



# Community Engagement Update

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**urbanvision**  
ENTERPRISE CIC

## Local Heritage: Community and Stakeholder Engagement and Involvement Guidance Note

### Introduction

Effective community and stakeholder involvement can bring real benefits in terms of promoting, managing and regenerating heritage. But specialist skills are required to do it properly. Where community engagement is undertaken without such skills, it is often tokenistic or ineffective and can have damaging consequences.

### Ways in Which Communities are Involved with Heritage

There are numerous ways in which communities engage with, use or control heritage assets. These include:

**Use and Management.** Most heritage assets (buildings, spaces and areas) are in productive use and form part of the infrastructure of modern society. Communities and individuals can own or otherwise control heritage assets, manage them, or occupy them. Sometimes, local trusts, such as community development trusts, take on heritage assets to support their programmes and operations. Transfer of assets to local communities by public bodies is a way of facilitating community projects and programmes.

**Influencing and Monitoring.** Local community groups such as civic societies, residents' associations and local trusts often monitor policy and proposals and seek to influence

decision making by campaigning or making representations. In addition, they can submit buildings for listing or suggest other designations, such as new conservation areas.

**Tourism and Education.** Volunteers are often part of the solution to the interpretation, management and running of heritage assets that are open to the public or to schools.

**Other Kinds of Involvement.** Many heritage projects, initiatives and activities rely on volunteering. Volunteering can range from hands-on physical works to provision of professional support. This can include things like: research and understanding, project development and management, professional services (planning, architecture, legal, etc.) or business planning.

### What Kind of Heritage Matters Can Benefit from Consultation?

Community leadership, engagement or involvement can contribute significantly to a range of heritage-related activities and decisions.

Communities can be consulted or become actively involved in local designations, such as compiling local lists, designating or extending conservation areas or making use of Article 4 Directions.

It is essential to engage communities when developing regeneration programmes and projects. They may have knowledge or views to inform the ways in which heritage assets will be used and adapted. In addition, local knowledge is essential in developing sustainable business plans for heritage assets to help ensure their on-going viability.

Local people and groups will often be interested in planning applications

and applications for listed building consent. If effective early consultation has taken place, it is more likely that people will be supportive at the formal application stage. Pre-application consultation is useful, but pre-design consultation is far better. This allows local knowledge to inform the project brief.

It is important that communities be engaged in plan-making activities, from Local Plan Core Strategies to Neighbourhood Plans. It is a myth that people are not interested in policy. A lack of involvement in policy making is often due to poor practices rather than a lack of interest. Few people will read a thick technical document deposited in a library. But most people have views on their local area and ways in which it should develop in the future.

## Why is Community Engagement Important?

Community and stakeholder engagement is necessary and important for several reasons:

**Gaining Support.** Early community engagement is essential in developing consensus, avoiding misconceptions and creating public confidence. This can apply to heritage projects, planning policy on heritage, heritage designations, or proposals to alter or extend heritage buildings or spaces. Good community engagement helps to create a sense of ownership by the wider public.

**Statutory Requirement.** Planning legislation requires consultation and engagement to take place when producing local or neighbourhood plans or when dealing with development proposals.

**Understanding the Heritage Asset.** Finding out what people think and drawing on their knowledge of a local area is an important part of developing evidence and understanding of a heritage asset and its social, economic and physical context. This is essential when planning new uses, developing project business plans, formulating policy or designing physical changes to buildings, spaces and townscape.

**Better Outcomes.** The community know a lot about their own place. Effective community engagement leads to more realistic and deliverable projects, plans and policies. Without such understanding, the risk of failure is much higher.

**Avoidance of Conflict, Additional Cost and Delay.** Failure to engage communities properly at an early stage is one of the main causes of conflict later in the process. This can lead to additional costs and delays. The more work that is done at an early stage, the lower the level of risk.

## Good Practice in Engaging Communities and Stakeholders

Community engagement programmes and events need to be designed for the specific subject, area and population in question. There are no standard templates. Nevertheless, there are good practice principles that should be considered:

**Proportionality.** The scale, cost and scope of community engagement should reflect the scale and nature of the activity or project. This needs to be considered when reading the following.

**Front Loading.** Community engagement should be undertaken at the earliest stage, and certainly before work commences on project design, policy writing, plan-making or the undertaking of new heritage designations. The purpose of such engagement is to develop understanding and knowledge to inform design, project development or plan-making processes.

**Publicity and Awareness.** It is important to publicise proposals using different media right at the beginning of the process.

**Local Partnerships.** Key partners and stakeholders should be identified. These can provide easier access and support in involving minority groups, different communities, residents, the business community, hard-to-engage communities, etc. Partners could include business organisations, community and residents' groups, local trusts and societies, not-for-profit organisations representing minority groups, educational establishments, land and property owners, local institutions, etc.

**Capacity Building.** It will often be necessary to include capacity building (education/training) so that those participating in community engagement events are well informed about the proposal and issues involved.

**Avoiding Tokenism.** The purpose of undertaking community engagement is to inform the project, plan, designation or initiative. If the outcomes have already been determined, then community engagement is tokenistic.

**Being Creative.** Community consultation needs to engage people using a range of approaches and media. It should be stimulating, relevant and enjoyable. Too often it is dull and

inaccessible and therefore fails creatively to engage. Developing community engagement events requires real skill and creativity.

**Managing Expectations.** It is necessary to balance ambitions with realism and understanding of practical and legal limitations.

**Targeting.** Whilst some people will naturally want to get involved, with other groups of people targeting may be necessary. This could include the elderly, young people, ethnic groups, small business owners and other minority or hard-to-engage groups.

**Making it Accessible.** Careful thought needs to be given to make events and material accessible, including location, timing, media, format, etc. Events should be informal and unthreatening.

**Feedback.** It is essential to provide feedback on community engagement activities at all stages of the plan-making process. It is also important to explain how consultation responses feed into the plan.

## **Common Mistakes – What to avoid!**

Poor practice is all too common:

**Consulting too late** – the most important stage of consultation is at the beginning, before pen is put to paper. The poor alternative is the ‘publish and defend’ approach, where schemes, projects, policies or master plans are produced first, before consultation takes place.

**Technical documents** – placing a thick technical document or complex plans on a stand in the library is unlikely to result in many responses.

**Public Meetings** – public meetings are often more about talking at people. Public meetings allow little time for each person to speak and can often be intimidating and confrontational.

**Consultant-led** – it is poor practice to commission consultants to produce options before consulting the local community.

**Outcomes predetermined** – there is no point wasting time and money on ‘consultation’ if there is not an opportunity to influence what actually happens.

## **Community Engagement Techniques**

It is advisable to use a range of community engagement techniques. Different people respond to different approaches. The location(s) for community engagement events should be chosen on the basis of where likely impacts will be focused. Different timings may also cater for people with diverse working patterns. Techniques could include:

**Workshops.** Workshops can take many forms, but essentially they are interactive events where people can make their views known and discuss issues with other participants, often working in smaller groups. They do involve time commitments, but have the advantage of allowing participants to get more involved and for issues to be examined in detail.

**Market/Street Stalls.** These are a faster and less time consuming form of engagement, aimed at catching passing people. They need to be sited where there are strong pedestrian flows. They can include a range of ways of participating, from

questionnaires to comment boards. It is useful to target local events, such as festivals, which often attract large numbers of people.

**Questionnaires.** These have the advantage of being low-cost and of potentially being circulated to large numbers of people. They can include paper-based and on-line versions. Analysing returned questionnaires can be very time-consuming and this needs to be taken into account in their design. Multiple-choice questions are relatively easy to analyse. However it is important also to ask open questions and to avoid loaded questions.

**Model Making.** Getting local people to make three dimensional models or layouts of how their area could be developed is a creative and often effective way of considering options and developing ideas.

**Use of Social Media.** Social media is useful for publicising events and sometimes can be a platform for discussions.

**School and College Projects.** It can be quite challenging to gain access to schools. An effective approach can be to work through teachers and identify opportunities to include heritage into existing lesson plans, e.g. debate, or art and drawing. For older age groups, pupils or students can be asked to design their own questions to engage their peers.

**Placecheck.** Placecheck is a useful technique for analysing local areas. At the earliest stage, broad questions can be put to local people on what they like and dislike about their area. At a more detailed level, placecheck provides checklists against which to look at local areas, streets and places.

## **About the Historic Towns Forum and Urban Vision Enterprise CIC**

The Historic Towns Forum's mission is to promote the prosperity and heritage of historic towns, cities and settlements. Its work is grounded in the recognized value of heritage assets to social, economic and environmental well-being. It is the only UK-based organisation which represents all professional disciplines and all sectors working in the historic built environment.

Urban Vision is a partnership between Urban Vision Enterprise CIC and Urban Vision North Staffordshire. Urban Vision Enterprise CIC is a community interest company specialising in planning and regeneration operating nationally. Urban Vision North Staffordshire is an architecture and urban design centre and registered charity. The partnership specialises in planning, regeneration projects, neighbourhood planning, community engagement, urban design, heritage conservation, training and education projects.

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