Community Engagement Toolkit

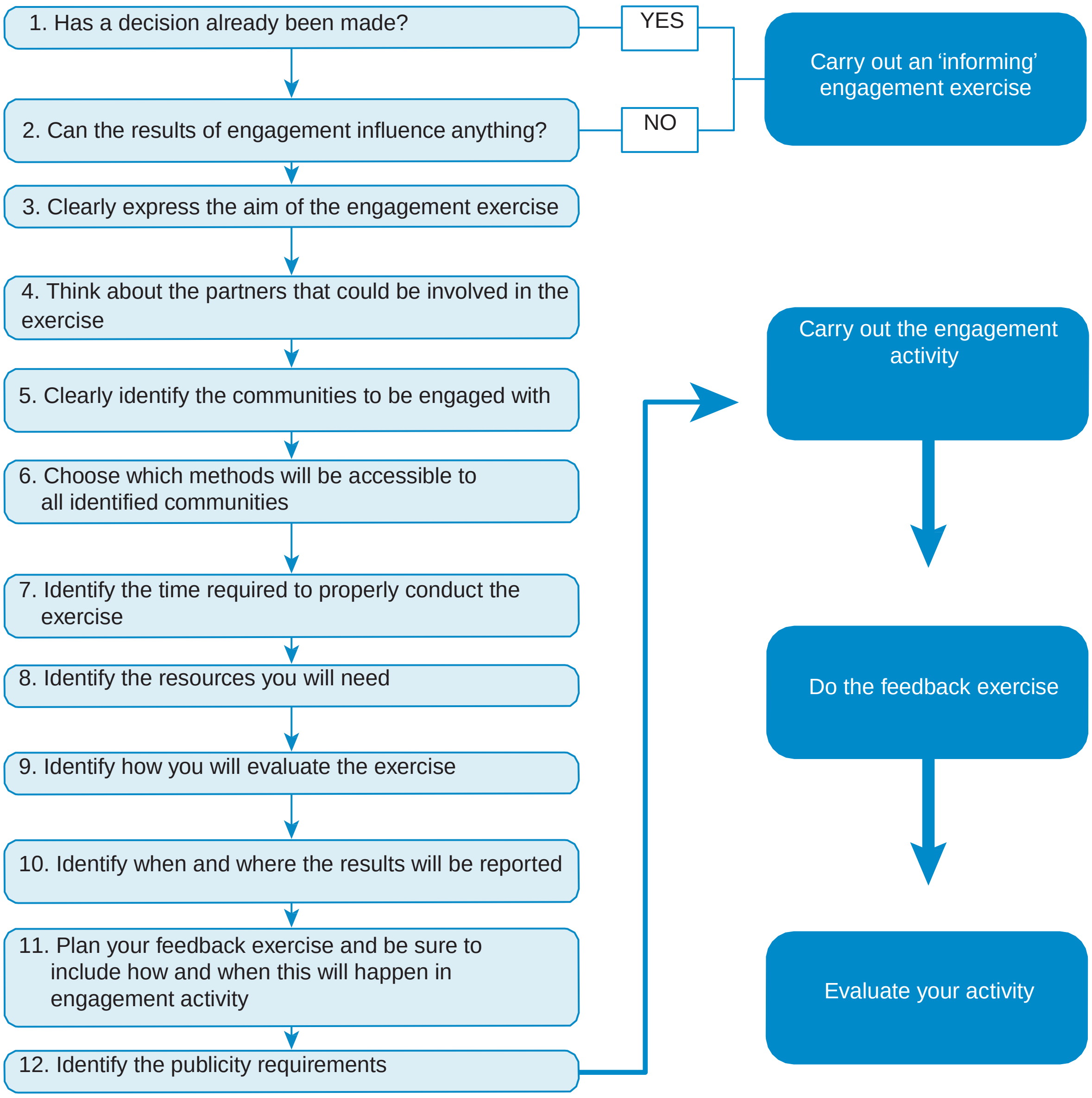
for the North East Lincolnshire Strategic Advisory Board

Introduction

Community engagement is at the heart of improving public services.

This toolkit supports the Community Engagement Framework and has been developed to help Strategic Advisory Board members, elected members and officers undertake effective consultation and community involvement with our key stakeholders. The toolkit provides clarity on the principles, parameters, requirements and standards which should be routinely built into any consultation or community involvement exercise.

Engagement decision path



The decision path

The chart takes you through the decisions that have to be made before any engagement exercise can take place. Ensuring that all these issues are carefully addressed before final decisions are taken about engagement will give the best chance of a successful outcome.

The following gives further information about the issues contained in the decision path. The numbers correspond to those shown in the boxes on the decision path flowchart above.

1. Has the decision already been made?

If a decision has already been made then an engagement exercise beyond informing is inappropriate. It is dangerous practice to assume that engagement will ‘rubber stamp’ a decision already made. If a decision has been taken it is more appropriate to put effort into informing those affected or interested in the decision of the reasons behind it and the implications for them.

2. Can the results of engagement influence anything?

Make sure you know how the results of an engagement exercise will be used to influence decision making, service provision or any other aspect of council partners’ activity. Participants need to know that the effort they have made to respond was of value.

3. Clearly express the aims of the engagement exercise

You need to be sure of the aims of any engagement and be clear what you want to get from the results. For example do you want to:

- Challenge the existing service
- Look for unmet needs
- Shape the way your service is delivered
- Measure satisfaction within your service
- Prioritise future spending
- Set targets for the service
- Check out reaction to new ideas or initiatives
- Look for quality improvements
- Check opinions, views and attitudes
- Assess potential interest in something
- Improve customer relations

Ask colleagues involved in the work for their views and ensure managers express clear views about their expectations. This will assist you in asking correct questions in the engagement exercise.

4. Think about the partners that could be involved in the exercise

We will identify the appropriate partners and carry out engagement activities in partnership. This will allow us to appropriately target engagement activities and to avoid duplication of effort (this will help us to avoid ‘consultation fatigue’ in our communities).

5. Clearly identify the communities to be engaged with

It is important to recognise that 'communities' can be defined in different ways. Definitions that we will use in North East Lincolnshire are defined in the Engagement Framework.

As general rule, people do not mind being consulted about a topic that they consider is important to them or close to them. This means that some thought has to be given to exactly whom it is that you should consult. The very broad approach is appropriate for some engagement but a more focused approach is likely to result in better return rates and avoid accusations of time wasting.

It is important therefore to think carefully about everyone who can be affected by an issue - whether directly or indirectly, now or in the future, and those who can affect parts of an issue. The list needs to be exhaustive and the service involved is the best placed to draw up a comprehensive list.

Having identified these communities, each one needs to be further broken down in order to be as specific as possible. Use this checklist as a basis to think about and map your stakeholders:

Key customers

- People who pay directly
- People who pay indirectly
- Users of services
- Internal customers

Non users

- People who are unaware of the service
- Dissatisfied or ex-customers
- People who might need the service at a later date

Others

- People we enforce against or who are regulated (e.g. landlords)
- Citizens/local people
- Interested agencies - voluntary, private, public sector
- People affected by policies or development (e.g. planning)
- Local Councillors, neighbourhood forums, Parish Councils, MPs, carers or advocates, local businesses etc.
- By identifying communities and then breaking them down, you will have a list that is detailed enough to allow you to allocate the most appropriate engagement method for their particular needs.

Internal Communities

Some engagement carried out by partners has as its community other departments or individuals within that organisation; other exercises have a mixture of internal and external consultees. These internal consultees are another type of community and need the same sort of consideration.

It may be that engagement can be carried out more quickly and efficiently with these internal communities. However all the same considerations about appropriate questions, feedback mechanisms etc still apply.

6. Choose which methods will be accessible to all identified communities

Effort in identifying all those affected - whether directly or indirectly - will in part be wasted if careful consideration is not given to the appropriate methods of reaching each of the identified groups.
Research has shown that the most popular methods for all types of people 'are having the information sent to them' and 'surveys' (ie home based engagement).

- There is much less support for public meetings or anything that involves leaving home
- People on higher incomes are more likely to favour being in panels or groups
- People on lower incomes are generally less keen on getting involved
- Younger people like focus groups and street interviews
- Older people prefer neighbourhood forums and the like
- More than one method may well need to be employed in order to give all identified communities an equal opportunity of understanding the issues and giving their response as confidently as possible.

Making engagement inclusive

If communities are carefully identified and appropriate methods used, engagement will be more inclusive and not give too great a say to articulate but unrepresentative sectors of our community. It is accepted that engaging with some groups is easier than others and there are a number of reasons for this including:

- Some groups such as working parents, have less spare time than others (e.g some retired people)
- Some people do not have a great understanding of written or spoken English
- Some groups feel culturally isolated
- Some groups feel alienated from, or even suspicious of, the organisation that is engaging with them
- Some communities are geographically isolated
- Some people have no permanent address
- Some people may just not be interested in being engaged by partners

These groups are sometimes bundled together and termed 'seldom heard' groups. This is an accurate description to an extent - it may well take more imagination or more effort to engage with people who speak little English or are alienated from partners. Nevertheless, labelling some people 'seldom heard' or 'hard to reach' implies that the problem lies with them when, in reality, it is our job to make sure that engagement is inclusive

Making engagement inclusive is important because:

- Engagement exercises often need to find out the views of an accurate cross section of the population as a whole, and
- Different sections of the community, practically minorities, may have needs or views that are different from those of the majority and if they are not engaged with effectively, these needs or views may remain invisible.

7. Identify the time required to properly conduct the exercise

This may lead to a modification in preferred methods. It is important to allow enough time when planning an engagement exercise. This should not only take into account the wishes of partners, but also the frequency of meetings of any organisations being asked to take part.

If your end date (the date by which results must be available) is fixed, you must work backwards and if there is insufficient time to properly carry out your engagement using the preferred methods, you must make a judgement about whether using 'quicker' methods would compromise the exercise. If this is so, you should consider whether to continue with the engagement.

Current best practice says to 'Judge the length of the consultation on the basis of legal advice and taking into account the nature and impact of the proposal'. It may be considered that less complex matters could require less time, but it is not good practice to ask people for their opinions and then provide them with insufficient time in which to debate the issue amongst members and feedback a considered, representative response.

It is good practice to include time to pilot any engagement questions. This increases the likelihood of the information you receive meeting your stated aims and can save time later in the process.

8. Identify the resources you will need

Consideration needs to be given to the cost of an exercise in terms of printing and distribution, staff cost involved in delivering and managing the exercise, analysis of raw data etc. This will enable those running the engagement to form a picture of the relevant costs involved in differing engagement methods, sample sizes, communities, etc.

This is important not only to identify the true cost of any exercise but also to make comparisons between exercises in order to identify good practice and to ensure that the team undertaking the exercise is sufficiently resourced in order to carry it out successfully. Ideally all exercises should be costed to include staff time and where this had not been done it should be clearly stated. Other considerations, if applicable, include:

- Staff travel costs
- Printing
- Graphics
- Postage out
- Postage return
- Analysis
- Any out of pocket expenses reimbursed
- Any associated information-giving, advertising or publicity
- Feedback costs
- Any consultant costs, if used

9. Identify how you will evaluate the exercise

Evaluation is vital; not only to know whether you are spending scarce resources wisely, but also to ascertain whether the exercise has genuinely listened and responded to needs. Evaluation is not a procedure that takes place at the end of engagement, but is a process that should take place throughout. It will be much easier to do if you have included it in your initial planning. To fully evaluate and exercise, both the process of engagement and the outcome of the campaign should be evaluated.

There are a number of models of evaluation, but try to keep it simple. If you have planned properly, identified what your success and failure criteria are and how you are going to measure them, then the evaluation process will be more straightforward. There will always be unforeseen factors that influence results and your evaluation should be flexible enough to take account of these.

Effective evaluation tells you what worked and what didn't (and why). It helps make sure that you get the best value for money from your efforts and time. If one particular method doesn't work you can at least gain some valuable information from it by trying to work out why. Problems are always much clearer with hindsight, and help you avoid pitfalls next time. Equally, if something works well, try to assess why it was successful, so that you can build on it.

If you are able to answer the question 'what would I do differently or the same next time?' then your evaluation will be valuable.

The engagement record will help as you will be able to identify places within the organisation where a particular method has been tried before and talk to people with experience.

Deciding how you will assess effectiveness is a fundamental part of engagement design. You should consider the following elements.

- You got views from those you wanted
- You were successful in engaging with minority, disadvantaged or under-represented groups
- Different groups responded to different methods
- You gave feedback to those you consulted
- The people contacted felt that the engagement was worthwhile

Methods

Identifying which methods to use for engagement is clearly crucial. You need to consider a number of issues, including who you want to engage with, what sort of information you want, and how much money, time and experience you have. At the end, you want to be able to measure whether:

- The methods used were right for your objectives
- If you used more than one method, which worked best and why
- You got the right information in terms of quantitative and/or qualitative information, response rate and representative sample

Timescale

The length of time engagement takes is often underestimated. You give a deadline for responses, but what will you do if people ask for extensions? At the end you will want to be able to measure whether:

- The timescale was clear and kept. If not, why not?
- Enough time was allowed for responses

Information provided

Remember to evaluate the effectiveness of any material you produced as part of the engagement process. Did the posters used to advertise your open meeting attract the right audience? Was putting material on the internet an effective way of encouraging views? Did you succeed in making information available to the right people? At the end you want to be able to measure whether the information was:

- Easy to access
- Relevant to the engagement process
- Reproduced in plain language and easy to understand
- Available in other languages and in other formats (e.g Braille) where necessary

Costs

You need to be able to show that you got value for money from your engagement work. Some methods are much cheaper than others, but the information you get may not be of any use. Include staff time and training in your budgets and evaluation - this can be the most expensive element, particularly if you are running the exercise in house. At the end you will need to be able to measure whether:

- You budgeted adequately
- You made savings in particular areas or overspent in others – and why
- There were unforeseen costs – and what they were

Effect of the engagement

The key question is 'did anything change as a result of the engagement exercise?'

At the end you will need to be able to measure whether:

- You got views that you could use
- That views have been considered
- The engagement has led to some identifiable change in your service or policy
- The engagement has changed the relationship between you and your users

10. Identify where and when the results will be reported

You must decide at the outset what will happen to the results and how they will be fed into the decision making process.

In all cases, action should be drawn up giving details of what is happening as a result of the engagement exercise, the time by which the actions have to be carried out and the officer responsible for ensuring that this happens.

The main way we can use the results of engagement is to take consultees' views into account when making decisions. These decisions might be one-off decisions, or they might concern the shape of policies, the detail of service delivery or the targets set for the services.

Managers, like Elected Members, have to balance conflicting views. On a controversial issue, views may be sharply polarised. Resolving these conflicts will always be a matter of judgement - there are no fixed rules about what particular kind of engagement should take precedence over another, ultimately, this is part of the decision-making role of Elected Members. When consultees' views diverge, it is particularly important to provide clear feedback; individuals who do not like the decision that is eventually reached may still feel that the process has given them a fair hearing.

11. Plan your feedback exercise and be sure to include how and when this will happen in your engagement activity.

It is crucial that members of the public are fully informed of what happened to the results of engagement exercises in which they took part, and the impact that they had. This will ensure that participants are much more likely to want to take part in future engagement. Considering how much to feed back to participants at an early stage ensures that you have the information necessary to do so efficiently. For example, you may have to include some questions in your survey to ensure this can take place. You may well also have to identify the cost of this in order to ensure it is included in the costing of the exercise.

How are you going to feedback information should be considered before completing the design of the engagement exercise. This will enable you to build in mechanisms for ensuring feedback takes place. This can include:

- Ensuring you have requested sufficient contact information to enable you to write back at a later date
- Ensuring that you get an attendance list of focus groups and forums etc. Addresses/telephone numbers will enable you to feed back to participants at a later date
- For larger group meetings or less formal settings for engagement – e.g. a stand at an event – a large poster can be displayed stating where participants can obtain the results and details of any actions resulting from the engagement process. This information can also be included on any leaflets handed out, people could also be given the opportunity to leave their details for a personal copy of the information to be forwarded to them

12. Identify the public requirements

Well carried out engagement that results in a change in service delivery is interesting news to the local media and it is always worth letting them know. Alternatively, you may need to raise awareness or incorporate information-giving into the start of your campaign.

There are a number of ways in which publicity can aid an engagement exercise:

- By telling stakeholder groups about forthcoming engagement work, interest can be generated that will contribute to a higher response rate
- By providing information to stakeholder groups in advance of an exercise, they have the opportunity to discuss it amongst themselves. This is particularly useful if the topic is one of which they have little prior knowledge or if it is complicated. This often helps to increase the rate of return, particularly if people are given the opportunity to contact a named person with any questions they may have
- For smaller exercises it may be possible to contact people on an individual basis in order to ensure as high as response rate as possible. However this is not possible with larger examples of engagement, well-timed publicity may remind potential participants that their response is valuable

The results of most engagement exercises will be of interest to one or more groups of people. For large-scale exercises, it may be appropriate to involve local press and media in the findings and what will happen as a result. For smaller groups, it may be worthwhile referring back to your stakeholder groups. Many of them will be represented by community newsletters and/or news bulletins distributed by their organisation. They may also have a representative organisation to which you could write asking them to pass on the information at their next meeting or offering to attend and speak briefly on the findings.

13. Starting the engagement:

You may find this checklist useful

Ensure that people know:

- Who is being involved and why
- What decisions will be influenced
- Who will make these decisions
- When the decisions will be taken
- How the results will be fed back to people
- That anonymity will be respected if requested
- Who they can contact if they are unhappy about the exercise

Ensure that you have:

- Used plain English and no jargon
- Avoided any leading or ambiguous questions
- Thought about different people's preferences in terms of methods
- Offered a choice of Engagement methods to suit preferences
- Thought about involving 'seldom heard' people
- Planned for how the views of different stakeholder groups will be balanced against each other
- Given people enough time to respond
- Decided who will do the consultation, in-house or agency
- Successfully built consultation into your service review and planning process

For further information, go to
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