Citizen Engagement Toolkit

A guide for overcoming barriers and enhancing your community engagement efforts

eScribe

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Introduction

Citizen engagement is crucial to a healthy, happy community. Effective engagement ensures government officials understand the needs and wants of the community and can develop projects and initiatives that align with them.

Oftentimes, though, there's a disconnect between a local government and its citizens. Governments must work to overcome the barriers that stand in the way of more effective engagement.

Throughout the guide, you'll also find practical, hands-on resources you can leverage to overcome key obstacles and start building and fostering a more active, engaged community.

In this guide, we'll explore:
- What citizen engagement is
- Why it's beneficial
- Why governments often aren't doing as much as they could to foster it

Part 1

What is citizen engagement,
and why does it matter?

Think **Discuss** **Align**

Why Citizen Engagement Matters

Before we explore the benefits of citizen engagement, let's first take a step back to define what the phrase means – and what it looks like in action.

Citizen Engagement, Defined

According to the Institute of Development Studies[1], citizen engagement is "a form of interaction between citizens and their governments. It can happen at any stage of the development or implementation of government policy and the delivery of public services, or be triggered by events in local areas. It can lead to a range of outcomes, including more effective services and more responsive and accountable states."

Said another way, citizen engagement (which is often referred to as civic engagement) is **the practice of community members collaborating with municipal leaders on an ongoing basis to improve the community and the lives of those who live there.** Citizen engagement isn't a one-time event or a one-way relationship. Rather, it's a two-way process that encourages ongoing dialog and idea-sharing between a government and those it governs.

Put simply, citizen engagement refers to the relationship between local governments and the communities they serve.
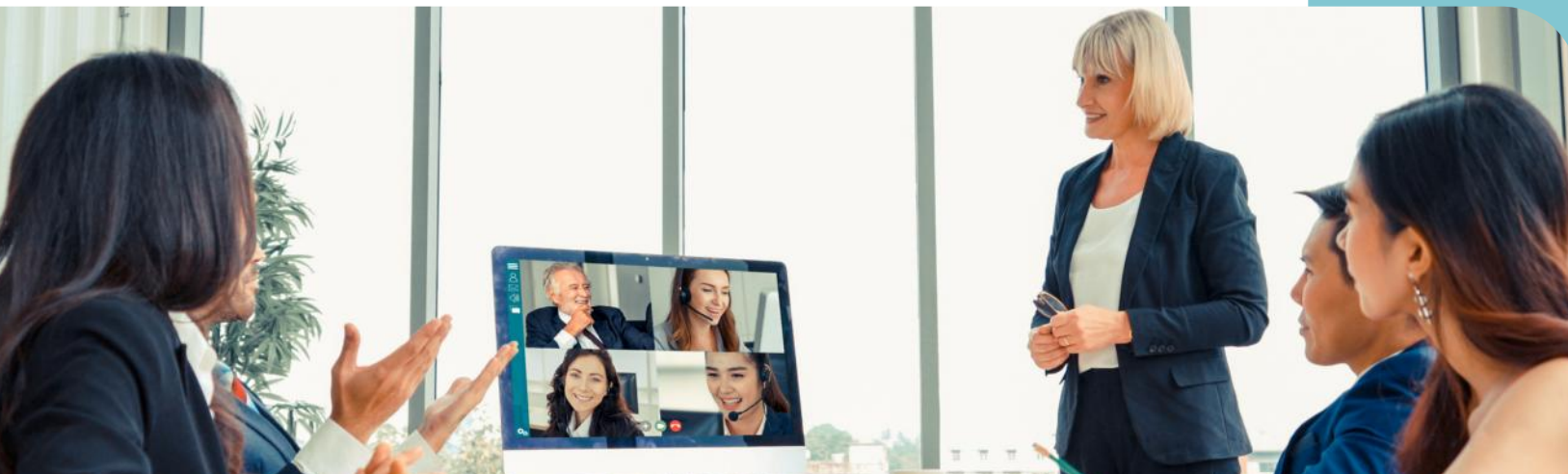
[1] Institute of Development Studies "Citizen Engagement"

In the past, citizen engagement primarily took place in person. Local governments would announce upcoming council meetings and town halls, typically by placing newspaper notices and distributing flyers. Interested citizens would then attend those meetings to engage with municipal leaders. If a citizen wanted to make a formal inquiry – like a request to present at a future meeting – that inquiry had to be made via traditional mail.

In-person meetings are still an important part of citizen engagement. However, **the rise in technology has enabled other means of engagement which have the potential to increase community participation**. For example, constituents and leaders can now correspond electronically, and video conferencing capabilities allow citizens to participate and collaborate remotely. In addition, online resources allow community members to easily access information whenever and wherever the need arises.

What Makes a Well-Engaged Community?

But what exactly does a well-engaged community look like? There's no one-size-fits-all answer, as each community is unique.

In general, though, there are some common characteristics all well-engaged communities share, as we will discuss here.

Read on to discover the six most common characteristics of engaged communities.

6 Characteristics of Engaged Communities

Accessible

Citizen engagement isn't something that should be reserved for the few. Rather, all citizens should have the ability to participate effectively in local government, regardless of schedule, location, and abilities.

Transparent

A government must always be fully transparent with its citizens if it expects to earn (and maintain) their trust. For example, governments must be transparent about their process for decision making, the opportunities for input from the public, and how that input will be used.

Vision-driven

Local governments must always be focused on the future of their communities. Their vision should be the north star of all actions and decisions.

Alignment

The role of local government is to serve and represent its constituents. Governments must work to understand the needs, wants, and values of its citizens – and work to ensure their efforts are aligned to the desires of the community.

Open to dialogue

Local governments must always be open to hearing from its citizens. Governments must create ample opportunities for citizens to raise their concerns and have their voices heard and ensure citizens know about these opportunities.

Efficient

Clunky processes and technological limitations shouldn't stand in the way of progress.

Key Benefits of Engaged Citizens

Increasingly, governments are making citizen engagement a priority. Those who do are realizing significant benefits.

Key benefits of citizen engagement [2] include:

- **Broader understanding of the community's values, views, and priorities:** Often, there are gaps in understanding the broader community's views on proposed actions and decisions. Citizen engagement can shed light on collective views from a broader range of community members.
- **More informed residents:** Few community members are well versed on local policy matters. Citizen engagement provides opportunities for community members to be more informed on a given issue, its impact on the community, and the challenges of local agencies.
- **Better decision making:** Citizen engagement allows for more diverse perspectives and ideas – as well as insights into the issues that concern residents. This knowledge and insight fuels decisions that are made in the best interests of the community.
- **Community buy-in and support:** When citizens are actively involved in shaping a policy or project, they're more likely to support the final outcome. In addition, if the larger community understands the role the public played in a decision, it'll boost their support, too.
- **More productive discussions:** Waiting until the last minute to involve the community in a discussion can lead to hostile

[2] PennState School of Agriculture Sciences "Why Community Engagement Matters" and Institute for Local Government "Why Engage the Public?"

interactions. On the other hand, early, frequent involvement leads to more civil, productive conversations from the start – and can allow citizens to weigh in before an issue gets out of hand.

- **Faster project implementation:** Community involvement and buy-in to a decision can lead to faster project implementation. In addition, when citizens and government officials are in alignment, there's less chance of needing to revisit decisions over again.
- **Greater mutual trust:** Trust is the foundation for stronger communities. When governments and citizens collaborate, they gain a better understanding of each other's challenges – and the reasons behind their actions. In addition, when a local agency shows that it values the perspectives of its constituents (and provides them with opportunities to share their views), it boosts the community's trust in the local government.
- **More community participation:** When you provide new opportunities for your citizens to get involved, more of them will become involved.

Did you know?
60% of public sector organizations indicate the primary benefit of citizen engagement is better understanding of citizens' priorities. [3]

[3] SmartCitiesWorld "Whose City is it Anyway?"

Part 2

What gets in the way of effective citizen engagement?

Think

Engage

Obstacles to Effective Engagement

Clearly, there are many benefits to citizen engagement for both governments and their constituents. At the end of the day, citizen engagement – when it's done well – leads to mutual trust, better decision-making, and happier, healthier communities.

Yet, fostering effective citizen engagement is often easier said than done. That's because organizations, citizens, and city clerks and administrators all face unique challenges that stand in the way of ideal citizen engagement.

Top Obstacles for Organizations

Providing ample opportunities for citizens to get engaged is well worth the effort it takes to overcome the obstacles that prevent such engagement. While most organizations understand the value of citizen engagement, many hesitate to create and promote these opportunities.

Did you know?
A mere 10% of public sector organizations feel they're doing "very well" with citizen engagement. [4]

[4] SmartCitiesWorld "Whose City is it Anyway?"

Most of the time, organizations are aware of the challenges they face in this regard. According to research from SmartCitiesWorld[5], only one in 10 public sector organizations (including cities and local authorities – among others) feel they're doing "very well" with citizen engagement."

If organizations understand the value, what prevents better cultivation of citizen engagement? According to a report from SmartCitiesWorld[7], it often boils down to some combination of these common fears and concerns:

- **Failing to meet the public's demands:** Accepting ideas and insights from the public leads to better decision making. Yet, a third of organizations are concerned that they simply won't be able to meet the demands of their citizens. Failure to meet expectations can damage trust. Managing expectations is key to overcoming this concern.
- **Lack of participation:** "If you build it, they will come." Right? Not necessarily. Nearly a quarter (22%) of organizations worry that they'll establish opportunities for citizen participation – but then citizens won't step up to the plate. It's imperative to provide inclusive means of participation and ensure your citizens know how to get involved.
- **Cost concerns:** Local governments are focused on ensuring every dollar of the budget is well spent. So it's not surprising that 17% of organizations cite cost concerns as a barrier to more effective citizen engagement. But increasing citizen engagement doesn't have to be a costly endeavor. While there are some costs involved with citizen engagement – such as investing in a platform for community engagement – these costs are well worth it (and can even pay for themselves in cost/time savings!) as they help drive more effective decision making.
- **The technology gap:** Technology is evolving at a rapid pace, changing the face of community engagement. But oftentimes, organizations still rely on outdated, time-consuming processes and procedures.

Did you know?

10% of public sector organizations feel they're doing "very well" with citizen engagement. [6]

33% of organizations worry that the public will make demands they can't meet. [7]

22% of organizations are concerned that not enough people will participate in their citizen engagement initiatives. [8]

17% of organizations worry that citizen engagement is too costly. [9]

[5-9] SmartCitiesWorld "Whose City is it Anyway?"

Top Obstacles for Citizens

As mentioned earlier, many organizations fear that if they establish opportunities for citizen engagement, participation will be low. This is a valid concern. One of the main benefits of citizen engagement is getting a wide range of perspectives, and that's not possible if only a few people are participating.

Oftentimes, there are three key factors that stand in the way of greater citizen involvement.

Accessibility

In many cases, a citizen doesn't get involved because participation isn't accessible to them. For example, meetings may be held in a location that's not easily accessible. Or, perhaps meetings are always held during the community member's working hours. In addition, a community member may have a disability and there are no accommodations in place to ensure they can participate.

Increasing accessibility is vital. Providing accessible opportunities is key to increasing participation from all citizens.

Lack of Information

A top reason citizens don't get engaged is that they don't know how. The onus is on governments to clearly communicate opportunities for involvement. For example, it's essential to leverage multiple communication channels to ensure community members know when public meetings are happening and how they can participate.

Not Feeling It's Worth Their While

Some citizens opt out of engagement because they feel their voice doesn't matter and that their participation won't make an impact. These people may believe that governments request community member feedback to "check the box," but don't actually do anything with it.

Transparency is key to overcoming this obstacle. For any given project, governments must clearly communicate what the decision-making process is, what opportunities there are for providing ideas and feedback, and how that feedback will be used. It's also important to close the feedback loop. That way, citizens will see firsthand that you value their feedback – and are, indeed, using it. If they feel heard and valued, they'll be more likely to participate in the future.

Top Obstacles for City Clerks and Administrators

Bringing together municipal leaders and those they serve is powerful and important. City clerks and administrators are often the folks charged with managing citizen engagement efforts.

But it's not an easy task. City clerks and administrators face some major challenges that stand in the way of more effective citizen engagement.

Lack of Tools & Resources

City clerks and administrators must facilitate accessible, transparent opportunities for citizen engagement. But doing so is difficult and time consuming without the right tools and resources.

Communication Challenges

City clerks and administrators are usually on the hook for keeping the public "in the loop" on all the goings-on in the local government. Doing so ensures maximum participation and higher feelings of overall satisfaction with local government. But it can be challenging to determine the best communication channels to get the word out – and then effectively manage them.

Sure, there are significant barriers that stand in the way of citizen engagement. But local governments can't let these obstacles stand in the way. Instead, they need solid strategies to overcome challenges – and start reaping the myriad benefits of engaged citizenry.

Part 3

An interactive toolkit to help your
community achieve optimal
citizen engagement.

Evaluate +
Write it Out

Toolkit for Promoting Citizen Engagement in Your Community

The benefits of citizen engagement can't be denied. Yet, there are many barriers on the road to effective engagement.

However, it is possible to overcome those challenges. The following toolkit provides practical tips, advice and checklists that you can start leveraging today to boost your citizen engagement – and start fueling better decision making.

Citizen Engagement Self Assessment

Does your organization possess the characteristics necessary for effective citizen engagement? Assess your current state and identify opportunities for improvement by answering the following six questions. Try to be as honest and specific as possible.

1. Accessibility

How accessible are the engagement opportunities we provide to community members? Do they accommodate all citizens regardless of disability status, employment schedule, transportation access, etc.?

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Use this rubric to assess the state of citizen engagement in your own community.

Additional Notes...

2. Transparency

How transparent are we with our constituents? What are our current processes for ensuring transparency?

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3. Vision-Driven

Do we keep our long-term vision front and center when making decisions? How so?

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4. Alignment

Do we take the time and effort to understand the needs and desires of our citizens? Do our actions align with those needs and desires? What steps do we currently take to ensure alignment in this regard?

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Additional Notes...

5.Efficiency

Are our processes efficient? What are the ways we're streamlining those processes to ensure we can achieve more for our communities? Where is there opportunity for improvement?

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6.Openness to Dialogue

What opportunities do we provide for community members to share their feedback and ask questions? Do we offer opportunities in different formats – for example, in-person and online?

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Citizen Engagement Matrix for Specific Projects

Not all initiatives will involve the same level of engagement from your citizens. In some cases, the role of citizens is simply to stay informed on the progress of a decision or initiative. In other cases, the public has the power to make the final decision.

Use this matrix, adapted from the IAP Spectrum of Public Participation[10], to determine the level of public participation in any of your projects, programs, or initiatives.

[10] International Association for Public Participation "IAP2 Spectrum of Public Participation"

Low Level of Impact   **High Level of Impact**

	Inform	Consult	Involve	Collaborate	Empower
Goal of Citizen Engagement	Provide the public with enough information to understand the problem(s) and proposed solutions.	Gain citizens' feedback on analysis, alternatives, and decisions.	Ensure the public's concerns are heard, understood, and considered.	Partner with the community. Collaborate on every aspect of the decision-making process.	The public makes the final decision.
Government's Obligation to the Public	Keep citizens informed.	Keep citizens informed. Accept feedback. Communicate how input influenced final decision(s).	Ensure that public concerns are reflected. Communicate how public input influenced the final decision(s).	Solicit advice from the community. Incorporate that advice as much as possible.	Implement public decisions.

Notes:

Checklist: Increasing Community Engagement with Local Government

It can be challenging to increase citizen engagement. Perhaps you have low participation. Or, maybe your efforts always attract the same few folks every time.

It's important to gain participation from a diverse group of voices. Below is a checklist with some fresh, powerful ideas for doing so, adapted from a blog by Planetizen.

■ **Make City Hall More Accessible**
City Hall may be inconveniently located. What's more, meeting times may overlap with citizens' working hours. These factors lead to decreased engagement. Rather than holding all meetings at City Hall, consider scheduling them at different locations throughout the community – including senior centers and schools. In addition, rethink when meetings are scheduled to ensure greater participation.

Start implementing new community engagement practices in your community.

Think Outside of the Box
Open houses aren't the only way to get people involved. Instead, brainstorm less formal ways to encourage attendance. It can be as simple as incorporating food and entertainment – such as music or a live speaker.

Incorporate Digital Engagement Opportunities
Attending in-person meetings isn't always practical. Consider incorporating opportunities for citizens to engage right from their computers. For example, add video conferencing to your town hall meetings. Or invite conversations about a particular issue or project via social media.

Invite Diverse Opinions
Frequently, only the most vocal citizens are the ones whose perspectives are heard. Leverage digital tools to solicit a wider range of perspectives. For example, invite community members to provide some background information about themselves. Then, periodically invite these folks to share their perspectives. They might do so via a poll, survey, or small group discussion.

Notes

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Notes

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■ **Think Mobile First**
These days, citizens use their mobile devices for just about everything. Ensure all your communications and digital engagement opportunities are built in a way that makes it easy to participate from a mobile device.

■ **Leverage Storytelling**
Storytelling can be a great way to connect with citizens, personify issues, and increase engagement. For example, if environmental concerns are an area that's being addressed, invite subject matter experts to share stories or ask community members to share their own firsthand experiences.

■ **Take to the Streets**
Invite community members to join you for "walkshops." Community members and government leaders can participate in lively discussions about specific neighborhoods, concerns, and planned projects and initiatives.

■ **Throw Open the Doors**
Citizens may not know what exactly happens at City Hall. Consider hosting a "Doors Open" event that lets them get an insider's look at how City Hall (and other venues) operates.

How to Determine the Right Communication Channel

Clear communication is key to effective citizen engagement. Without strong communication, citizens won't know how to engage and how their feedback will be used. That'll lead to low (or even no) community participation.

But which communication channels are right for your messages?

In this how-to guide, adapted from the IAP2's Public Participation Toolbox ⁿ, we'll explore the pros and cons of common communication channels – and best practices for each.

ⁿ International Association for Public Participation "IAP2 Spectrum of Public Participation"

	Pros	**Cons**	**Best Practices**
Bill Stuffers	• Widespread distribution • Leveraging existing mailing	• Limited information • Confusion about who the stuffer is from	• Create aesthetically pleasing stuffers to capture attention
Websites	• Reaches a wide audience • Information can be accessed 24/7 • No printing or mailing costs • Easy to update	• Won't reach those without an internet connection • Large files take long to download	• Put the most important information at the top of the page • Use techniques like headings and bullet points to make content easy to scan
Email	• Inexpensive • Easy for community members to share with others	• Challenging to maintain accurate email lists	• Use a compelling subject line • Keep your message short and sweet • Optimize for mobile

	Pros	**Cons**	**Best Practices**
Briefings	• Use a compelling subject line • Keep your message short and sweet • Optimize for mobile	• Lack of interest in topic	• Short and simple • Use visual content
Central Contact Person	• Control flow of information • Provides accessibility for the community	• Must be prepared to answer a wide variety of questions, including challenging ones	• List a person rather than a position • Ensure contact person is local
Newspaper Inserts	• Community-wide distribution • Newspaper inclusion boosts readership • Chance for public comments	• Fewer newspaper readers • Expensive	• Create an eye catching design • Include insert on a day with few other inserts

Pros

Cons

Best Practices

Printed Materials

- Can reach a wider audience
- Chance for feedback via comment form
- Helps community understand their role

- Printing costs
- Only as good as the distribution network
- Information may become quickly outdated

- Keep it short, simple, and visually pleasing
- Add a free-post comment form to boost community engagement
- Define public's role in decision-making

Notes:

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Think Outside of Town Hall

A checklist of out-of-the-box engagement ideas to try

Attending public meetings shouldn't be the only way your citizens can get involved. Instead, experiment with different formats to maximize citizen engagement. Here are a few ideas to try, adapted from the IAP2's Public Participation Toolbox.

Citizen Juries
Small groups of community members gather to learn about an issue, question witnesses, and make recommendations.

Kitchen Table Meetings
Small neighborhood meetings held at a community member's home.

Virtual Meetings
Community members can attend and share their feedback from the comfort and convenience of home.

Fairs and Events
Fairs and events provide a great avenue for sharing information and showing local government involvement with the community in a fun, casual environment.

Fishbowl Processes
Decision-makers hold a meeting in a "fishbowl" so their deliberations are open to the public.

Focus Groups
Randomly select target audience members to test messaging and solicit feedback.

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■ **Meetings with Existing Groups**
Present at another group's event.

■ **Advisory Boards**
Form a group of stakeholders to provide ongoing public input on a project or initiative.

■ **Open House**
Invite the public to tour at their leisure.

■ **Public Meeting**
Host large group meetings where presentations are delivered and the public is invited to provide comments and ask questions.

Notes

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In Closing

The benefits of citizen engagement are clear. When citizens are engaged with local governments, decisions and actions are better aligned with the needs of the community.

Yet, many organizations struggle to build and foster citizen engagement. That's not surprising. Governments, citizens, and administrators alike all face challenges that stand in the way of more effective engagement.

Governments can't let these obstacles stand in the way of progress. With the right tools and strategy, government agencies can break down barriers and start fostering active, engaged citizenry that leads to mutual trust and happier, healthier communities.

Learn more about eScribe

A public sector meeting management solution with built-in community engagement modules.