Engaging communities **toolkit**

A practical guide to **community engagement**

YOUR Community

Together we can do more

West Lothian Council

Contents

Introduction

This Community Engagement Toolkit brings together a range of introductory information on community engagement.

It has been designed as a practical resource for anyone who wants to learn more about what we mean by engagement; providing practical guidance on the issues to consider when planning and designing community engagement activities.

The purpose of this toolkit is to support a whole range of individuals such as local workers, voluntary organisations and community members in the planning and delivery of different types of engagement; through recognising and appreciating the different levels of engagement; and outlining the methods and techniques that can be used to effectively involve people. The toolkit aims to increase understanding of community engagement to create more meaningful ways for local people to become involved in decisions that affect their lives.

It's important to understand that when we refer to community engagement it can mean anything from informing and consulting people to involving and collaborating with them. Community engagement methods exist on a spectrum and this is further described in the toolkit.

West Lothian has a great track record of good community engagement practice. Good practice case studies can be found throughout the toolkit to demonstrate the varied and innovative ways that practitioners in West Lothian have involved local people.

This toolkit aims to support and promote effective community engagement practice in West Lothian. It does not cover every method and technique that can be used to engage people, but signposts useful and informative resources so that more detailed information can be found.

What is Community Engagement?

This section describes what we mean by Community Engagement and gives more detail on the different levels within it. This will help you decide what level of engagement is appropriate and what methods are most suitable in achieving this.

> ❝Community Engagement is the process of involving people in decisions that affect them❞

Community Engagement is a broad term that covers a whole range of activities that encourage and enable individuals and communities to be involved, at the level they want, in what is going on in their area. This ranges from simply giving the community information, to working in partnership with the community in developing services in their local area.

'**Engagement**' means different things to different people therefore it's important to understand the range of terms that are used to define engagement and participation. This is illustrated in the Spectrum of Community Engagement on page 4 which sets out the different levels of participation, from 'informing' others to 'empowering' others.

A '**community**' can be a group of people who share a common place (people in a geographical area), a common interest (people who share a particular interest or experience) or a common identity (demographic charactersitic such as age). It is important to remember that individuals often belong to more than one community.

What community engagement is not!

While understanding what successful Community Engagement is and why it is important it is also useful to understand what Community Engagement is not. It's not;

- about gaining community input when a decision has already been made and citizens can have little or no influence;
- a coercive process that obliges people to agree
- a single event or activity
- an afterthought or add on

Why is community engagement important?

Community Engagement is important because it is a process that enables dialogue with communities in order to improve understanding of the specific needs of communities or individuals and helps improve relationships between organisations or groups within communities based on trust and mutual understanding. Good community engagement helps to ensure that groups can feel confident that they truly represent their communities, and can act to progress change. This is important when it comes to applying for funding, where often demonstrating and evidencing that a process of engagement has taken place is necessary, and ensures that groups are aware of the needs and issues in their community.

Benefits of community engagement

- ❯ Enhanced **wellbeing** and increased levels of satisfaction through local people being genuinely involved in decisions.
- ❯ Increase local **ownership** and enhanced civic pride – if people feel valued and included they are more likely to participate.
- ❯ Increased **dialogue** and **communication** between local people and organisations. Working in partnership will allow better relationships and trust to develop between policy makers and local people.

It's about communities having their say

The Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015 came into force in 2015 and is a key piece of legislation in relation to community engagement and involvement. The Act aims to empower communities by strengthening their voices in decisions about public services and makes it easier for them to own and manage land and buildings.

More information on the Act can be found **here**.

Engaging with communities is not just about meeting legal duties. Genuine and effective community engagement has benefits for both organisations and local people.

- ❯ Increased **openness** and **accessibility.**
- ❯ Promotion of social inclusion.
- ❯ Increased sustainability – Sustainable change can only happen if communities are involved from the start.
- ❯ **Responsive** services that meet local need.

Case Study

Capturing the Voices of Young People

Providing opportunities for local people and communities to be involved in the development of long-term strategic plans can be challenging. West Lothian Community Planning Partnership produced it's 10-year Local Outcomes Improvement Plan in 2023 and wanted to ensure that local people were involved in the process. Locality Plans for specific areas were also being produced therefore it was vitally important that these were shaped and influenced by the voices of local people.

To achieve this, a place-based engagement approach was carried out based on West Lothians' regeneration areas to ensure that the development of the plans was based on local knowledge, views and experiences and that local people were given opportunities to be involved at the level they wanted and in ways that were appropriate for them.

Capturing the voices and views of young people was vital to the process therefore a programme of engagement activity with P6/7 pupils was undertaken. This involved asking young people to draw what they liked and disliked about their local area, supported by members of the Community Wealth

Building Team who helped facilitate conversations with the young people to help them consider the different elements of their area. The young people were also asked what they would change about their area if they had a magic wand. This allowed the young people to be able to express their views - through drawing or words – and helped the team get a better understanding of issues from a local perspective.

This demonstrates the use of an innovative, practical engagement activity to be carried out which was fit for purpose.

The feedback from teachers and the young people themselves was that the work carried out in schools was fun and engaging, and allowed the children to express their views in a visual, creative way. Using a method like this really helped to bring some of the community issues to life, and really inspired the young people to get involved. It also helped to give the young people a sense of ownership within their communities, knowing that their views and opinions matter which in turns empowers them.

The Spectrum of Community Engagement

This spectrum of engagement demonstrates the possible types of engagement with stakeholders and communities. It shows the increasing level of public impact as you progress from 'inform' through to 'empower' and explains the range of public participation and engagement options available. It will help to assist with selecting the most suitable level of participation or engagement.

Increasing Level of Public Impact

	Inform	Consult	Involve	Collaborate	Empower
Purpose	To provide the public with information to assist their understanding of an issue.	To collect information from the public about attitudes and opinions.	To work with the public throughout all stages of the process to ensure their concerns and aspirations are understood and considered.	To partner with the public in each aspect of the decision, agree sharing of resources and decision making.	To place final decision making in the hands of the public.
Expectation	We will keep you informed.	We will keep you informed, listen to and provide feedback on how public input has informed the decision.	We will work with you to ensure that your concerns and aspirations shape the process and influence the decision.	We will look to you for advice and help in developing solutions and incorporate your recommendations into our decisions to the maximum extent possible.	We will implement what you decide.
Example techniques	❯ Fact Sheets ❯ Websites ❯ Street Stalls/Displays ❯ Newsletters ❯ Shop Fronts	❯ Surveys ❯ Public Meetings ❯ Web based consultation ❯ Citizens Panels ❯ Consultation documents	❯ Workshops ❯ Community Events	❯ Citizen Advisory Committees ❯ Participatory decision making ❯ Open Space Events	❯ Citizens Juries ❯ Ballots ❯ Delegated Decision

Think it through first

Planning made easy

Taking time to plan out community engagement activity will help it run smoothly and be more effective overall. It is worth remembering that communities, groups and individuals may want to participate at a range of levels therefore engagement activities should be planned with this in mind.

Below are a range of questions to ask in thinking about engagement. Thinking through these questions and issues will help in the planning and design of community engagement activities.

What is the purpose of your engagement?

What level of participation is it hoped will be achieved?

Who needs to be involved in the planning of your engagement process?

How will you identify stakeholders?

Why are people being involved?

How will you communicate and let people know it is happening?

What resources are required?

When will you carry out your engagement and how long will it last?

What methods will you use and why?

Feedback and next steps ➤

What is the purpose?

Before you begin any engagement process, you need to be clear about the purpose. This will help you to select the most appropriate and meaningful engagement methods to use. Setting out your aims is an important step which ensures that you have a clear understanding of why you are engaging with people.

Think about what difference you want your engagement to make and what you hope will change as a result of the engagement. This will help you to plan your engagement activity effectively.

What level of engagement are you hoping to achieve?

Individuals can participate in a variety of ways, and to different levels of influence, in helping to identify community needs, generate solutions, plan new projects and influence how services are developed and delivered.

The purpose of your engagement will help determine the appropriate level of engagement and who needs to be involved. As illustrated in the Spectrum of Community Engagement, each of the levels of engagement will be appropriate in particular circumstances, and will achieve different results.

Case Study

Mid Calder Community Council - Your Priorities

Mid Calder Community Council wanted a way to engage a broader segment of the community to gather ideas and suggestions. Attendance at Community Council meetings was often limited to local councillors and a few dedicated residents.

To increase participation, Mid Calder Community Council experimented using a digital platform called "Your Priorities." This free, open-source social networking platform is designed for idea generation and deliberation. The Community Council created a "Your Priorities" page to facilitate community engagement for the Local Place Plan and to help decide how to allocate a Town Centre Fund budget. The site was easy to set up and the platform's URL was easy to share on Facebook and other social media channels, and it had a simple user interface. Residents were able to submit their own ideas and/or comment or vote on others which made for a really interactive process.

More than 150 local residents engaged with the Town Centre Fund page (drawn by the prospect of available funding), while over 75 participated in the Local Place Plan discussions. In total, they submitted, debated, and voted on 70 ideas. The platform's intuitive design made it accessible to a broad range of users, including primary school children. The reach of online engagement became clear, as only about 20 residents attended the in-person Place Plan workshop, while many more participated through the digital platform. This has really helped clarify for Mid Calder Community Council

the community's priorities and areas of interest which are foundational to creating the Local Place Plan for 2024. While meeting face-to-face and creating opportunities for in-person interaction is essential for building community ties, the digital civic engagement complemented these efforts and extended the reach to a new audience. Mid Calder Community Council plans to continue using both face to face and digital methods to engage with the community.
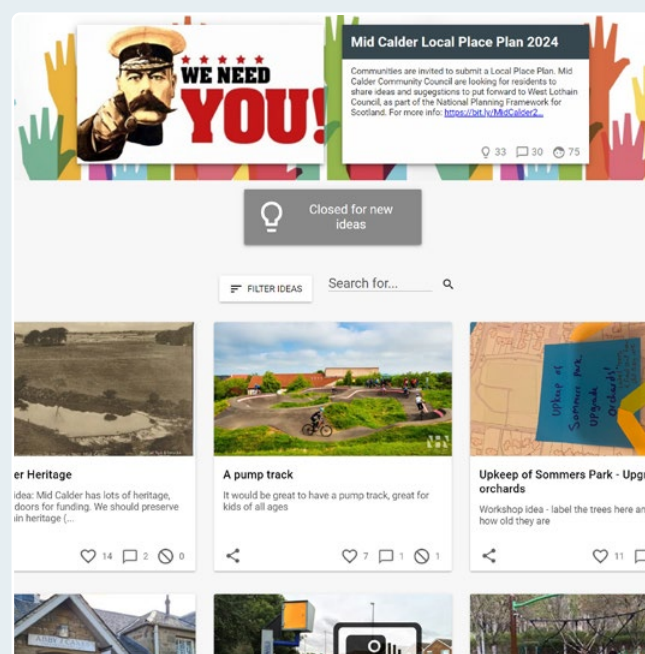
Who should be involved?

Who you involve depends very much on what you are engaging on. To get the most from your engagement activity, it is useful to use a range of methods and techniques to achieve the widest possible participation.

Local community networks and support organisations should be involved in identifying community stakeholders, their particular interests and needs and how best to engage with them. Issues to consider include;

- What impact the issue or proposals will have on these stakeholder interests?
- Who represents these groups?
- Are there existing community networks or forms of communication?
- Are their gaps in information which could be plugged through local knowledge?
- Relevant equality legislation

There are many groups, organisations and individuals that represent a whole range of interests in West Lothian. These might include;

- Local residents or area based groups
- Communities of Interest
- Faith Based groups
- Local community groups
- Voluntary groups
- Service Users
- Web based or virtual groups

What time and resources are available?

The following types of resources will be required for most forms of engagement;

- Input by staff, volunteers and other interested stakeholders
- Background information on briefing papers on the issue(s) or planned proposals
- Communication & promotion – venues, transport, childcare, translation

- Publication and printing of materials
- Resourcing local and voluntary groups to support people in understanding and responding to information and proposals; convene meetings; be involved in conversations; attending meetings and events.

Remember...some people might find it harder to participate

Inclusiveness is a key principle of community engagement therefore it is important that engagement activities reflect the diversity of West Lothian's population. There are groups in the community who are traditionally more difficult to engage; these are sometimes referred to as 'hard to reach'. There are also the individuals who are referred to as the 'usual suspects' – those who regularly are involved in consultation or community activity. It is important to ensure that these groups of people are engaged with in the most appropriate way and aren't marginalised as a result of their involvement (or lack of) in community activities.

Matching methods to people or groups will increase the effectiveness and success of any engagement activity. Ensuring that an engagement process is inclusive contributes to its value and its legitimacy. The real challenge of inclusiveness is to avoid involving just the usual suspects and the hard to reach, and leaving everybody else out.

Over the past decade, policymakers and practitioners have increasingly focused on the need to meaningfully engage people who have been left out of community engagement activities. Groups often excluded include the elderly, people with limited access to the internet or with limited computer literacy, immigrants, homeless people, people with physical and mental disabilities, people with low incomes, people working several jobs or working during nontraditional hours, and people who are English-language learners.

❝No-one is hard to reach if you do it right❞

Things to consider

- ✓ Think creatively about ways to access people who are often excluded. This could be through informal networks, social venues or local organisations who work with these groups.

- ✓ Take measures that will help overcome the barriers that prevent people from participating e.g. translators, visual aids, providing childcare, accessible venues.

- ✓ Be flexible over timing, location and transport issues to ensure you accommodate the needs and requirements of particular individuals or groups.

- ✓ Use methods that are appropriate to certain types of groups or individuals. For example, using a questionnaire with those who have literacy needs isn't a good idea; or holding a meeting for mums at school pick up time would not be suitable.

Groups that are more difficult to reach might be;

Asylum Seekers, young people, drug users, faith communities, homeless people, minority ethnic communities, offenders, older people, people with disabilities, people with mental health problems, single parents, travellers, victims of domestic abuse, people with learning difficulties, gay, lesbian and bi-sexual men and women, transsexual and transgendered people

Overcoming barriers to engagement

When planning an engagement process you need to recognise diversity, identify potential barriers and design the process to minimise barriers where possible. The table below illustrates some potential barriers that may prevent individuals or groups getting involved and identifies some areas you may want to consider which may help to remove these barriers.

Potential barriers	Design issues to consider
- The capacity and ability of different stakeholders, groups and individuals to participate 'Hard to reach' groups such as young people, older people, minority groups or socially excluded groups - Levels of community infrastructure - Rural isolation - Gaps in information - Literacy and numeracy levels	- Techniques and engagement methods to be used - Need for independent facilitation - Location and accessibility of venue - Number and type of engagement events - Transport requirements - Childcare needs - Format and content of communication and publicity material - Use of interpreters and signers

Good engagement means meeting people where they are. It is important to make it easy for people to participate and ensure there are as little barriers as possible. This applies when using both face to face and digital methods.

Case Study

Place Standard with a Climate Lens

As part of work to develop a new Locality Plan for Armadale, engagement was carried out with a specific focus on Climate Change. Work undertaken in Blackburn as part of the Climate Action Town Project, has enabled the use of the Place Standard Tool with a Climate Lens in Armadale. This tool empowers communities to consider climate change in their place in greater depth. One session that was delivered was with pupils from Armadale Academy and has resulted in further projects being explored with the group. The Place Standard with a Climate Lens was used to discuss 14 specific topics with a focus on the town of Armadale in West Lothian. A total of 16 pupils took part in the workshops which were delivered over 3 sessions.

The tool provides additional climate Lens prompt questions for each Place Standard Theme which helps to draw out links between a place and climate change. This really helped to focus and enhance discussion around climate action an enabled the young people to plot their scores on the Place Standard Wheel.

New! - Place Standard with a Climate Lens | Our Place

As a result of this engagement, young people are now involved in the following:

- Exploring upgrades to open space football provision to allow for more access for the community – many of the community open space pitches/grassed areas flood in bad weather making them inaccessible to the community

- Building capacity and working with the local community council so that young people feel confident to attend and be involved in decision making at a local level

- Being involved in decision making around a potential community asset transfer within the town ensuring there is not an addition to the already high number of derelict space/sites

- This engagement has enabled the young people to further explore projects that they have highlighted as a local need. This tool provided an innovative, visual and fun process giving the young people relevant information and helpful prompts to help them consider their place from a different perspective.

It doesn't have to be expensive

Whilst community engagement should always be resourced appropriately and effective processes built in, there are times when engagement has to be carried out quickly, and with limited resources. Here are some proactive tips on ensuring that just because time and resources are tight, your engagement is still fit for purpose and effective.

- Ensure the purpose of any engagement is clear and easy to understand; what are communities being asked and how will their views inform decision making? This will make it more likely that individuals will respond even if the timescales are tight.
- Good community engagement doesn't have to be expensive. Some online options are less expensive and less resource intensive and can reach a significant amount of people.
- When timescales are tight, it can be easy to rely on the 'usual suspects' to provide views. This often does not give a true picture of the experiences and views of everyone in the community. Knowing which local organisations are already working with 'hard to reach' individuals or communities and working with them could be a way to reach out into the community and gather wider views.

- Link in with what is already going on in communities; sometimes there can be a tendency to start from scratch and set up new routes of communication. Find out what's already going on and link in with established groups or events in the community.
- Community engagement works best when it is an ongoing process which allows relationships and trust to build and strengthen over time. The more that practitioners engage well with communities, the better contacts they will have within the community and the more response there will be to ongoing consultations.
- Be creative! There are countless methods and tools that can be used to engage. Tailoring your methods to your audience will result in better quality engagement and a better response.
- As with any engagement, it is important to follow up afterwards and provide feedback on how views have informed decision making. Communities will be more likely to take part in further engagement exercises if they know that their views have previously been considered.
- Ensure groups and individuals have access to the Toolkit. This will increase knowledge on the best methods to use to carry out specific types of engagement, and will help people to be more prepared when it comes to carrying out an engagement exercise with little time.
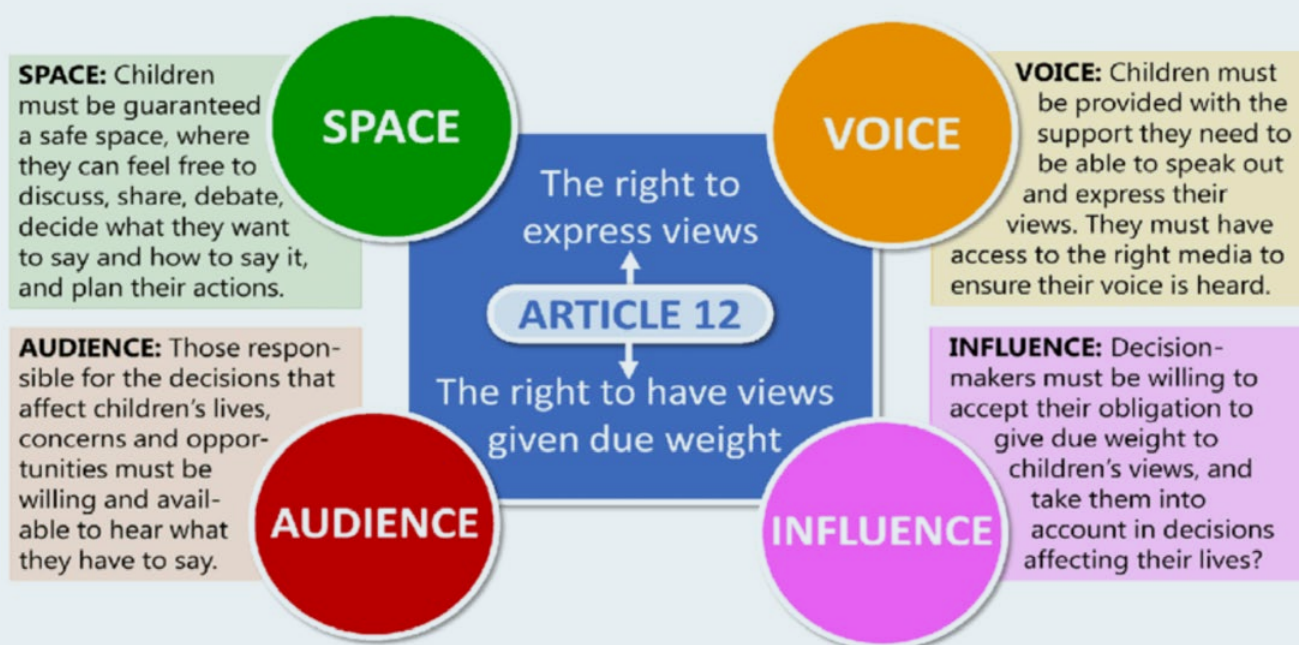
Engaging with Young People

Young people are an important audience when it comes to participation and engagement. They bring different perspectives, challenge traditional views, and offer innovative ideas. Below are some resources that can be utilised when it comes to engaging with young people specifically.

The following key steps in engaging with young people will ensure they are part of meaningful, participative engagement processes:

- Include young people from the start, just as you would include adults from the start and ensure participation is voluntary

- Talk in a language they will understand – don't use jargonised language – if young people don't understand what you are saying, rephrase it, just as you would with an adult who didn't understand

- Allow young people the opportunity to engage in a way that will best suit them, eg, online, writing ideas down, making a video

- Start from where young people are at

- Treat young people with respect and how you would like to be spoken to

- Be approachable, friendly, non-judgemental and inclusive

- Explain the process that is taking place and how any information they give will be used

- Ensure the process is not tokenistic or seen as tokenistic – make it meaningful!

- Give feedback and updates to young people in a timely manner to inform them of how their input has been used

The Lundy Model of Participation demonstrates four key elements to meaningfully engage with young people using the concepts of space, voice, audience and influence.

SPACE: Children must be guaranteed a safe space, where they can feel free to discuss, share, debate, decide what they want to say and how to say it, and plan their actions.

AUDIENCE: Those responsible for the decisions that affect children's lives, concerns and opportunities must be willing and available to hear what they have to say.

SPACE

AUDIENCE

The right to express views

ARTICLE 12

The right to have views given due weight

VOICE: Children must be provided with the support they need to be able to speak out and express their views. They must have access to the right media to ensure their voice is heard.

INFLUENCE: Decision-makers must be willing to accept their obligation to give due weight to children's views, and take them into account in decisions affecting their lives?

VOICE

INFLUENCE

This link shows the Lundy Model of Participation checklist which further explains how to use the Lundy Model when engaging with young people.

It also includes the Forth Valley and West Lothian Youth Voice Charter which has been recently developed with young people across West Lothian, Falkirk, Stirling and Clackmannanshire and demonstrates how young people want to be treated by adults. The Youth Voice Charter has been signed off by heads of service in these areas.

Digital engagement

Over the last few years, and particularly since 2020, the development and use of digital engagement has risen significantly. There are now numerous ways to inform, consult, engage and involve via digital means, which brings both opportunities and challenges. There has been a lot of progress in digital engagement; in terms of the development of platforms and tools that can be used, and in terms of the knowledge, skills and capabilities of communities for participating digitally.

However:

- Some communities and individuals, for a variety of reasons, are not able to participate via digital methods.

- We need a variety of methods for engagement. One size does not fit all. The rise of digital offers opportunities to widen the reach of engagement activities, and gives an additional option for the public in how they can participate in engagement activity.

- It is important that digital tools and methods don't replace physical face to face methods as there is a danger that a move too far to digital will exclude some communities or individuals, even while attracting new audiences. Digital methods should be used to augment and support face to face methods. Approaches that offer both physical and digital options offer choice to communities, and providing a balance is important when looking at inclusivity.

- When considering digital methods of engagement, it is important to think about what support people might need to take part. Some may not have internet access or may have a poor connection which will not support video conferencing. Others may lack the skills, confidence or financial resources to take part online. Speak to local community groups/ organisations about people's needs, particularly groups representing people who may face barriers to technology including disabled people, older people and people experiencing poverty and socio-economic disadvantage. These groups may also be able to help reach out and contact more excluded groups.

- It is important to offer support to people who need it. 'Test' video-conference workshops could be run to establish if participants are able to use video-conferencing tools. Events/ workshops should be broken up into smaller chunks. Speakers could be pre-recorded for participants to watch in their own time and provide written responses. Slides can also be sent to participants in advance. Engagement methods can be combined, with different options for participants to ask questions or submit their views. It is also important to establish communication needs, e.g. do you need access to an interpreter for British Sign Language (BSL) or a particular language? Consideration should also be given to any security and privacy implications of the video-conferencing platform or associated tools being used in the engagement process.

New Opportunities

Digital tools and online engagement open up more opportunities for both the organisation or group who want to engage with the community, and community participants. It brings more choice to the engagement process and can offer more creative, interactive ways to engage.

Reaching a wider audience

Offering engagement opportunities online means you can reach people who can't attend face to face meetings or events. The number of people online is increasing therefore digital engagement is a great opportunity to tap into that and reach different audiences.

More interactive

Online options open the door to more interactive, creative ways of engaging and enabling dialogue. Different digital tools and platforms offer a range of ways to engage in different ways which are perhaps more interactive than traditional methods.

Easy to analyse

Digital tools can help collect data and information in a more robust way. Online platforms often provide the ability to create reports, gain more information about who is participating and provides 'hard' data on the outcomes of the process.

Cost Effective

Online methods tend to be more cost effective than traditional face to face methods. By adding online engagement to processes, you are able to cost effectively target more members of the community.

There are a variety of online platforms that can be used for digital engagement. Some of these are outlined in the final section of the toolkit.

Participatory Budgeting

Participatory Budgeting (PB) is usually referred to as 'Community Choices' in Scotland, and is a democratic process which empowers communities to have more say on how resources in their area are used.

West Lothian Community Choices

Participatory budgeting is a tool for community engagement and empowerment and is based on the view that communities (which can be a community of interest, a community of identity or community based on place) are best placed to be involved in or make decisions around their own needs. PB enables local communities to decide how public funding is spent.

Participatory budgeting can be carried out in a number of ways using a variety of methods. The rise and development of digital tools and platforms has also provided more opportunities for PB to carried out in different ways.

The profile and spread of Participatory Budgeting in Scotland has increased over the past few years. PB Scotland's website has a wealth of information relating to PB processes and case studies and a simple guide to what Participatory Budgeting is.

Useful Resources

- **Participatory budgeting | SCDC - We believe communities matter**
- **Community empowerment: Participatory budgeting - gov. scot (www.gov.scot)**
- **DS-Digital-Tools-paper.pdf (demsoc.org)**
- **PB Scotland - Participatory Budgeting in Scotland**
- **PB Network – Participatory Budgeting: Making People Count**
- **PB & Grant Making**

Case Study

Participatory budgeting

In 2023, West Lothian Council allocated a portion of the Place Based Investment Programme funding to be awarded via a Community Choices participatory budgeting (PB) process. £189,000 was made available and third sector organisations were invited to apply for grants of up to £25,000 for eligible capital projects.

Once the application stage closed and all eligible applications were shortlisted, the process then moved on to the voting stage. A number of engagement methods were used to make the residents of West Lothian aware of the process and to enable them to vote:

- A pamphlet was created which provided a summary of all proposed projects. This informed potential voters and helped them to decide which projects to vote for.

- The pamphlet was added to the council website along with a simple voting form, allowing people to vote directly online. No sign up was required before voting in order to make the process as accessible as possible.

- A printed version of the information and voting form was used at an in-person event in West Lothian College. iPads were also used so people could vote online if they wished.

- The printed forms were distributed to venues in each of the 13 regeneration areas along with a ballot box. This allowed people to vote who didn't have access to a digital device or preferred not to go online.

- Council officers used iPads to carry out a further four in-person engagement sessions in underrepresented communities. The officers could provide support to people who weren't familiar with the device or using an online form.

- The link to the online voting form and project information was promoted on the council's Facebook page and via various community groups and charities.

Over 4400 people cast their votes in this PB process making it the largest PB event that the council has delivered. The vast majority of the votes were cast online. However, utilising digital and non-digital engagement methods ensured that people could vote via a method that suited them and no-one was excluded.

Communication is key

An important part of any community engagement activity is good communication. Whatever level of engagement you are looking to achieve; informing, consulting or involving, good communication skills are vital. To get the most out of your community engagement activity, it is worth thinking through the key skills that are required and the behaviours that will help to encourage, support and enable individuals to participate in ways that suit them.

> ‘The heart of community engagement is the development of relationships, open and clear communication, networking, listening and learning to understand the diverse people and places that we are working with ❯

Community Engagement should be a positive experience for those carrying out the engagement and those being engaged with. Below are some of the key skills that are relevant to community engagement practice.

Facilitation

Facilitation is used to help encourage and enable individuals to participate in a variety of situations. A good facilitator will make things easier, enhance people's willingness to get involved and result in a positive engagement experience. Some effective facilitation points are listed below;

- ❯ Lead, but don't take over
- ❯ Summarise and communicate
- ❯ Offer praise and support
- ❯ Be assertive, not aggressive

- ❯ Listen to what people say
- ❯ Treat participants equally
- ❯ Encourage participants

Listening

Showing you are interested in what people are saying and why they are saying it. This creates a trusting and supportive atmosphere. Participants should feel that they have been listened to and that they have been understood.

Questioning

Ask the right questions, of the right people at the right time, in the right way. This will keep discussion moving. Good use of questions will help to bring structure to the engagement activity.

Case Study

Five Sisters Skate Park

A group of local skaters and their parents approached the Community Development Trust to get support in raising funding for a new skate park in the West Calder and Polbeth area. A range of engagement methods were used to gather support, design ideas and to enable people to express concerns with the idea which could then be addressed collaboratively.

- ❯ Talks and skateboard display at local primary schools with opportunities for people to ask questions and leave comments.
- ❯ A design a skateboard and park competition with local schools to gather design ideas.
- ❯ A survey of local residents and potential users to gather ideas for design and concerns people had

- ❯ A professional skateboard display in the village centre and presentation of possible designs for feedback.
- ❯ A presentation of potential designs at a community event for feedback and ideas
- ❯ An open meeting for local residents to find out more and express and discuss concerns.
- ❯ A community heritage art project between a local artist and high school that resulted in new graffiti art on the new park
- ❯ The above enabled us to raise £160,000 to build the park which opened in 2020 and has had a huge amount of use and positive feedback.

Share your results & find out what worked

One aspect of community engagement that can discredit the process is lack of feedback to participants.

It is important to inform them of how their views have been considered, the broad findings from the process and what has happened as a result of the engagement.

Providing good quality, timely feedback is necessary to making sure that participants feel that their views have been listened to and taken into account. If people feel their views have been considered then they are more likely to continue to participate in engagement activities and see this as a worthwhile process. If feedback isn't given, participants may think that taking part is a waste of time, or that they have been ignored, and won't know if their contribution has made a difference.

It should be set out at the start when and how feedback will be provided, and what form this will take. When and how you feedback to participants will depend upon the nature of the engagement.

A range of feedback techniques should be used to make sure you reach a variety of participants. Feedback should provide the participant with information but also offer an opportunity to ask questions or get additional information.

It is also important to feedback even when the outcome isn't what the participants or specific community want. Delivering honest, clear feedback is key to building ongoing trust with communities.

Feedback methods

- Writing letters, either paper or through email
- Providing summary reports of meetings, events or workshops
- Workshops to feedback information
- Presentations to groups
- Publishing newsletters or posters
- Using websites to post information
- Using local media to communicate information
- Using social media

Feeding back to participants will:

- Encourage people to participate
- Improve relations between organisations and communities
- Build trust and confidence in the engagement process
- Empower individuals and communities
- Promote ongoing dialogue between organisations and communities

What worked and what didn't?

It is important that any engagement process is evaluated in order to learn what worked well, what didn't work and why. For example, evaluation will provide useful information on the best methods for engaging with groups in a particular area or most appropriate venues. This information should influence future community engagement processes.

Evaluation arrangements should be set out at the start of the engagement process. Key pointers for evaluation are;

- Be clear about the aims of your engagement process so you can evaluate whether or not these have been met.

- Make sure you ask participants, staff, groups and any others involved in the process what they think; Ask if they think the process did what it set out to do and how they found the engagement experience.

- Make use of evaluation forms to gather information from participants about the event or meeting. This will capture how people felt at the event or meeting and provide you with an opportunity to ask questions about individual elements of the event.

More information on how to carry out effective evaluation of community engagement can be found in the resources below.

- **VOiCE | SCDC - We believe communities matter**
- **Evaluating Participation**

The National Standards for Community Engagement

The National Standards for Community Engagement provide a framework upon which community engagement should be based.

They set out best practice guidelines for engagement between communities and public agencies. They were originally launched in 2005 and were reviewed and updated in 2016. The Standards are principles that describe the main elements of effective community engagement. There are seven standards. More detailed descriptions of each of the standards can be found on the VOICE website. **Introduction (voicescotland.org.uk)**

Inclusion
We will identify and involve the people and organisations that are affected by the focus of the engagement.

Support
We will identify and overcome any barriers to participation.

Communication
We will communicate clearly and regularly with the people, organisations and communities affected by the engagement.

Impact
We will assess the impact of the engagement and use what has been learned to improve our future community engagement.

Planning
There is a clear purpose for the engagement, which is based on a shared understanding of community needs and ambitions.

Methods
We will use methods of engagement that are fit for purpose.

Working Together
We will work effectively together to achieve the aims of the engagement.

Community Engagement Tools & Methods

The following section provides guidance on the different methods and techniques that can be used to engage with communities. They have been split into three categories; **INFORM**, **CONSULT** and **ENGAGE** so that it is clear what methods can be used to achieve different levels of engagement.

For each, we have given a brief description, outlined the benefits and weaknesses and where appropriate, provided links to useful resources. This section will give you some ideas about the different ways to engage people to get the most out of your engagement activity.

This is not an exhaustive list; there are many other tools and methods available.

More detailed information on a wider range of methods can be found in the following toolkits and guides.

🔗 VOICE Scotland: VOiCE (voicescotland.org.uk)

🔗 PAS Guide to community engagement

🔗 Healthcare Improvement Scotland's Participation Toolkit

Tools & Methods to **INFORM**

Fact Sheets/Newsletter

What is it?
- Provide information about a local area or particular project in a paper or on line format.
- One of the cheapest and cost effective methods of keeping people informed.
- A useful complement to other forms of engagement.
- Can be used to inform the community about developments in their area.

Benefits
- 😃 If distributed regularly, can build community awareness and understanding
- 😃 Effective means of developing and sustaining interest through a community
- 😃 Can be developed in a format that appeals to a target group
- 😃 Cost effective

Weaknesses
- 😫 May not be accessible to people with low levels of literacy or visual impairment
- 😫 People may not take time to read it

Useful links
🔗 **Creating a community newsletter**

🔗 **Planning a neighbourhood newsletter**

🔗 **Creating a neighborhood newsletter**

Web based information processes

What is it?
- A variety of web based processes are available to choose from which gives people the opportunity to get involved at different levels.
- Websites provide a way for organisations to provide information to the public.
- Online methods can be used as standalone processes or as part of a wider engagement activity.

Benefits
- 😃 People can choose a convenient time and place to participate
- 😃 Particularly useful for those who may be homebound e.g. elderly, carers, parents with young children
- 😃 Can create debate and exchange of views
- 😃 Cost effective
- 😃 Can reach large numbers of people
- 😃 Less time consuming than attending a workshop or meeting

Weaknesses
- 😫 Some techniques may require a moderator to manage comments-this can be expensive and time consuming
- 😫 Excludes those without access to the internet
- 😫 Some people may feel intimidated

Street Stalls & Displays

What is it?

- Use of highly visual materials to get a particular message or information across a range of audiences.
- Displays are normally set up in local community areas like community centres, shopping centres, libraries.
- Useful for informing the public and stimulating discussion on issues.

Benefits

- 😊 Can collect the views of large numbers of people
- 😊 Interactive
- 😊 Engages and generates interest
- 😊 Can reach people who may not normally participate

Weaknesses

- 😠 Can generate a large amount of data
- 😠 Requires advance planning and preparation
- 😠 Requires several facilitators to engage with people
- 😠 Event may be affected by weather conditions
- 😞 If people can't attend on that day, they will miss it

Useful links

- 🔗 **Displays & Exhibitions**

Shop Fronts

What is it?

- Shop fronts can be temporary venues set up in a heavily used public area to display information or provide a venue where people can meet, collect information and have discussions.
- Need to be effectively located to target a large audience.
- Staffed by knowledgeable and approachable staff.

Benefits

- 😊 Increases visibility and accessibility of project/topic
- 😊 Easily accessible for community members
- 😊 Provide a venue/physical space for local people

Weaknesses

- 😠 Expensive to establish
- 😠 Requires resources in terms of staff and venue
- 😠 Access could be an issue depending on opening hours

Tools & Methods to **CONSULT**

Public Meetings

What is it?

- Provide an opportunity to consult large numbers of people. They are open to all, offering an opportunity for people to ask questions and discuss issues.
- Often opportunities for participants to set or influence the agenda and to ask questions.
- As part of a series of events they can be a valuable way of sharing information and demonstrating openness and transparency.

Benefits

- 😊 Enables large numbers of people to have their say
- 😊 Provides an opportunity to explain processes, give information and gather feedback
- 😊 Demonstrates openness and transparency
- 😊 Can attract publicity or can be used as a launch event
- 😊 Enables participants to develop networks
- 😊 Face to face meetings humanise organisations and authorities in public eyes

Weaknesses

- 😠 Unlikely to be representative – not everyone has the time or inclination to attend
- 😠 Attendance is often low unless people feel personally or deeply concerned
- 😞 Some people are likely to be inhibited from speaking in a large group
- 😠 Traditional formats can limit audience contribution and lead to conflict
- 😠 If confrontational it may lead to poor media publicity

Useful links

- 🔗 **Organising a public meeting | Resource Centre**
- 🔗 **How to arrange a community meeting**

Social Media Platforms

What is it?
- Platforms like Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and Tik Tok
- Social media offers the ability to share bite–sized information quickly
- Offers the opportunity to use creative visuals
- Allows regular communication or distribution of information

Benefits
- Quick way to informally consult or engage with audiences.
- Members of the community can comment, ask questions and get answers in real time.
- Popular with young people
- Can be used to publicise events through the use of event pages
- Live streaming abilities offer an additional way of reaching members of the community
- Offers an opportunity to reach specific audiences. Understanding how different groups engage with social media platforms is important and will help in targeting and tailoring your approach.

Weaknesses
- Requires continual monitoring of posts to ensure they adhere to regulations
- Although popular with some groups, there are a significant number of people who don't use social media

Useful links
- The digital engagement guide
- A Social Media Guide for Community Councils

Surveys & Questionnaires

What is it?
- Most widely used consultation method.
- Undertaken to identify needs and views of a large number of people in a standard format.
- The main stages involved are: defining the sample size and the type of information required; deciding on the type of survey to be used (postal, drop and collect, telephone or interview); survey design; piloting the survey; undertaking the survey and post-completion analysis of the results.
- Often best to use a short and concise questionnaire where people's views on an issue are being sought.
- Good way of collecting quantitative and qualitative information from local people at a certain point in time.
- Surveys can be completed through face to face interviews, self-completion written forms, over the telephone, or electronically over the internet or email.
- Surveys often best used as part of a programme of other methods – by themselves they can sometimes be limited.

Benefits
- Can gain the views of a large number of people
- Useful for obtaining quantitative data
- In principle data can be compared over time or with results from elsewhere
- Useful for identifying and evidencing need

Weaknesses
- Need to be well designed and coded to get 'usable' answers
- Large questionnaire surveys are time consuming and labour intensive
- Information may be limited
- Do not offer any real sense of community engagement or provide an opportunity for people to exchange views.
- Can contribute to 'over-consultation' if public are surveyed on a number of occassions

Useful links
- Tips for a good survey
- Tips for writing a good survey

Web based consultation

What is it?
- As well as being used to provide information (as described in the previous section) the internet offers a range of opportunities for individuals to engage in decision making processes.
- Online consultation is one tool which should be considered as part of a range of other consultative tools.
- Interactive websites can support consultation by enabling people to get involved online. This could be by completing online surveys, taking part in a poll or participating in online discussions.
- Discussion forums provide the public with an alternative method of getting their views on particular issues across. By monitoring discussion boards, we can get a better insight into the thoughts and ideas of people who may not participate in other ways.

Benefits
- A range of online tools are available
- Cost effective
- Can reach a wide audience quickly
- Gives more choice to individuals as to when and how they can participate
- Anonymous nature may increase participation

Weaknesses
- Participation is limited to those with access to the internet
- Resources required to set up and mediate discussion forums

Useful links
- Social Media tips for improving community engagement
- How to use social media to engage your local community

Consultation Documents

What is it?

- Regularly used for formal consultation by local authorities and other government bodies to seek formal responses from statutory consultees.
- A document which allows whoever is consulting on a particular issue to set out in detail the whole of a situation and set specific questions.
- Provides an opportunity to provide detailed background information on a particular proposal or issue.
- Most consultation documents are document based, although web based consultation is increasing.
- If carrying out a document based consultation process, it is a good idea to offer a web based alternative that enables participants to navigate directly to the parts of the document that are relevant to them.
- The use of diagrams and illustrations rather than text is preferable. The number of questions should be kept to a minimum and every question asked should serve a specific purpose.

Benefits

- A written document allows the consulters to set out in detail the whole picture and ask specific questions
- A document can also be used to explain complexity and provide background information
- Paper based consultation is safe and predictable
- Web based processes allow comments on documents and responses to questions to be displayed in full

Weaknesses

- The sheer size and detail in a document can have a negative effect on the people being consulted
- People are reluctant to read long documents
- A large number of responses can be labour intensive to collate and analyse

Citizens Panels

What is it?

- Representative sample of people from a local area who sign up to be involved in various consultation activities.
- Provide a 'ready-made' sample of people to consult or engage with.
- Panels normally involve around 1000-2000 local people

Benefits

- Using the same panel a number of times reduces recruitment costs
- People agree to be on the panel thereby increasing response rates
- May allow for some measurement of changes over time
- Provides a ready-made sample of individuals to consult with.
- The composition of panels can be made representative of the local population

Weaknesses

- People on the panel become more knowledgeable (and therefore less representative) than the general public over time
- A turnover of the panel may reduce the validity of tracking over time
- Information provided may mean responses are not an accurate reflection of opinion among the less informed.

Workshops

What is it?

- Workshops and focus groups allow people to discuss their ideas in an open and relaxed atmosphere.
- Can take a variety of different formats, depending on the topic for discussion.
- They can be designed to exchange information; to discuss the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats of an idea or project; to obtain ideas and innovative thinking for a way forward for a project; or they can be specifically geared towards prioritisation and the production of an action plan.
- Focus groups by contrast are designed to specifically concentrate on a single issue or a programme of topics.

Benefits

- Encourages active discussion in a welcoming environment
- Time and resource efficient way of identifying and clarifying key issues
- Conflict can be more easily handled in a small group
- Can be designed for a specific purpose
- Can be directly targeted at excluded or 'hard to reach' groups

Weaknesses

- With small groups, it is difficult to be sure all stakeholders or interests are represented
- Workshops can be dominated by articulate and confident individuals if not carefully facilitated
- Requires experienced facilitators

Useful links

- **Community Engagement Guide**
- **How to facilitate a workshop**

Planning for Real

What is it?

- Practical technique involving a 3D architectural model of an area which is used to help participants decide what improvements/changes need to be made to their local area.
- Local residents are involved in creating the model.
- The model can be displayed in public venues to generate interest and discussion.
- Cards/cut-outs that represent services and physical assets are made available so individuals can place appropriate suggestions and changes on the model itself.
- These details are then fed back to people, discussed further and prioritised at public meetings or small group discussions.

Benefits

- Adds variety to consultation and can engage people who might not otherwise get involved
- It is accessible to people of all abilities and backgrounds
- Can build a sense of community ownership of the process
- Can help people see and understand their community in different ways

Weaknesses

- Can generate ideas which are not possible to implement
- Preparing for the event can be time consuming
- The card count can be seen as conclusive and may cause conflict particularly if there is a disagreement

Useful links

- **Planning for Real**

Community Fairs/Events

What is it?

- Provides a fun, informal atmosphere that will attract a wide ranging audience.
- Provides various opportunities to inform and engage participants about local issues using different methods.
- Should incorporate a range of activities and events to cater for the broadest possible audience.
- As well as distributing information, a fair provides a range of opportunities for consultation and involvement.
- Community events work best if a number of organisations in the community get together to run one.

Benefits

- Can reach a large number of people
- Allows for different levels of engagement
- Can allow for creativity in the ways in which people are engaged
- If a number of organisations get involved, the range of activities can be increased and generate more interest

Weaknesses

- It may not appeal to the people who most need to be reached
- Can be expensive and require a lot of resources
- May not be well attended

Useful links

- **Community Events Toolkit**
- **How to organise a fun day!**

Asset Based Community Engagement

What is it?

- Uses maps and photographs of an area or specific location to illustrate how people view their area; what they like or dislike or improvements they would like to see.
- Practical way of finding out what assets exist in a community.
- A variety of aspects can be mapped including land use, community assets, facilities, transport and business to develop a snapshot of an area.
- Increases understanding of assets in its broadest sense; not just about the physical assets but the people, groups and skills that exist in a community.

Benefits

- Stimulates discussion
- Can build a sense of community ownership
- Can help people see and understand their community in different ways

Weaknesses

- Can generate ideas which are not possible to implement
- It may be difficult to interpret participants ideas
- Participants need to be familiar with the local area

Useful links

- **Assets Based Approaches | SCDC - We believe communities matter**
- **Asset-based community development for Local Authorities**

World Cafes

What is it?

- Aim to gather the views of participants in a comfortable and informal setting, much like a café.
- Informal setting stimulates creative conversations.
- Set up room to look like a café, using small tables, tablecloths and provide food.
- Discussions take place in small groups. The tablecloths are used to take notes and make comments. Each group feeds back to the facilitator at the end of each question discussion.
- Participants move around the tables in order to discuss each discussion topic.

Benefits

- Informal atmosphere created which encourages conversation
- Flexible
- Less formal than a public meeting
- Easier to get people to attend

Weaknesses

- Potential for raising expectations
- Success can be dependent on the questions set
- No qualitative data

Useful links

- **World Cafe Method**
- **World Cafe**

Open Space Events

What is it?

- An approach to meetings that gives participants the opportunity to set the agenda. Participants are responsible for the content and recording of the event.
- The event will have a set theme but no fixed programme or agenda.
- The event begins with participants sitting or standing in a circle, the theme is introduced and participants are invited to identify issues they are interested in, and asked to take responsibility for running a session.
- Participants can sign up to sessions they are interested in.
- Participants can move from one session to another as they see fit.
- Fluid and unstructured approach.

Benefits

- Increases skills of participants
- Promotes empowerment and ownership
- Breaks down traditional 'them' and 'us' barriers
- No fixed agenda – structure and content shaped by participants
- Good for addressing difficult issues

Weaknesses

- Limited control
- Danger of not recording information correctly
- As they are 'one-off' events, people may miss out

Useful links

- **Open Space Method**
- **Doing an Open Space**

Appreciative Inquiry

What is it?

- Builds a vision for the future using questions to focus people's attention on past and future successes.
- Group discussions focus on the positive aspects of an area; what people enjoy about their area and their hopes for the future.
- The process begins with a core group setting and testing the questions and then these are used to gather information from the wider community.
- The findings from the process are then looked at, pulled together collectively by the community to create a plan for the future.

Benefits

- It includes people who normally don't take part, involving a range of people, not just those who can attend an event.
- Focuses on what can be achieved
- Encourages participants to reflect on what has worked well

Weaknesses

- Does not address problems
- Ensuring consistency of approach by interviewers

Citizens Juries

What is it?

- A group of citizens who are representative of the general public meet to consider a complex issue by gathering evidence, deliberating and reaching a decision.
- Jurors can hear from and ask questions of experts and 'witnesses' before they reach their decision.
- After they reach a decision, the jury will present their recommendations/decision to the public or local authority.
- A high level of skill is required as participants are often asked to analyse complex issues.

Benefits

- Empowering experience for those involved
- Can result in obtaining informed community opinions on complex issues
- Helps to identify solutions to problems
- Participants gain an in depth understanding of the issue
- Enables decision makers to understand what the public thinks

Weaknesses

- Representativeness of jury may be compromised due to small numbers
- Issues are often complex, and require extensive preparatory work
- Could exclude individuals with low literacy or non-English speakers
- The sponsoring body has to be prepared to accept the results or else the process loses credibility

Useful links

- **Citizens' Jury**
- **Citizens' Jury**

Place Standard Tool

What is it?

- Provides a structured framework to enable and support discussions around place.
- Questionnaire format allows discussion around the physical and social environment of a place.
- 14 questions about the physical and social elements of a place. Answers are plotted on a diagram which then creates a visual representation of where improvements need to be made.

Benefits

- Visual tool for engagement
- Encourages conversations about different aspects of place
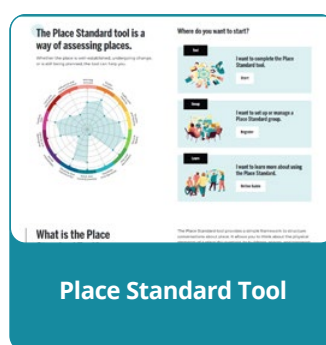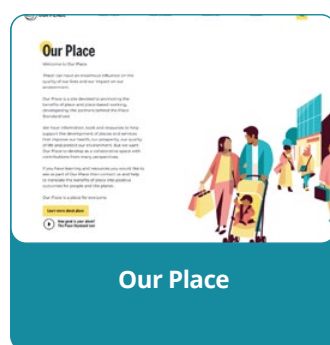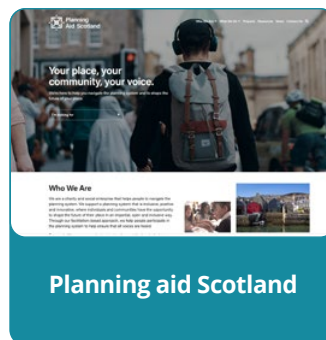- Prompts allow deeper discussion

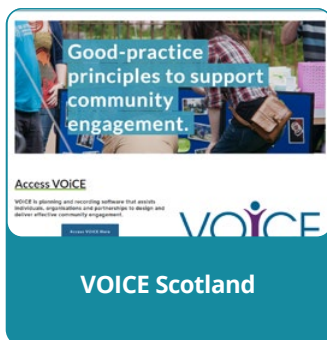### Weaknesses

- Can be a lengthy process
- Themes do overlap which can cause duplication in discussions

Useful links

- **Place Standard**
- **What is the Place Standard Tool?**

Useful resources

VOICE Scotland

Scottish Community Development Centre

Planning aid Scotland

Guide to community engagement

National Standards for Community Engagement

Our Place

Place Standard Tool

Healthcare Improvement Scotland

The Digital Engagement Guide

#FollowMe: A social media guide for community councillors (communitycouncils.scot)

Climate Action Towns Toolkit

YOUR Community

Together we can do more

3rd edition, September 2024