⛨ **citizen**lab

The beginner's guide to digital community engagement

Get started with digital democracy in your community today.

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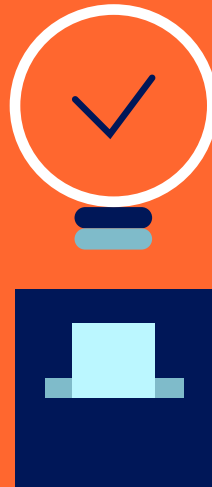
Introduction

Our world has never been more connected, and that affects how people see themselves in it. Eager to be more involved in shaping their communities, people and their governments have been turning to digital solutions to connect and move forward together. As a result, we've seen tech seep into the deepest levels of political decision-making, including in the community engagement process.

Traditional offline participation methods and one-off digital solutions make up just the tip of the iceberg. To make the most of our communities' collective intelligence, and to allocate our time and resources in a more efficient and sustainable way, **we have to maximize the way we use digital solutions.**

Governments are in a unique position to facilitate collaboration and dialogue between people and their representatives, as well as amongst community members. **It's time to innovate and plan for the future. Our communities demand it, our cities and climate require it, and future generations depend on it.**

This guide will walk you through the basics of digital community engagement, but it's meant to serve as a resource for beginners and seasoned practitioners alike. **Setting a solid foundation for each community engagement initiative is key to its success**, so we hope this guide will provide you with a strong roadmap for action. After all, the recommendations are drawn from the 300+ local governments we've worked with around the world - and they've got a lot of good practices to share. Let's get started then, shall we?

Why digital participation?

What is digital participation, and why should you use it?

Before we get into the why, we should first address the what. What is digital participation, anyway? IRISS defines it as "working with communities to address issues of opportunity, access, knowledge and skill in relation to using technology, and in particular, the internet." This often spans social, political, economic, and cultural contexts. And, when it comes to community engagement with and by governments, this also means empowering the people to influence processes, programs, and/or policies within their communities.

Digitizing local democracies with a community engagement platform can help activate collective intelligence. **Rather than relying on the input of a handful of decision-makers, a platform will help you tap into the insights and knowledge of your broader community.** And rather than simply letting people cast their vote during each election cycle or engaging them in a one-time survey, **continuous community engagement enables residents, stakeholders, and the government to work in unison and co-create communities they are proud to call home.**

Digital platforms for community engagement take this one step further by meeting people where they are, allowing them to engage anytime and anywhere. This offers a more diverse audience the opportunity to participate.

As you can see, digital community engagement has a wealth of advantages and contributes to a stronger, happier, and more democratic community.

What's the impact? For instance, you'll:

1. Reach a bigger and more diverse audience, at a lower cost

Allowing and enabling your community to get involved online helps you reach those people who usually wouldn't have the time to attend a town hall meeting or informative session. For families with young children, professionals with busy schedules, people living in remote areas, or young people, an online approach lowers the threshold to participate.
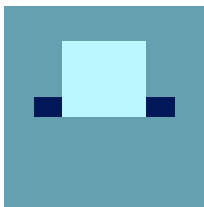
2. Get more buy-in and public support for decisions

If a new decision or policy isn't supported by the community, you're setting yourself up for failure. It's key to set up a transparent, participatory process with genuine opportunities for two-way communication and input. If community members feel like their ideas and opinions were heard and taken into account, they'll be more likely to support the decisions made (and more likely to participate again, in the future).

3. Increase efficiency and responsiveness

We'll be the first to admit—launching a community engagement platform isn't a "one and done" endeavor. It requires seamless incorporation into your internal workflows, a person or team to facilitate discussions and manage responses, and a clear action plan. And yet, digital solutions will increase your efficiency. Rather than processing thousands of paper surveys or making sense of ideas scribbled onto sticky notes, you'll be able to analyze your community's input with the click of a button. Trivial tasks, like responding to quick questions or following up with updates, suddenly become easier and less time-consuming. This means you can spend more time on substantial engagement and responsiveness.

4. Achieve higher quality decision-making and administrative innovation

Community engagement isn't just about collecting a certain number of votes— it's about the reasoning behind people's input and ideas. By having a stronger pulse on what your community truly cares about, you'll be able to prioritize your time and resources more effectively. While your elderly residents are asking for better sidewalks, local parents might prefer a school community garden. You can't set priorities for your community by taking only the loudest voices in the room into account - you need to reach more people and empower them to get involved.

Roadmap to digital participation

Don't leap without looking. Before launching a digital community engagement project, you should make sure to have strong internal support.

While your platform is an instrument in achieving your goals, it's crucial to collaborate closely with your colleagues, perhaps even across departments. So, what should you consider when it comes to internal organization?

Step 1:
The preliminary process

Ask yourself:

Why do we need a community engagement process for this project?
Define what success looks like before you launch. This will help you internally organize teammates and departments, as well as externally communicate why the community should get involved.

Who do we want to reach?
Consider the different segments of your audience and identify the best ways to reach them. Be creative! Maybe the best way to work around busy work schedules or digital divides is to partner with housing authorities to hand out paper surveys. Or maybe the best way to get people involved is by collaborating with community leaders and associations as champions. Whatever you decide, make sure your efforts are as inclusive and representative as possible.

What is our timeline?
Start by defining when you want to launch and finish your project, then work backward to identify the steps you need to take on the way there. When it comes to timing, balance is key. While you don't want to drag a project out so long it loses its momentum, you should also give your community enough time to participate—and your team enough time to analyze the input. Setting up recurring cycles of community engagement can help you work around the question of timing (but we'll get into that later in this guide).

What information do you already have?
It's not always necessary to reinvent the wheel. Have your community members already been surveyed on this topic or a very similar one? How old are the results, and what do they indicate? Asking people for the same information repeatedly, without it leading to a tangible conclusion or outcome, might tarnish the credibility of your engagement efforts. Map out the information you already have so you can use it as a framework to dig deeper.

How will you communicate the results?
Your community engagement process can only be considered a success if community members know exactly how their input was used to steer the final decision. This is what we call 'closing the feedback loop'. Continuously keeping your community updated on the progress and final results of your project will increase the legitimacy of the process and make community members much more likely to participate again in the future. It's crucial to achieve consensus internally on how you'll close the feedback loop before the project even kicks off.

Having these initial questions answered will help you map out who to include internally.
Some teams to include might be:

Government and policy-makers
Even if your Mayor or councilperson isn't closely involved in every step of your project, it can be valuable to keep them in the loop. Make sure to update them on the primary goal, progress, and outcomes of your project, and include them in your communication strategy.

Administration
The department leaders, service managers, and other members of the management teams across your administration are key actors in the success of your digital community engagement efforts. They should have the opportunity to give input on the overall process and receive regular updates on the project's progress and results.

Communications
Your communications team is likely to have a great pulse on how to get information to residents and stakeholders, and how to hear back from them. Pair up to make the best use of social media, newsletters, and other outlets. Don't forget to consider language access needs in your communications.

What kind of engagement process is best?

Well, that really depends on what you're trying to accomplish. Before you even start thinking about which method is best, you'll have to decide on your project's primary goal:

- *Do you want to inform your community about a specific policy or upcoming renovation?*
- *Are you looking for input or feedback on a predetermined plan?*
- *Are you looking to collect community ideas or opinions?*
- *Or are you setting up an actual co-creation process?*

As a local government, you get to decide how much the voice of your community will ultimately weigh on the final decision or policy. **Or, in other terms, where your project lands on the ladder of citizen participation,** a political structure developed by Sherry Arnstein in 1969.

The participation ladder

The participation ladder maps out the different levels of community engagement. The higher your project ranks on the ladder, the more of a commitment or investment it'll require—but, also, the bigger the rewards. **Higher engagement levels directly correlate to the degree of trust communities have for their representatives.** The more genuine influence and decision-making power you transfer to your communities, the more they'll trust your administration to make legitimate decisions for the common good.

The local government empowers the community to make independent decisions.

The local government and community collaborate as equals to co-create the city or neighborhood.

The local government actively involves the community and takes their input into account, but maintains the final decision-making power.

The local government asks the community for non-binding feedback on specific decisions and policies.

The local government provides its community with transparent, relevant, and up-to-date information.

While the participation ladder naturally has a built-in hierarchy, it's not static. Rather, it consists of different levels that can operate simultaneously and complement each other, depending on the nature and goals of your project.

How does a digital participation platform play into all this? Well, your platform facilitates both top-down and bottom-up participation. Whether you're gauging your community's opinions on a specific decision or letting them take the reins by submitting their own proposals (or, preferably, both!), your platform will structure the process and automate the analysis.

Combining online and offline methods

There's no "one size fits all" in community engagement. In fact, the more diverse your methods, the higher the chances of reaching more people and really tapping into collective intelligence.

Online community engagement platforms provide local governments with a single hub to collect, share, and discuss community feedback and ideas. By complementing these online methods with more traditional offline strategies, and vice versa, you can create a more inclusive participation process.

Meet your community where they are.
Make it as easy as possible for your community to get involved. This could mean setting up a pop-up participation event in a high-traffic area, like a transportation hub, sports center, or grocery store.

Close the digital divide.
To make sure everyone can access your participation platform, including people without digital devices or high tech skills, you could make tablets available in public libraries or your City Hall. If you're working with paper surveys, you could collaborate with housing facilities or other community networks to make sure everyone gets a chance to get involved.

Collaborate with local leaders in your community.
Even with the strongest possible communication strategy and the most diversified methods, there are still people you as an administrator may not be able to reach. By engaging nonprofits, schools, government agencies, urban developers, and community leaders, you'll build bridges within your community and ensure more equitable representation.

Step 2:
Your implementation & communication plans
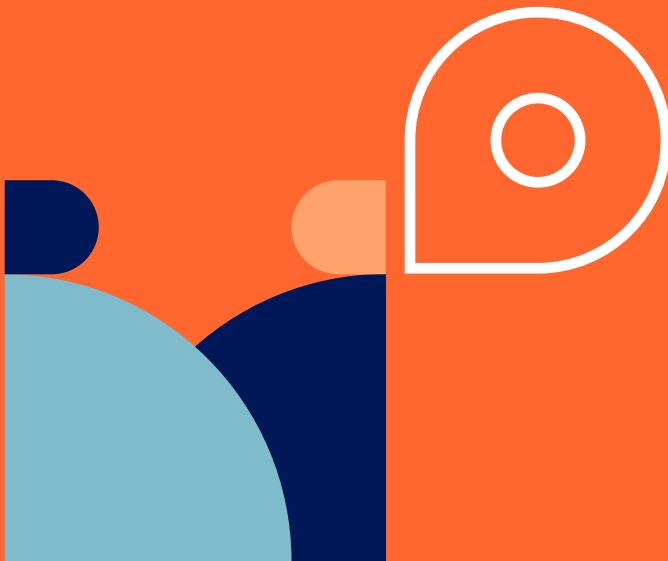
A clear flow and structured process will help set you and your community up for success.

First, consider whether your project will be segmented according to:

- City priorities, with agenda items set for the municipal council, advisory council, etc.
- Specific topics, like focusing on a mobility plan, spatial planning, cultural activities, etc.
- Location, with input being collected per neighborhood, district, region, etc.

Once you've decided what kind of input you're asking from your community, it's time to consider how you're going to ask them for it. **After all, successful participation relies on active communication from start to finish.**

Choosing the right channels to spread your message is vital. Consider your existing communication channels, such as your website, local newspaper, social media, or newsletters. **How can they lead your audience to your platform, the hub for all your community engagement projects?**

Digital channels

Organic web traffic
- Choose a memorable URL for your platform.
- Use as many keywords as possible in your text for search engine optimization.

Social media
- Communicate in relevant Facebook groups and set up targeted ads to reach specific audiences.
- Share information about your platform across your social media channels (Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn, Nextdoor...).
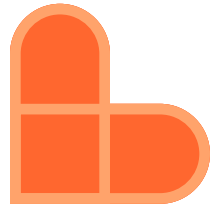
Website
- Link to your digital community engagement platform on the homepage of your existing website to drive traffic to it.
- Add a page to describe how to get involved in the community, and make sure it also links to your platform.

Traditional channels

- Distribute paper flyers around town. To add a digital twist, consider adding QR codes to lead more digitally inclined people to your platform via their cell phones.
- Work with paper surveys. These can be distributed in places such as senior housing facilities, schools, local stores, or other popular areas.

How do you keep your audience engaged?

We've mentioned the importance of feedback loops before, and they come into play here as well. Closing the feedback loop simply means communicating the results of your participatory project back to the community, and it's one of the most crucial parts of the process.

What does that look like in action?

The **district of Alna, part of the city of Oslo, Norway** asked for the community's input for the planning and development of the Allmenningen, a new outdoor space in the Haugerud neighborhood. After this process was finalized and the input was incorporated in an action plan, the administration decided to ask the community for feedback once more. That way, they made sure that the community input was interpreted correctly and anyone could add additional feedback if they deemed it necessary.

If you've asked your community to voice their opinions, disclosing the results of that discussion—and more specifically, how these results may steer decision-making—is an important type of accountability.

How do you efficiently process what you're hearing?

When organizing an offline community engagement touchpoint, such as a town hall meeting or brainstorm, analyzing the input you receive may seem overwhelming. **How do you channel hundreds of post-its or bullet points on a chalkboard into a clear and relevant action plan?** With a digital approach, you can eliminate most of those trivial tasks.

A digital community engagement platform processes your collected votes, ideas, and reactions quickly and efficiently, offering you a clear overview of the results. Thanks to our Natural Language Processing technology, the CitizenLab platform helps you cluster similar ideas, pull out common themes, assign them to different departments, and directly provide feedback to participants on the platform.

NLP doesn't just help you process information, it also helps you collect optimal data with:

- **Spam prevention:** NLP automatically detects spam, trolls, or inappropriate language.

- **Identification of duplicates:** To make sure every participant's voice weighs equally in the final result, NLP technology filters the accidental duplicates out of your collected input.

- **Geolocation:** This feature allows you to automatically cluster ideas according to location, which is especially interesting for projects focusing on specific regions, neighborhoods, or streets.

- **Voting analysis:** How did your community vote? What percentage of participants was in favor of a specific idea or proposal? NLP technology processes votes and shows your results at the click of a button.

Step 3:
Continuity

Setting up a one-off participation project can help you get the answers or insights you need on a specific topic or plan. But in order to use your community's collective intelligence to its fullest potential, it pays to make community engagement a continuous part of your policy cycle. Only by consistently involving your community in decision-making—and by doing so in meaningful ways—can you foster the sense of unwavering trust that drives your community forward.

Continuity comes into play in two different ways. First, it's about embedding community engagement in the different steps of your policy cycle, from agenda-setting to the actual implementation of your project. Second, it's about ingraining participation as a recurring and indispensable part of your local democracy. Let's take a closer look at what all of this means.

Continuity throughout the policy cycle

In an ideal world, community members would have the opportunity to voice opinions, raise questions, and address concerns at every stage of the policy cycle. In each of the different phases, engaging your community has specific benefits.

Agenda-setting
In this phase, you identify problems and gauge where your community's priorities lie. This helps you better understand the needs of your community, which ultimately helps you to make better decisions and allocate budgets more efficiently. Involving your community at the beginning of the process has the added benefit that people feel included and valued from the get-go, which increases public support.

Policy-making
Once the main priorities are identified, the policy-making stage is all about shaping tangible plans. Involving the community in this phase will help you tap into the collective intelligence and come up with more innovative solutions.

Implementation
Once the plans are on the table, it's time to turn them into reality. In this phase, local governments can ask their community to help them make the new policy more concrete, for example by allocating budgets to specific ideas or proposals.

Evaluation
Before wrapping up a community engagement project, it pays to ask the community how you did. By receiving constructive feedback on the process, you gain more insight into how your project was received and whether its implementation was satisfactory.

By involving your community in multiple (or, ideally, all) stages of the policy cycle, you're setting up a solid process of co-creation and two-way dialogue that'll help you reap all the benefits of community engagement.

Continuity in your local democracy

And then there's continuity beyond the policy cycle, as well. When wrapping up an engagement project, the most valuable thing you can do is … start over! Setting up cycles of engagement, rather than isolated or stand-alone projects, keeps your community engaged and receptive.

What does that look like in action?

The **City of Lancaster, PA** has used their Engage Lancaster platform to run projects on everything from city art, mobility issues, and water management. Similarly, the Stirling Council in Scotland has used their Engage Stirling platform to run consultations on cycling and pedestrianization projects, their climate and nature emergency plan, and special education planning. What do both of these cities have in common? They have strong internal organization, good communications plans, and approach community engagement as a continuous effort rather than a one-off project.

Conclusion

Digital community engagement is strengthening communities and improving policy-making across the world, and it could do the same for you.

A few key takeaways from this guide include:
- Start by defining why you need to engage your community, and identifying who you need to bring along internally and externally.
- Get clear on how you're going to run your community engagement efforts, and where they fall on the participation ladder.
- Create a solid communications plan to get - and keep - people engaged each step of the way.
- Approach community engagement as a continuous effort rather than a one-off project.

Whenever you're ready to start a new community engagement initiative, this guide can help you set up for success from start to finish. And, if you're ready to digitize your efforts, at CitizenLab we have the technology and in-house expertise to support you from launch to implementation.

Ready to engage your community?

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

See CitizenLab's platform in action

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Get started with digital community engagement!

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