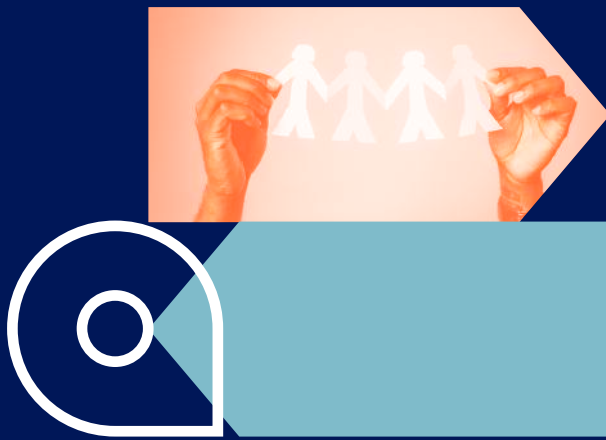


# Community Engagement: A Practitioner's Guide

**Part One:** How to create sustainable and effective community engagement for your government agency.





# Index

**Authors' note:** *There's a lot to cover, so we have broken this guide into two parts. This guide, Part One, focuses on upfront strategy and planning. Part Two will focus on the engagement spectrum (i.e. how do I want to engage my community?) and selecting the right tool for your city (i.e. what's the right software for my needs?).*

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# Introduction

Community engagement is an increasingly critical resource for local governments. It's not just the "right thing to do", it also unlocks tangible benefits and strategic value for residents and government employees. When done correctly, community engagement helps local governments **save money, get buy-in on high-profile and contentious issues** (like [how to spend your ARPA dollars](#)), and **make better decisions**.

Despite a burgeoning industry of platforms and tools designed to help governments hear from their residents, successful engagement does not happen overnight, nor with technology alone. In fact, **digital engagement platforms should complement an existing strategy** that factors in internal communication channels, outreach and digital divide challenges, and political buy-in.

For engagement to have the long-lasting, transformational effects that we've seen in [Taiwan](#), across Europe [in cities like London](#), and increasingly in [American cities like Lancaster, PA](#), **your strategy must be well-defined, shared internally, and championed by a specific leader or office**.

**So, you want to engage your community? Here's how to get started.**



# Step 1: Understand your community, and your capacity

It's likely that either your team or other departments are already doing some form of engagement. This has become an increasingly broad term (one we'll define in more detail in Part Two), that has come to include everything from 311 chatbots, to digital forms and websites, to full service participation platforms like [CitizenLab](#). It also includes more traditional methods such as public meetings, newsletters, public service announcements, posters and signage around town, and any other dedicated strategy designed to inform, collect feedback from, or garner participation from residents, small business owners, local leaders, and other community members.





## To better understand your community's needs and your organization's capacity, conduct internal and external assessments of your government's current engagement strategies.

- **Internal:** Focus on who within the government is engaging the broader community, which channels they're using, and how (if at all) these channels are connected to any decision-making processes.
- **External:** Focus on who from the community is being engaged, paying close attention to demographics, topics of local relevance or interest, and whether any of these methods provide a way to systematically collect feedback. Also consider how different groups within your community typically receive other types of information and news.

Your assessment should identify existing channels (e.g. social media, newsletters, in-person events) and gaps, as well as which departments are interested in more robust engagement and community feedback.

## Questions to ask

1. Are specific groups of residents more active or overrepresented on these channels? Are certain groups under- or not represented? How would you reach these groups and how do they want to engage?
2. How is this feedback being incorporated by your organization? Do residents know how their feedback is (or is not) being incorporated?
3. Do staff have a shared understanding of your community engagement strategy?

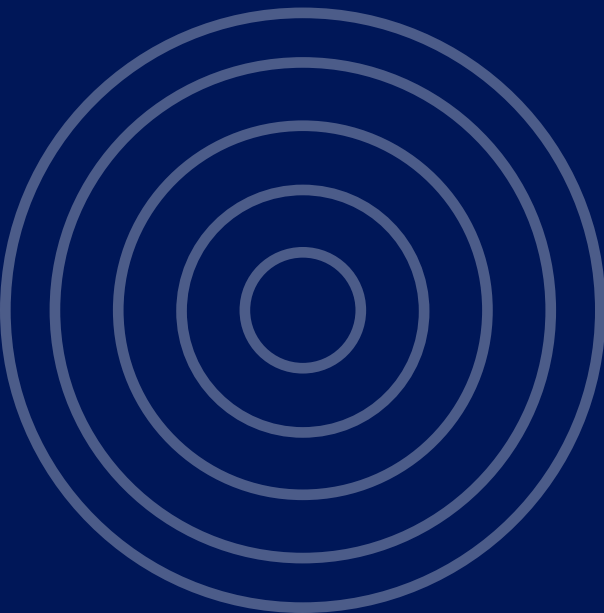
## Things to consider

- **Internal:** Engagement is an art as much as it's a science, and there's a lot you won't know at the beginning. Empower your team to be local engagement experts, and give them the confidence to work in ambiguous environments.
- **External:** Resident communication preferences are not set in stone, and can change when new options and technologies become available. As such, focus on understanding why something does or does not work to better anticipate changes moving forward.



# Step 2: Define engagement and your engagement goals

Engagement doesn't have one single definition, but **often involves a set of strategies to convey or collect information to the public, and open the door for participation in a government's decision-making processes.** You'll need to go deeper and define engagement within your own local context, according to your goals and metrics for success.





## Respect your community members' time!

People lead busy lives! They are juggling work, family, and their own needs -- all of which are probably more important to them than whatever you're asking them to do.

Any opportunity to engage residents must:

1. Be easy and convenient for them, ideally meeting them where they are;
2. Make clear why this is important for them; and
3. Include a way to close the feedback loop, or let them know how their feedback was (or was not) used to make decisions. *This last piece is essential if your plan calls for anything beyond a single survey or poll (hint: it should), and is necessary to build long-term trust in your community.*

The first question is often the most obvious: "why do you want to engage your community?" or more specifically, "what are you trying to achieve?"

Some governments:

- Want to use engagement as **a tool for surfacing small issues or gaps in service, or to involve community members in the design of a specific program or service.**
- Are data-driven, and want **to tie outcomes and spending as closely to community needs as possible.**
- Are motivated by equity, and want **to prioritize the voices of residents who have been traditionally marginalized.**

Your answer will most likely be a mix of these, and you may have to prioritize some rationales over others. What's important is that your goals and metrics for success are clearly articulated, and there is a clear understanding of how this feedback can be incorporated into your own decision-making processes. Without a path for implementing resident feedback, engagement becomes a public relations exercise, and your residents will lose motivation to participate.



## Questions to ask

1. What can you improve through accurate and timely resident feedback? *How will you know if we've done this well?*
2. What happens if you get feedback you aren't expecting?

## Things to consider

- If we've learned anything in 2020, it's that **things can change quickly**. Consider opting for a set of Guiding Principles rather than a more traditional Strategic Plan, which could box you in and become outdated.
- **Context yields better feedback**. Be upfront about your goals when asking for feedback as it will inform and shape residents' responses. Be compelling and help them understand why they should care enough to spend time providing feedback in the first place!

## How to measure engagement: it's a metric!

In order to evaluate any community engagement strategy, you will need to define and choose a series of metrics by which you can measure your progress over time. These metrics should have clear definitions, be relevant to your work and local context, and allow for consistent and repeatable data collection.

[CitizenLab's guide on measuring impact](#) can help you define what's most important for you to measure.





## Community Engagement Principles in Action

In San Rafael, CA, the City's community engagement practices have been guided by principles since 2015.

While the tactics and strategies staff use have changed over time, these principles still hold true today:

1. Demystify local government
2. Engage early
3. Translate in other languages
4. Leverage technology
5. Close the feedback loop

***What would guiding principles look like in your community?***



# Step 3: Align your capacity and community (1) with your goals (2)

Your goals are defined, you have a sense of your community's needs, and you understand your organization's capacity. **Now it's time to compare these goals, needs, and assets to see if your expectations are realistic.**





As you compare what you have with what you want, it's important to remember the following realities of any engagement strategy:

- **Engagement takes time:** Engagement is a cultural shift, both internally (i.e. how government decision-makers define and implement projects) and externally (i.e. how residents expect to interface with their local government), and does not happen overnight. Do not be discouraged if early participation numbers are lower than expected; analyze and experiment with your approach with each new initiative.
- **Meet pushback with clear benefits:** You may get pushback at some point during this process, so you'll want to make it clear to stakeholders how and why this approach will benefit them. For those concerned about the bottom line, explain that feedback data will help you all prioritize spending and avoid costly, wasteful programs. For those worried about staff capacity, establish clear roles and time commitments, and explore whether certain time-consuming projects are delivering commensurate value to the community.
- **Get quick wins and build from there:** It's important to start with tangible, low-stakes projects that you can quickly demonstrate were driven by community feedback. This starts a virtuous cycle whereby residents engage, see their feedback implemented, and then want to engage again.



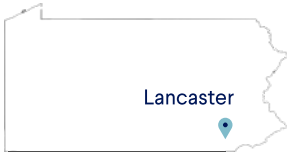


## Questions to ask

1. How could you test assumptions and pilot this on a smaller scale? Can you work at the neighborhood level to start? Are there certain projects or departments that would be particularly well suited to start with?
2. How do you identify and support internal champions? Where do they currently exist in your organization and how would they benefit from better community engagement?
3. Do staff have the time to do engagement work? If not, what can you do to free them up so they have more time for this?

## Things to consider

- **Give your staff a framework and the capacity** (i.e. time) to incorporate engagement into their projects. Give them clear goals and resources to do what you're asking of them, like a process to follow and templates to use.
- **Create a cross-departmental engagement team** so staff can share their practices and resources (like checklists and guides) and find ways to collaborate on engagement.
- **Scale your approach so that it fits your internal capacity and external expectations.** Make sure what you're doing is repeatable and sustainable.



## Community Engagement in Action

In Lancaster, PA, the City's community engagement team addressed their local digital divide through a blended approach, incorporating both online and offline methods, including:

### Online

- Launching *Engage Lancaster*, a centralized hub for community participation that helps the city convey information, collect feedback, and demonstrate results to inform decision-making.
- Running social media and newsletter campaigns driving traffic to Engage Lancaster.

### Offline

- Distributing digital and paper surveys (in multiple languages) and then uploading paper responses onto Engage Lancaster so feedback sat alongside digitally entered ideas and comments.
- Creating a branded Engage Lancaster video in multiple languages to guide residents on how to use the platform.
- Adding QR codes to paper flyers and posters so that viewers could participate on-the-spot via their cell phones.
- Public service announcements on local radio, via paper flyers, door knocking, and targeted outreach to community leaders.



## What's next

Congratulations! You've finished this guide and started doing the introspective, and often overlooked, work required to design and launch a community engagement process. To recap, you need to:

1. **Assess** the current state of engagement in your community. Identify community members' needs and your organization's capacity by conducting internal and external assessments of current engagement strategies.
2. **Define** what engagement looks like for your local context. Be clear about why people should take the time to participate, create a path for measuring and implementing the feedback you get, and keep open feedback loops!
3. **Align** what you want to do with what you can do. Once you've identified your community's needs and your office's assets, map a course of action. Start small, build buy-in, and then scale your efforts.

As you take these steps, new questions and challenges will emerge. *What does engagement actually look like, and are you asking the right questions? How do the tools you use shape the engagement process? If successful, how will resident expectations change moving forward?*

**We'll answer these questions and more in Part Two of this series. Stay tuned!**



## Ready to engage your community?

CitizenLab has worked with over **300 local governments** around the world to support participatory democracy and community engagement. CitizenLab's engagement experts can guide you through the entire process. [Get in touch today!](#)

[See CitizenLab's platform in action](#)



Community engagement made easy.

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