**Guide:**

How to build community engagement into your planning processes

citizenlab

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# Introduction

A significant part of local governments' many responsibilities is the creation of comprehensive plans. These plans are generally meant to outline strategies and actions in various areas over the course of several years. For example, this could be a strategic plan, which defines local priorities for the years to come. It could be a climate plan outlining both long-and short-term strategies and tactics to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, create green spaces, or implement more sustainable policies. Maybe it's a large-scale revision of your mobility plan or a city-wide participatory budget allocating public funds to several neighborhoods or initiatives.

Involving residents and stakeholders in reviewing, assessing, and co-creating these paramount plans is crucial for accurate, responsive, and inclusive policymaking. But too often, when presenting a big plan, it's tempting to throw the whole thing out there at once. Formality and thoroughness are hallmarks of big plans, after all — but that makes them quite intimidating. Community members are unlikely to engage with, or feel passionate about, a 300-page PDF or Keynote presentation going into excessive detail about any and every policy decision for the next few years. While crucial for the plan's successful implementation, these documents are typically difficult to understand, uninspiring, and inaccessible.

To prompt genuine engagement from community members, and create a plan that's reflective of your community's needs and likely to win their support, you'll have to make them care. And the only way to do that is by breaking down your plan into smaller, more manageable, and more relevant pieces. This makes it easier for residents and stakeholders to formulate feedback, and also allows them to weigh in specifically on the parts of the plan that matter most to them or will most affect them in the real world.

A CitizenLab community engagement platform provides several functionalities that'll help you structure and layer your projects, making it easier for residents to get the gist and give their two cents. In this guide, we'll discuss how you can use these functionalities to your advantage. So let's dive right in. And no, this won't be a 300-page document — we can promise you that.

# 1

# Why is it so important to receive community feedback?

Before we dive deeper into acquiring more and better community input, it pays to know why consulting the community is so vital in the first place. We'll be the first to admit — launching a community engagement trajectory isn't a "one and done" endeavor. It requires commitment, a clear action plan, and  a dedicated person or team to facilitate discussions and manage responses.  So what do you get in return for your  effort?

# Buy-in for new policies and plans

Without involving the community in the decision-making process, your well-intended, well-researched plans might end up misaligned with community needs or lacking community support. Securing buy-in for policy decisions requires setting up a transparent, participatory, two-way process that presents residents and stakeholders with a genuine opportunity to share their ideas and opinions. Suppose community members feel like their opinions were heard and considered in the final decision or plan. In that case, they'll be more likely to back the policy or decision at hand (as well as participate again in the future, and typically take a more favorable and trustful stance towards local government).

# Better, more accurate decisions

By inviting your entire community to formulate feedback on your plan, you will better understand the community's diverse priorities and needs. Young parents, elderly residents, and small business owners will look at your plan with drastically different perspectives and will be able to provide multi-faceted feedback. This, in turn, will help you allocate your time and resources most efficiently.

# Increased community awareness and building trust

The digital revolution has enabled billions of people across the globe to be and stay connected in a way that would have been unimaginable just a few years ago. This strong sense of connection has sparked an equally strong desire to help shape communities and find (new, digital) ways to consistently and successfully connect and move forward together. Strong communities are aware and engaged, and community engagement is the driving force behind it all.

# 2

# Setting yourself up
## for success

Receiving more valuable feedback on your plan starts with proper preparation. Preparation means fine-tuning the information and data  you already have, identifying what kind of input you still need, and, most importantly, how this feedback will influence your decision-making or implementation process.

# Why do you want to engage your community?

We've already discussed why engaging your community in plans and policymaking is so massively beneficial to your local democracy, but why do you want to do it? What's your intended outcome?

For some extensive plans, such as certain multiannual or strategic plans, community engagement is a legal requirement rather than an option. Still, it's worth evaluating what you're hoping to get out of the community feedback you receive. Do you want to tap into the collective intelligence to develop new, inventive ideas you might not have considered before? Do you need a sounding board to tie up loose ends on final decisions? Or do you want to gauge how the community feels about a particular idea, strategy, or measure? The answer to this question will serve as a helpful guide throughout the engagement process and will help you evaluate the success of your efforts afterwards.

# At what stage of the project will you engage your community?

When it comes to community engagement, the ideal scenario is co-creating an extensive strategic, climate, or mobility plan with your community from scratch. But because that's not always practically feasible, it's essential to consider which phase(s) of the project you'll let the community weigh in on. Are you allowing community members to co-define the plan's contents? Or are some decisions already virtually set in stone by the time the community gets to assess them?

There's no wrong or right when it comes to engagement. Community engagement can be valuable and meaningful at every stage of the process. Still, if we may make an expert recommendation, it would be **engaging residents and stakeholders early and often**.

Including your community in drafting and devising your plan early on will build awareness of the changes afoot and bolster the community's trust that they're being considered in the major decisions that will shape the next several years. Consulting people often means you're reaping the benefits of engagement at every stage of the trajectory. Setting relevant priorities and accessing innovative community ideas in the first phase, gauging opinions on the project's progress along the way, and double-checking decisions with the community at the end of the ride.

## How can your community engage, and what's their degree of influence?

You can use many different methods to engage your community, but they're not all created equal. This is where the engagement ladder comes in, a hierarchy ranking engagement methods based on the degree of genuine influence and transfer of decision-making power.

The five rungs of the ladder are information, consultation, involvement, collaboration, and empowerment. The higher you venture up the ladder, the higher the degree of engagement becomes. Deeper engagement requires a more considerable commitment on your part. Still, the more decision-making power you transfer to your communities, the more these communities will consider you a legitimate representative of their interests.
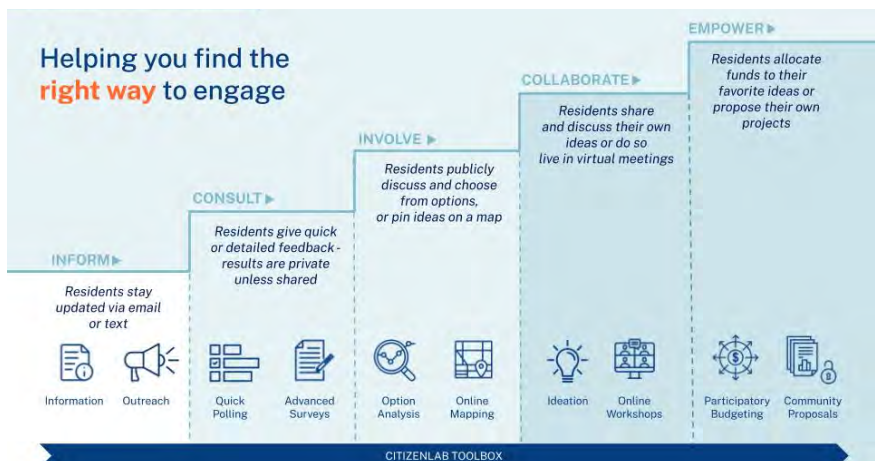
Again, all participation methods can be extremely valuable - the one you choose depends on your specific project and the outcome you have in mind. But as a general rule, our recommendation would be to **aim high or combine several steps of the participation ladder**. While the methods highest on the ladder will yield the most deliberative process and potentially the most valuable feedback, the methods lower on the ladder can provide additional value with a minimal investment of time and resources.

# 3

# Encouraging engagement by breaking down your project

In the previous section, you identified your community engagement goals. Now, it's time to consider how you can break down this process to encourage your community to participate. Because, as we discussed in the introduction, even the most motivated, engaged community members won't be able to wrestle their way through a lengthy 300-page report.

# It's all about context

First, you'll need to give your community members the necessary background information. What's the context of this new plan? Why is it being devised? What will it change? Is there input from subject-matter experts you can share from the get-go? Consider which information should be shared with the community to start from an equal footing.

When sharing this information, consider how you can make it accessible and engaging. Turning a 300-page PDF into a plain 50-page summary won't be enough to make community members passionate enough to participate. **Experiment with infographics, interactive maps, mind maps, or other visual elements**.

The **City of Lancaster, PA** asked for feedback from people who live, work, and play in the South Duke Street area to help make it safer and more community-friendly. They shared background data showing that things like slower speed limits, more visible crosswalks, lighting, better sidewalks, and bike lanes could all help reduce accidents and injuries. Then they used the mapping function on their platform to ask for visual feedback on the changes the community wanted to see.

# Defining your engagement projects

Once you've identified which background information you need to provide, it's time to consider what you want people to weigh in on. Suppose you're devising a climate plan. This entails many subject matters that could all potentially be transformed into specific projects. For example, your climate plan could explore shared mobility solutions, the potential creation of new green spaces, initiatives to unharden the city, strategies to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, or the placement of composting containers. These are all drastically different projects that will require similarly specific approaches and appropriate engagement methods.

Breaking your comprehensive plan down into tangible projects will help you define clear actions and goals. But, more importantly, it will help your community understand the real-world relevance of your plan, and help them formulate more specific, valuable feedback.

# Trust the timeline

Once you've determined your project(s), you can use the dynamic timeline functionality to break your project into phases. This has the added benefit of providing transparency because community members can view and review the structure of the entire process from the very beginning.

Technically, you could have a timeline as simple as beginning-middle-end. You'd start by announcing the project and sharing the necessary background information. Then, you'd have the consultation phase using one of the engagement methods you selected in the previous section of this guide. And as a final step, you'd share the results. You could launch with those basic phases, or develop them further to utilize the  true strength of the timeline functionality with several substantial phases built into the project.

Consider this example from Wokingham, UK. For the update of Wokingham's local plan, the council built in several public consultations, revisions, and a feedback round in one project timeline.

# Breaking it down even further

Once you have your clearly delineated projects and their (ideal) timelines in front of you, consider how we can break them down even further. Within each project, you can create project folders on the CitizenLab platform. This feature allows you to tailor both the public-facing and administrator sides of your platform, grouping projects to meet your specific requirements. Each folder has a dedicated URL to allow for simple, user-friendly sharing with community members.

For example, you could split up your project according to:

➕ **Topic.** Say your project aims to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. This could easily be broken down into several different topics, including but not limited to sustainable energy solutions, recycling, vegetarianism/veganism, shared mobility, public transportation, or the local circular economy. Breaking down your project into different areas of interest allows your community members to weigh in on the topics that matter most to them, leading to more genuine and valuable engagement.

➕ **Area.** Who is this project relevant for? Which neighborhoods are you targeting? Suppose you're collecting ideas on the creation of new green spaces across your city or municipality. Breaking down this initiative with project folders representing different areas or neighborhoods would allow your community members to share ideas for their own local habitats, generally leading to higher engagement rates and more well-informed, valuable feedback.

➕ **Degree of engagement.** Some community members are so eager to weigh in they won't be satisfied with simply filling in a quick poll. Others might want to participate but won't have the time or conviction to allocate a budget or join an online workshop. Breaking a project down into different methods can help convince a broader audience to get involved in the way they see fit. If you're exploring shared mobility solutions, for example, you could break that project down according to the rungs of the participation ladder. A survey on shared mobility options could, for instance, be complemented with an ideation project on the placement of shared bike or scooter racks and an online workshop on how to seamlessly integrate shared mobility solutions in your local context.

**Mix & match.** Why stick to one of these options? Breaking it down into different areas, THEN topics, or vice versa, makes it even easier for community members to focus their engagement efforts on the things that matter most to them or most affect their daily lives. Similarly, breaking it down into topic/area THEN degree of engagement provides them with options on how to make their voices be heard on the things they care about. The more specific you go, the more thorough — and thus valuable — the community feedback will be.

The **London borough of Newham, UK**, set up localized community assemblies to involve residents and stakeholders in tackling local topics. They also broke down the decision-making process into different phases, working with the entire community for initial input and then diving deeper into specific issues with working groups.

## The power of hybrid engagement

Timeline and project folders allow you to split your project into bite-sized chunks on the digital platform. But don't forget you can also back your digital engagement efforts with traditional offline initiatives and quite literally split up your project between the online and offline realms. The personal contact involved in offline engagement can be an important factor in building trust and motivating community members to participate. Besides, online and offline participation opportunities often reach a different kind of audience. People who are not particularly tech-savvy, for example, are more likely to prefer an offline approach, while people with busy work schedules or caring responsibilities gladly participate online.

To reach as many people as possible — and make your engagement process as representative as it can be — it's a good idea to take a hybrid approach.

When the *Edit the City!* team in Philadelphia, PA set out to shape the future of urban main streets by building on improvements that were tested during the pandemic, they knew that including both online and offline options would make participation easier for the community. So, in addition to their digital engagement platform they added in-person booths at city events, like a ribbon-cutting ceremony downtown, where they knew there would be a lot of foot-traffic.

# Conclusion:
# thinking  in layers

Hefty strategic plans or reports don't randomly appear out of thin air in one day. There's a good reason why they're so lengthy and intimidating — because they contain a multitude of ideas, possibilities, measures, and initiatives. In a community engagement process, that's precisely how these plans should be presented.

So, we've got the theory covered. But how do you go about this, exactly? How do you break down that bulky report into an engagement process that'll actually inspire people to participate? We've created a helpful worksheet that'll help you unravel all the layers of your plan.

**I. Setting the scene**

**1. I'm creating a...**

☐ city plan, local plan, or multi-annual plan;

☐ climate strategy;

☐ mobility plan;

☐ other: _____.

**2. My main reason to engage the community is...**

☐ because it's legally required for the plan I'm devising;

☐ to get buy-in from the community;

☐ to make better/more accurate decisions;

☐ to get inspired by the collective intelligence;

☐ other: _____

**3. I'm considering the following engagement methods:**

☐ consultation — polling or surveys;

☐ involvement — option analysis, online mapping;

☐ collaboration — ideation; online workshops;

☐ empowerment — participatory budgeting, community proposals;

☐ a combination of different methods.

**4. I'm looking to engage my community in the following phase:**

☐ from the get-go — there's no plan yet;

☐ early on — there's a rough outline of the plan, but it should be elaborated based on community feedback;

☐ down the line — we've determined some options and priorities, and would like the community to weigh in;

☐ at the end — to gauge how the community feels about a draft or the decisions made;

☐ at several stages.

# Worksheet

## II. Breaking it down

**5. Based on your responses to questions C and D, how many timeline phases could you use?**

| Kickoff: background information | ◯ ◯ ◯ ◯ ◯ ◯ ◯ ◯ | Sharing results |

**6. Now that you've identified the timeline phases of your project, break down which engagement methods you'll use in every phase.**

| Kickoff: background information | ◯ ◯ ◯ ◯ ◯ ◯ ◯ ◯ | Sharing results |

**7. Based on your response to question A, break down your plan into focus areas. These can help you define which potential projects your plan contains. You can have one or several focus areas, so only fill in the boxes you need for your specific project.**

| TITLE OF YOUR PLAN | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Focus Area 1 | | | Focus Area 2 | | | Focus Area 3 | | |
| Subtopic 1.1 | Subtopic 1.2 | Subtopic 1.3 | Subtopic 2.1 | Subtopic 2.2 | Subtopic 2.3 | Subtopic 3.1 | Subtopic 3.2 | Subtopic 3.3 |
| Focus Area 4 | | | Focus Area 5 | | | Focus Area 6 | | |
| Subtopic 4.1 | Subtopic 4.2 | Subtopic 4.3 | Subtopic 5.1 | Subtopic 5.2 | Subtopic 5.3 | Subtopic 6.1 | Subtopic 6.2 | Subtopic 6.3 |

**8. Of the potential projects you've defined, consider which ones could be linked to specific locations, for example based on expert recommendations or community feedback. If this isn't relevant for your plan you can skip this section.**

| Topic 1.1 | | | Topic 1.2 | | | Topic 1.3 | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Location | 1. | | Location | 1. | | Location | 1. | |
| | 2. | | | 2. | | | 2. | |
| | 3. | | | 3. | | | 3. | |
| Topic 2.1 | | | Topic 2.2 | | | Topic 2.3 | | |
| Location | 1. | | Location | 1. | | Location | 1. | |
| | 2. | | | 2. | | | 2. | |
| | 3. | | | 3. | | | 3. | |
| Topic 3.1 | | | Topic 3.2 | | | Topic 3.3 | | |
| Location | 1. | | Location | 1. | | Location | 1. | |
| | 2. | | | 2. | | | 2. | |
| | 3. | | | 3. | | | 3. | |
| Topic 4.1 | | | Topic 4.2 | | | Topic 4.3 | | |
| Location | 1. | | Location | 1. | | Location | 1. | |
| | 2. | | | 2. | | | 2. | |
| | 3. | | | 3. | | | 3. | |
| Topic 5.1 | | | Topic 5.2 | | | Topic 5.3 | | |
| Location | 1. | | Location | 1. | | Location | 1. | |
| | 2. | | | 2. | | | 2. | |
| | 3. | | | 3. | | | 3. | |

By breaking each project down like this, you'll uncover the different layers your projects could be split into to make them more accessible, interesting, and relevant to community members. Don't worry if you have a lot of empty boxes — not everything can be broken down this way. Really, it's about considering the different layers of your comprehensive plan, and evaluating how they should be presented to the community.

# citizenlab

**Feeling stuck?**

Get in touch with one of our participation experts.
They're more than willing to help you structure, plan,
and make the most of your engagement process

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