



The **FAQs** of digital consultation

Tips & tricks from real-life case studies
and civil servants

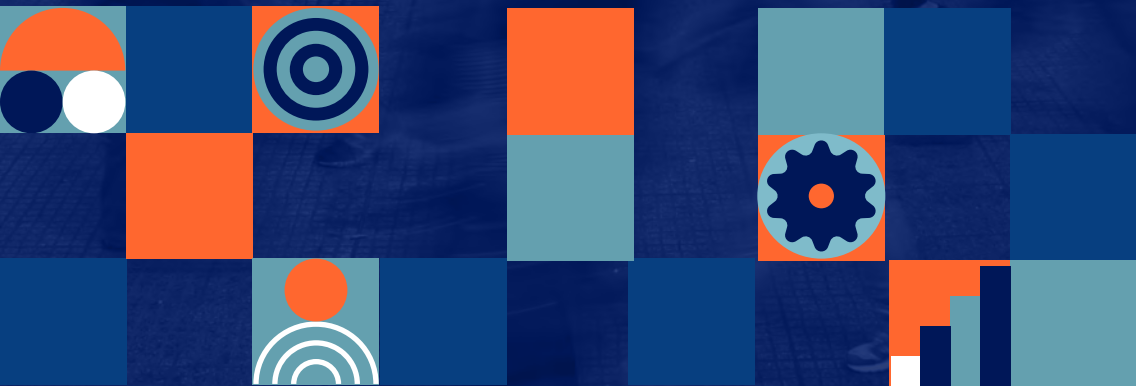




Table of contents

Introduction	1
Where in the policy cycle should you start involving your community?	2
How do you organize a digital participation platform internally?	5
How do you get the community to use your platform?	9
How do you pick the right consultation method?	12
How did you get your community to trust your participation platform?	15
How do you combine the online platform with your offline projects?	18
How do you reach beyond your usual audience?	21
What is the cost of a community engagement platform?	24
How do you keep your platform interesting?	27
How do you follow up on community input?	31

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Introduction

Since 2015, CitizenLab has worked together with 300+ governments across 18 countries to launch and maintain digital community engagement platforms. Along the way, we've realized that around the world, local governments share similar concerns and questions about getting started with online community engagement. This guide is meant to share our take on solutions to the most common questions administrations face in the early stages of setting up online participation projects.

While there is no golden rule for successful digital community engagement, there are guidelines that have proven to help achieve participation goals. Some of our suggestions are tailored explicitly to the online community engagement methods offered on the CitizenLab platform, but most of them apply to any digital community engagement project.

In this guide, we draw on learnings from real-life case studies and share insights from participation professionals we have worked with. We spotlight ten recurring themes, along with practical tips and tricks that can assist your government in launching a digital community engagement project.



If you still have questions after reading this guide, reach out to us!



1

Where in the **policy cycle** should you start involving your community?

You can consult your community at four phases in the policy cycle: (1) Agenda setting, (2) Policy formulation, (3) Policy implementation and (4) Policy evaluation.

Many practitioners and researchers agree that community engagement is **most meaningful early on in the policy process**. Involving residents and stakeholders in setting the agenda or formulating policy gives them direct influence on the issues at hand and allows them to weigh in on decision making. Engaging them towards the end helps in finding concrete solutions and evaluating policies.



Benefits of community engagement early in the policy cycle:



It helps you gain a **better understanding** of your community's needs at the start of the process



Potential **problems can be identified** straight away, which lowers the odds of new issues popping up once the policy is (nearly) finalized



It offers the opportunity to **co-create policy**, and raises the chances of the new policy being supported by the community.



CASE STUDY STRATEGY & BUDGETTING

Mol, Belgium

The Flemish commune of Mol asked for community input to establish their strategic **multi-annual plan**. Community members could share their ideas for the municipality via an online “idea-market”, and their ideas received **more than 2,000 votes**. Moreover, the posted ideas provided Mol with insights as to which themes the community was most concerned with: a vast majority of the ideas dealt with mobility or neighborhood development.

“If you start with participation on time and involve citizens from the beginning, you notice it has a very positive effect on the result of a project. In Mol, we realized that by only organizing informational events later in the decision-making process, the policy ends up being less supported in the community. People don't feel that they truly have been able to contribute their ideas - or that they've been listened to.”

Wim Caeyers, Mayor of Mol



There's a critical side-note to make regarding this insight: the Flemish commune of Mol has been actively involved with (offline) community engagement for years. If participation is new to your administration, and there aren't any internal processes in place yet to manage participation, it could be difficult to start off your participation endeavours right at the start of the policy cycle. In these cases, you might choose to start with lower levels of engagement, like surveys or polls, on your council's existing policy plans, instead of immediately aiming to co-create policy with your community. **Engaging residents and stakeholders later in the decision-making cycle can be a great stepping stone to get used to community engagement.**

Though, keep in mind, eventually the most rewarding community engagement processes - for both city and community - happen early on in the policy cycle. Ideally, your government ends up offering engagement opportunities for the community throughout your policy process.



2

How do you organize a digital participation platform internally?

Setting up a community engagement platform is no small feat. It requires defining clear goals, juggling deadlines and coordinating with multiple stakeholders, some of which are outside of the government. **Efficient internal organization is therefore key to your project's success.** And yet, it remains one of the main challenges that many administrations face.



Step 1: Get the right people at the table

The number of stakeholders involved will vary depending on the size of your participation project and/or your city. For each platform or project, you'll need to collaborate with (at least) the following roles:



Policymaker: There needs to be political will and support. A mayor or council member doesn't need to be actively involved in the implementation of your platform, but they should be aware of it and on board with the participation components. As the objective of a participation platform is to influence local policy and decision-making, policymakers must be willing to listen to their community's input.



Project manager: This person will keep an overview of the project and/or platform, with the explicit responsibility of keeping policymakers in the loop about developments.



Communications manager: The participation platform needs to be embedded into your broader communication strategy, and should be included in existing communication channels. Via communications, you can direct community members to your platform.



IT manager: While our platform is built with all users in mind - both administrators and participants - you may find you can still benefit by engaging someone from your IT team. Engaging them can also be helpful to ensuring your platform integrates well with your other existing tools.

Step 2: Setting cross-team expectations



Define objectives: The first step is to set your goals and choose the relevant metrics to measure success. Does the project aim to reach a lot of votes? To engage a certain age group? And how will this be measured?



Agreeing on key dates: This will keep things ticking along. We also recommend sharing some of these deadlines on the platform to set clear expectations with your community.



Communications: Who is in charge of communications with the administration? There should be enough coordination between the team in charge of the platform and the departments responsible for the projects on it. Also, how (often) will you respond to community members' ideas on the platform? When and how will you share results or updates?

Step 3: Learn by doing

Yes, it's essential to make time to plan around these elements. But keep in mind that community engagement always entails some form of trial and error. It's okay to give your administration time to get used to these new processes. Once the overarching objectives, roles, and deadlines have been set, it's time to get out there and give it a try. From there, apply your lessons learned to iterate when needed.



CASE STUDY ENVIRONMENT & SUSTAINABILITY

Texel, Netherlands

The Dutch commune of Texel consciously started small to ensure a smooth internal process. They did this by launching quick polls about their environmental policy. Even in the early stages, the platform illustrated **strong internal collaboration**: the deputy mayor and councillor, Edo Kooiman, was actively involved and assisted with communication efforts to raise awareness about the platform in the community.



The communication team also promoted the platform by sharing videos, pictures, and tweets about the process on Texel's social media platforms. All in all, these practices illustrate the commitment and internal alignment of a variety of stakeholders.

"We felt that it was vital to deliver on the promises the participation platform made to citizens. Therefore, we decided to start by creating a platform without any beginner's mistakes. Now that everyone feels comfortable with the platform, we launched the next phase: citizens can share their ideas and engage in a conversation with us and each other. In the first phase we'd only ask them to comment on the ideas we put forward."

Linda Dinkelman, Communications advisor of Texel



At CitizenLab, we always provide our clients with a personalised workshop on internal organization and expectations. Our seasoned participation strategists even created the **e-participation canvas based on this experience**. This practical framework can assist your administration in outlining the most essential elements of a participation project. **You can download the e-participation canvas and fill it out for yourself.**



3

How do you get the community to **use** your platform?

You're organized. Your platform is ready. But... no-one's using it. Raising awareness about your platform and participation projects is vital. Ideally, the results of a project reflect a wide range of voices from your community, fulfilling your need to reach as many people as possible. A successful launch doesn't always require a considerable budget or a large team, but it always requires effort and serious consideration.

3 fundamental principles to craft your message:

In a nutshell, your communication relies on **clarity, continuity, and diversity**. There might be a lot of information to share, but it's essential to keep it simple: How can the community participate? Why should they? What will you do with the results? A simple call to action and clear value proposition will help your message stand out.



5 channels to get your message across:

1. **Local press:** Involve local news outlets via a press releases about your platform's launch, and include about its direct (or anticipated) results.
2. **Letters:** By sending letters with unique registration codes to community members you can both spread the word about the platform's existence more equitably, but will also make your community curious about the platform and its featured projects.
3. **Email campaigns & newsletters:** If you have a mailing list of interested residents and stakeholders, or former participants, consider sharing the news with them via email directly. These campaigns shouldn't be just a one-off: keep your community in the loop about the results, too.
4. **Social media channels:** Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, and Instagram - each channel allows you to share engaging posts about your platform. Many communities already interact with each other via social media groups, such as neighborhood associations.
5. **Direct web traffic:** Make sure that your platform can be easily found by residents who look for it via search engines or on your government website. This means choosing easy titles and explicit descriptions - for instance, "MyCity's participatory budget" is a clearer title than "Co-creating the future of MyCity". By adding links to the platform on your main website you also improve the platform's visibility, which makes it easier to find.

Rome wasn't built in a day, and neither is your platform's audience. Continuously remind your community about the different channels they can use to contribute to local policy. Moreover: don't just mention that you have a platform, but also share updates of the most popular ideas or replies from the council to get community members genuinely engaged and excited.



CASE STUDY STRATEGY & BUDGETTING

Kortrijk, Belgium

The Flemish city of Kortrijk started off strong with its digital platform. With their “Big Inquiry” initiative, the city asked community members to share their thoughts on 5 clear statements across different policy areas. Their communications team set-up a campaign that was successful for multiple reasons:

- 1. Kick-off event:** The city launched the “Big Inquiry” in a festive atmosphere during a New Year’s reception on a large square in the city. This event, which attracted 5,000 residents, also received local press coverage, which immediately led to a lot of awareness about the participation project and platform. Following the event, the city created short and catchy videos which could easily be shared online.
- 2. Low-threshold inquiry:** If awareness is your first objective, accessible projects about day-to-day questions might appeal most to your community and convince them to sign up for your platform. Although the goal should eventually be to engage with your community in a more meaningful way, a lower-stakes process like this can kick-off engagement on your platform and ensure that residents have a profile before larger, deliberative projects take off.
- 3. Quickly communicate first results:** We can’t stress it enough: show your community that their voice matters from the very beginning. Two weeks after launching the “Big Inquiry”, Kortrijk already shared some of their first results. This raised awareness, received press attention, and led to a new surge of registrations on the platform.



You can download our free [**communications kit**](#) to get more tips on successfully launching your platform.



4

How do you pick the right consultation method?

There are many participation methods, ranging from in-depth offline deliberation to direct online voting. In online participation, there are six common methods. If your government does not have a participation platform yet, make sure to look for one that supports a variety of methods. It'll allow you to **tailor the participation method for every project.**



Questions you need to answer internally, per project:

- Is there a specific plan we want to receive input on?
- How much influence can we give the community?
- Are we open to new ideas, or do we just want feedback on an existing idea?
- Is a budget available?
- Do we want community members to engage with each others' input?

6 commonly used participation methods:

- 1. Polling:** Gives participants one clear question with pre-filled answers as options.
- 2. Scenario testing:** Provides participants with multiple policy plans to choose from, explaining the pros and cons per proposal and allowing debate.
- 3. Surveys:** Offer questionnaires for participants to fill out, which provides deeper insights into their reasoning.
- 4. Participatory budgeting:** Allows participants to allocate (part of) a public budget to selected projects.
- 5. Idea collection:** Asks participants to share ideas within a defined policy area or as a solution to a specific policy question.
- 6. Citizen proposals:** Offers participants the opportunity to share ideas on any topic, at any time, which your city will consider after a threshold of votes has been reached.



These methods don't have to be mutually exclusive. Participatory budgeting, for instance, often starts with an ideation phase that allows community members and stakeholders to share suggestions for ideas and plans that could receive funding.



CASE STUDY MOBILITY & INFRASTRUCTURE

Oudenaarde, Belgium

The city of Oudenaarde launched their participation platform in June 2019. The administration used the platform several times to consult its community members via a variety of surveys on mobility, community development, and culture. The local government also asked residents to share ideas on improvements to the city, which led to 238 ideas, 426 comments, and 3,027 votes.

"We always consider which participation method is appropriate in consultation with the involved department or any external partners. An important starting point is the degree of input that is still possible. It makes a big difference if there's still room for new ideas or whether clear boundaries have already been set. In the case of participation for a new mobility plan, we went with a survey. At that stage the partner we were working with needed insights on concrete bottlenecks; this method would enable us to define and structure the input more clearly."

Jelle Didier, communications officer of the city Oudenaarde



Each method has its advantages and disadvantages. We wrote an elaborate guide on the pros and cons per method, outlining the specific situations in which each could be suitable. We even illustrating them via real-life case studies! You can download the **[guide on 6 methods of online consultation](#)** for free.



5

How do you get your community to trust your participation platform?

Trust is a two-way street. To convince your community that your platform is trustworthy, they need to feel heard and included. In our experience, it takes time to build trust, but the three following tricks might help you to get started:



Communicate clearly and transparently

Offer community members all the information they need to make a well-informed decision to participate in your project, and show that their input is being taken seriously. Share upfront how input will be used, and be clear about the weight community input could have in the final decision. Community members must also be able to trust the messages they receive from you - clearly brand your platform with the **visual identity of your city to** make it easy to recognize who is asking these questions and why.

Make sure your platform offers a genuine and concise answer to the following questions:

- What is the goal of this project?
- Who is it aimed at?
- How will input be used?
- Which selection criteria will be used?
- How will the ideas be implemented?

Showcase results

Building trust takes time. The best way to achieve it is by keeping your promises: showcase the direct results of (earlier) participation projects to illustrate that you community members can make a real impact by participating. In the early stages of your project, showing results may be less straightforward, but not impossible. You can either share early results while the project is still ongoing, or you can share previous (offline) participation projects that your government has launched. Both will **underline the fact that you are listening to input**, genuinely care about the voices of your community, and hopefully inspire them to engage with the platform.



Take privacy seriously

It's as evident as it is crucial. Privacy and data ownership are thorny topics these days, and for a good reason. Explain clearly on the platform why you're asking for (specific) data from community members, and what you intend to do with that information. **Only collect the data you need to influence your decision-making process**, and be mindful of collecting personal information when it's not relevant or will not be used. The Privacy Policy and Terms and Conditions of the platform have to be easily accessible so that residents always know what they're signing up for.

Since trust is a two-way street, we also provide the option for governments to verify the identity of participants. We've worked on implementing local resident verification, e.g. for official voting, with multiple partners. This is recommended when results have to include a variety of stakeholders or if only certain neighborhoods are allowed to participate.



CASE STUDY

NEIGHBORHOODS & COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

Orsay, France

"Our aim was to involve as many people as possible while avoiding any risk of fraud; the projects we are talking about would cost the city several million euros, so we needed guarantees that the obtained results would not be biased, and it's real citizens that are voting."

Antony Pereira, Director of Communications for the city of Orsay:

Orsay was the first French city to implement ID verification on an engagement platform. To our own surprise, the verification process in Orsay did not discourage the community from registering on the platform. Much to the contrary, the city saw a 213% increase in the rate of registered users compared to the average of other platforms. Orsay led a good communication campaign to help increase the visibility of the platform, and **verification may have helped build more positive perception**. It gave residents the confidence that the platform was legitimate and serious.



6

How do you **combine** the online platform with your offline projects?

Digital community engagement can complement offline engagement but doesn't replace it. Offline participation methods are still wide-spread, as they've proven their value for many communities by allowing for deliberation and debate. We recently launched our [online workshop feature](#) to ensure cities can host town hall discussions online, but if your community prefers to engage in a real-life setting they should be given this opportunity, too. Combining these methods also helps you reach a more diverse audience.



Luckily, many governments have found ways to align the offline and online aspects of their participation projects. The idea is to actively transfer the ideas and arguments from one domain to the other, to ensure that the conversation includes all of your community's suggestions.

Quick ways to start integrating your processes:



At your offline events:

- Make a video of expert speakers or government officials who outline their stance, so that these views can be shared on your platform as well
- Capture the feedback, stories, and ideas shared by community members at the event and share these in the online discussions. This can help you measure whether the ideas that are popular during an event also receive broader support from a (potentially) more diverse audience;
- Did the project launch online already? Share a summary of the discussion that has happened on the platform and which ideas have been exchanged. Is the offline event kicking-off your online participation? Promote the online platform by saying that the conversation will continue there, or by publishing the results there.



On your online platform:

- Ask for input on the agenda of your offline-event;
- Use online surveys or polls to gather broad community feedback as a starting point for offline discussions;
- Give a clear recap of the main topics and challenges that came up during offline talks to ensure the conversation can build upon this and evolve further.



CASE STUDY ENVIRONMENT & SUSTAINABILITY

Harderwijk, the Netherlands

The Dutch municipality of Harderwijk integrated their digital platform as a clear way to bridge two offline events. In the winter of 2019, the local government hosted its first offline "City Conversation" to deliberate about **life without natural gas**, asking: What are the challenges this presents for our neighborhoods? Are there any active green initiatives in the community? What opportunities do community members see?

Following this offline get-together, ideas were also posted and shared on their online engagement platform. Here, **community members could continue their discussion** over the course of three months. Afterwards, Harderwijk hosted a final offline "City Conversation" in June 2019, where they brought all the shared input into the discussion and shared final suggestions.

For evaluation, the municipality made a clear visualization of the main concerns and opportunities in the community, which they then shared on the online platform as well as in the local council meeting. These insights will be taken into account in the upcoming discussions on an action plan.



7

How do you reach beyond your usual audience?

We hear it often: you want to reach more of your community, and go beyond the usual suspects. You want your process to be more inclusive, so that everyone has the tools necessary to fully participate. However, some groups are harder to reach than others. **Mixing offline and online participation methods** can help you reach a wider audience. Doing this provides multiple opportunities to participate, and some people will prefer giving their input at a moment that suits them. In contrast, others prefer joining an event to share insights.



Factors that can have a big impact on the inclusivity of your platform:



Language: Keep it neutral by steering clear of stereotypes and assumptions about your audience. Also, in order to make everyone feel welcome and included, make sure that communication about your project is available in all the main languages that are spoken in your community. The same rules apply for visual language: images and photos should reflect a diversity of cultures, ethnicities, abilities, genders, and ages.



Launch for inclusion: Getting the word out across different social groups is essential. Your community is diverse, and everyone should be aware of your project or platform. Consider the kinds of content or media they consume to ensure you're sharing your message widely. A great way to reach as many people as possible is to collaborate with community influencers: either by sharing the news in relevant Facebook groups or by involving community organizations in outreach.



Clear User Experience (UX): A digital platform should be clear and accessible, i.e. by being compatible with all kinds of devices. The software should also cater to the visually impaired, which can be verified with an accessibility label such as [WCAG 2.1 AA](#) (part of CitizenLab's platform). If your participation platform is not user-friendly for different audiences, it will automatically exclude them from participating in your projects, so this should not be taken lightly.

While taking these factors into consideration is not a guarantee for participation, it's important that you take the steps necessary to ensure inclusivity. Measure your results along the way and adjusting your strategy if you feel you're not reaching a diverse enough audience. If specific stakeholders are missing from the conversation, you could consider addressing them directly to ensure they have at least had a clear opportunity to engage with the project.



CASE STUDY PLANNING & PUBLIC SPACES

Leiden, the Netherlands

"The big advantage of digital participation is that you reach citizens who normally don't attend town halls. That's why we launched a digital platform in January 2020. Our first project concerned the redesign of 'het Roomburgerpark, a local park. Citizens not only received a letter, but we also communicated about the project in our city newspaper, digital newsletter and on social media. Communication should be tailored to your citizens, and remains a process that you have to reconsider along the way. This allows you to evaluate, make adjustments and involve your target audience as much as possible. As we believe it is key that anyone who wants to participate, can do so."

Hester Tuinhof, communications advisor of the municipality Leiden

The municipality of Leiden started a participation project to transform the Roomburger park into a contemporary sports park, together with local residents. Through a survey on their platform, about **1,000 community members** shared their ambitions for the park. The final design proposal was drawn up by the municipality in co-production with a working group of ten selected residents and representatives from involved organizations. During the working group's meetings, the results of the survey were taken into account to make decisions.



In case you're looking for more tips on setting up an **inclusive participation project**, make sure to check [our free guide](#) on the topic.



8

What's the **cost** of a citizen participation platform?

How much time and money can you save through digital engagement? This depends on a lot of factors, such as the cost of your current (offline) engagement activities. However, what's often forgotten in this assessment is the fact that **not involving community members often results in (unintended) costs**. In essence, not consulting your community can result in unnecessary investments and fail to address the most pressing needs of the community.



Besides an initial investment in a digital platform, there also two **hidden costs** to keep in mind:



Time: Digital platforms don't run themselves. Setting them up, managing community input, moderating comments and analyzing contributions takes time. It requires involvement from city staff and is an essential point of any community engagement project: even the best platforms will fail if there's not sufficient stakeholder buy-in and no internal support for the tool.



Communication: Ideally, there is a separate budget for launching the platform and investing time into excellent communication. But it's also possible to communicate about your platform with limited resources. Your communication efforts stop once you launch. Even once the project is over, it's essential to communicate how the community's input is going to be used, which ideas are going to be implemented, and what the timeline looks like.

Offline community engagement also requires an investment: Town hall meetings or focus groups take time to organize, require on-site staff, and have to be repeated throughout different phases of the project (amongst other things!). The input that is collected during these meetings is more difficult to process and share across your administration. Since fewer people can attend an in-person meeting compared to logging into an online platform that's available 24/7, you're likely to get fewer contributions (probably from the same audience), making it a potentially less attractive investment.

Digital tools often help lower the cost of community engagement by getting ahead of problems. Of course, the nature of online input is different from the information that comes from focus groups. Online, community members can provide brief feedback through comments, or choose the projects they want to support, in addition to having more deliberative discussions in workshops. But in any case, they can be invited to participate sooner and throughout different touchpoints, making it easier to craft policies in line with needs sooner rather than later.



Despite these limitations, this type of consultation remains very useful to reach younger residents or people within the community who are not able to attend physical meetings for a variety of reasons. Digital platforms make it easy to reach large numbers of people and to collect input on a broad scale. Additionally, it cuts event costs so you can focus on implementation instead. Cities usually purchase a yearly license, on top of which they can add unique features and project management fees. Typically, the pricing model depends on two elements: **the city's size, and the number of requested features and services.**



At CitizenLab, we developed three core plans. These are designed to match the most frequent requests, but can always be tailored to fit specific needs. **[View our pricing plans](#)** to gain a better understanding of the pricing and features in the different options.



9

How do you keep your platform interesting?

You've successfully launched your platform and know how to work with it internally. But how do you keep its engagement going? If your government has invested resources in setting up a proper platform, you can't let the momentum of your projects go to waste. Too often, cities view engagement as a one-off project. But a real **engagement platform is all about building and maintaining engagement**. It's about keeping the community informed between the different phases of the policy cycle, up-to-date on what happens with their input, and involved with next steps taken by your government.



Practical tips to keep your platform relevant over a longer period:



Share (and repeat) results. Give frequent but short-and-sweet updates about what's been happening on your platform. Which ideas sparked debate? Did you notice that multiple people shared similar thoughts? Give attention to what's happening on your platform by joining discussions and sharing results or updates regularly to keep your community informed and engaged. Moreover, ensure that the results of previous participation projects are easily accessible on the platform so community members can see the value of their input.



Remind your community that your platform exists. Residents are likely to register and directly participate in a project that interests them, but they may need reminders to come back and engage with new projects or ideas. Instead of sending actual reminders, your communication team can consider creative ways to share engaging reminders about your platform. Local governments could, for instance, consider social media posts about popular ideas, videos from council members addressing the community, or sharing stories from community members who are actively involved on the platform.



Have at least one active project. When community members log into the platform, there should always be a running participation project and an opportunity to participate. If this isn't the case, people are less likely to come back, and your platform may seem inactive to visitors.



Let the community share proposals. Within a participation project, community members can sometimes share ideas related to specific policy topics. But what if they could always share their ideas outside of just the ongoing projects? This would mean they could contribute to policy at any time by simply posting a suggestion or flagging an urgent community need. This option provides an endless opportunities for community members to participate, as the proposals don't have to fit into the timeframe of the existing projects.

At CitizenLab, we've developed a **Proposals feature** to ensure that communities can always contribute to the policy agenda. The feature enables residents to share ideas on any topic, at any time, from anywhere, and opens up the debate on improving your community with a bottom-up approach. By sharing proposals and getting sufficient votes from fellow community members, **residents are empowered** to influence the policy agenda. The local **government remains in control** of defining the threshold of necessary votes and the actions to be taken once this threshold is reached.



CASE STUDY

NEIGHBORHOODS & COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

Linz, Austria

In Linz, the third-largest city in Austria, the government decided to implement proposals on its participation platform. The city set its own threshold that proposals should reach at least 30 votes from other community members within 60 days to be taken up by the council. If successful, the initiators are invited to a town hall to discuss their proposal, and to eventually meet with relevant local experts.

In just a few months, community members shared **26 unique proposals** on the digital platform, 4 of which reached the city's threshold. Linz confirmed that they will soon be implementing the first proposal: new benches for the city center, designed by a local resident. This was a conscious move to show the community that the city is listening and to encourage others to share their proposals as well.



"Now, citizens can participate whenever they want, and can share their ideas about whatever they want, which gives the mayor an idea of the citizens' needs. Even though citizen proposals are very new, they are very popular among citizens - so much in fact, that we're considering raising the threshold of signatures that are needed. We've seen that some citizens are truly invested in what's going on in their city, and really enjoy the opportunity to be active."

Julia Widy from HuemerIT, a consulting company, working with the city of Linz on digital participation:



10

How do you follow-up on community input?

Once your platform is fully up and running, it hopefully results in large numbers of community input. Residents make time to visit your platform and share their ideas, so your **administration should make time to follow-up on this input**. Always communicate what is happening with the input provided on the platform, as it will help to build a relationship of trust with your community.



For the record: following up on an idea does not necessarily mean that it has to be implemented by your local government. **Don't be afraid to say "no"** if a suggestion does not fit your administrations' strategy or budget. However, make sure to always share your reasoning with the community by replying on the platform. Community engagement is not about implementing every (popular) idea; it's about engaging in dialogue with your residents and stakeholders on the ideas that can improve the community.

Tips on following-up on community input:



Commit to giving official feedback. Make your community feel heard by replying to their ideas with your official city accounts. This may be difficult if there are a lot of ideas, but it's not impossible. [The Belgian city of Leuven](#) proves it can be done, as long as there is sufficient political will. After collecting 2,331 ideas for their strategic multi-annual plan, the administration replied to 96% of these ideas over the course of one summer. Depending on the size of your team, it may not be feasible to reply to individual comments, but it's a great way to build a dialogue and relationship with your community.

Before the start of your project, align internally to decide who is responsible for organizing follow-up. Ensure that your administration can at least reply to the most popular ideas and show the community that you're taking their views into account.



Make use of the available technology. The enormous benefit of a digital platform is the fact that technology can help you to process a large amount of data. The available technology will differ per platform, but at CitizenLab we work with **Natural Language Processing (NLP)**. NLP technology clusters community members' ideas and provides decision-makers with clear, concise insights on overarching trends. This technology, for instance, helped [the Belgian Youth4Climate movement](#) group 1,700 ideas into a short list of 15 priorities on climate action, which the organizers could then share with politicians.



Share decision-making. The most critical follow-up is, of course, sharing the actual results of your project. Many governments underestimate the importance of doing this, but sharing outcomes in an engaging way will inspire your community to come back and participate in future projects! Therefore, make sure your results are easily accessible, clearly state how community input informed your decision-making, and try to visualize the most significant policy actions taken by your administration. By making this information more engaging and easy to comprehend, more of your residents and stakeholders will understand and remember the results. It makes them more likely to feel supportive of and connected to the policy decision.



One last tip...

"To make your platform successful it can help to have clear processes in place, but you also learn a lot by doing. You might be really well prepared, but as a city, you have to accept that things are going to change along the way and that you're going to have to adapt. Don't be scared, just do it!"

Ana Zuljevic, Project Manager at the Innovation Hauptplatz of the Austrian city of Linz

Want to engage your community online? We're here to help!

CitizenLab has worked with **300+ local governments** on digital community engagement across more than 18 countries. **The platform offers a mix of participation methods**, allowing you to customize and utilize the toolbox differently per project. We're happy to walk you through all the functionalities of the platform and discuss how it could support your city's participation ambitions.

[Schedule a free demo of the platform](#)



Get started with digital community engagement
in your city!

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