

Community Engagement

What is community engagement?

Community engagement is an approach in which communities foster trust, increase collaboration, communication, and involvement. This approach is based on principles that respect the right of all community members to be informed, involved, and empowered.

Community engagement can empower collective decision making and gives people the opportunity to work towards and communicate their goals and vision for the future.

Community engagement takes into account the broad range of views and perspectives across the community to establish a shared vision and common purpose. This fosters a shared ambition between community members, and encourages individuals to act together to achieve their common goals.



Source: [Australian Government Department of Sustainability and Environment](#)

Creating the right environment in which everyone is able and confident to contribute effectively to the shared team goal is essential for good community engagement.

Importantly, community engagement recognises the need for adaptability to meet complex and ever-changing needs. The shared community ability to adapt to a rapidly changing climate and the challenges of a shifting environment will be increasingly valuable in coming years.

Social enterprise is a dynamic business model which is adaptable and flexible to the needs and priorities of your community and can provide an array of socio-environmental benefits in keeping with your aspirations and goals.

The growth of a shared community consciousness can produce positive and sustainable outcomes. Effective communication and strong community engagement can overcome resource limitations, enabling communities to become more focussed, effective, and resilient.

Community engagement can adapt to suit different contexts and there are different strategies and tools for community engagement, which inform, consult, involve, collaborate, and empower community members.

Empowering local residents through encouraged and valued involvement results in greater numbers of participants, and retention of volunteers for delivering action. Continuous information sharing, and regular meetings, means that local residents are fully involved in the process, and feel ownership of community actions.

Encouraging Local People

Case Study: COMCOT, Bringing People Together, pages 6 - 9

“The Finnish people need a lot of encouragement to take part in activities. When persuading new actors to take part in the development process, you need to be able to confirm to them that their ideas and skills are needed and are “good enough” to bring to the common discussion. It is also a matter of building the self-esteem of the local community” tells Pirjo Sjögren from the Lohja Island Village Association.

“Otherwise most of the people do not consider that their ideas are relevant for local development nor do they feel that it is their “place” to participate in joint development schemes. For this, general information on a development or e.g. events is not enough. Personal invitations and connections are the key to getting people interested.

It is also vital to maintain the atmosphere in local associations and development groups open for new ideas and people. “Everyone easily gets stuck in their own routines and way of thinking. You need to keep your mind open for new possibilities. Your way is not necessarily the only or even the best way” Pirjo continues.

Things to consider for community engagement

What is the purpose and scope of the engagement process? It is important to be clear about this from the outset.

For example, is the process designed to:

- Identify or prioritise what the needs and priorities for the community should be?
- Develop a consensus on a proposal or plan?
- Develop new or collaborative ways of implementing community priorities?

Thinking through the following questions and issues will help in the planning and organising community engagement.

- Have we defined the community (geography, households, demographics, any hard to reach groups within the community, etc.) (See chapter ‘Defining Your Community’)
- How do we reach out across the community?
- Best ways to communicate.
- Are there any limitations?

Inclusive engagement

Inclusivity is an important factor to ensure everyone has the opportunity to participate in community engagement. Inclusivity in rural areas often means ensuring that people with access issues (e.g. live in remote or rural location outside of the community, or farmers/fishermen or hospitality/tourism, who are unable to attend due to working hours) are still given the opportunity to voice their opinions.

In the Mull and Iona case study, the community group overcame the challenge of accessibility by having one-to-one telephone conversations with people living in very remote areas to ensure that all community members were able to participate and contribute.

Inclusivity ensures representing all of the social and economic groups present in your community. Page 5 details how the Mull and Iona Community Plan was created, taking care to equally represent different community areas, groups, and the main employment sectors by including them in a steering group, who gave feedback on proposals and ideas.

Thorough engagement across the community is important to create a meaningful community plan, which empowers, and attracts participation from local residents.

- Consider using different engagement methods for different groups of people (age, ability, mobility/access etc). See the national standards for inclusivity in community engagement from [Voice Scotland here](#).

Communications

Communication materials should be jargon free and in plain English; available in accessible formats and provided in alternative language(s) as appropriate. Given the strong oral tradition in many communities, events where individuals can discuss the issues first-hand are invaluable.

In order to maximise levels of participation communication materials should use clear examples or case studies of how the issue or proposed plan is likely to affect different individuals and sections of society. Use existing community networks and forms of communication to publicise events and identify opportunities to align or hold combined events for greater impact.

The Glenbarr case study shows how local residents were contacted and informed about ongoing activity in their community in a range of different ways.

- Informational leaflets distributed to all households, with invitations extended in each.
- Continuous information sharing on a monthly basis, ensuring residents are kept up-to-date with the process.
- Outreach work to ensure inclusivity of all residents who wish to take part.
- The identification of local residents who are willing to volunteer in the implementation of the plan.
- Including local young people in the creation of an informational video, including them in a meaningful, and creative way.

Creative processes are important, as they can be used to reach out to groups in a less formal manner, sparking ideas and conversation which might not occur in a more formal setting. It can be used to get people of all ages interested in the needs of their local community, ensuring inter-generational continuity of empowerment and involvement.

The importance of creative processes is highlighted in the below resource, which gives a good overview of these community engagement tools, explaining **how** to use them and recommending **when** and with **who** you should use them.

- Public Meetings
- Art and Creativity (• Photography • Video Format • Songs, Poems, Artwork • Blank Canvas)
- Street Stalls
- Community Mapping
- Workshops and Focus Groups
- Web-based Engagement

See [Community Engagement Methods and Techniques](#) for more information.

Examples of methods that can be used to bring people together:

- Personal contacts (face-to-face meetings, phone discussions) with key people. This has proved to be the most important method for engaging people in the process. Do not underestimate the role of personal contacts, even though it is rather laborious.
- Email marketing: usually on its own it is not effective enough to engage people in the process but still provides an easy method to inform a wide group of people.
- Organising local meetings and describing the aims and methods of the process to a wide audience. Note! It can be effective to join forces with other groups when organising meetings rather than organising one on your own.

- Newsletters, stories in the local newspapers to increase awareness with the wider community.
- Do not underestimate the role of team building in forming your core group! For example, study tours for local key people can be very effective in growing a team spirit among the group, devoting time for discussion, and understanding of each other's motivations and goals to the development initiatives.

See the [COMCOT case study](#), page 7 for more information.

Case Studies

- [Ross of Mull and Iona Community Plan](#) (*written in English*)
 - A case study for good practice which uses community engagement to identify and prioritise local issues and create a community action plan.
 - Identifies the community research methods and processes used: Survey, focus groups, open public discussion, visit to local groups and households.
 - Focus on community participation that is thoroughly inclusive and accessible for community members residing in extremely remote and rural areas.
- [Glenbarr Community Investment Plan & Film](#) (*written in English*)
 - This resource is an example of good practice, illustrated through a detailed case study and accompanied by a community survey template.
 - Community engagement methods are used to reach out to community members and keep local residents informed about community activity.
 - Gathering information and opinions from local residents of all ages, ensuring that the voices of the younger and older generations are heard and valued.
- [Memory Montage Podcast from Rockfield Centre](#) (*spoken in English*)
 - This is an example of a podcast from the Rockfield Centre in Oban, where community members shared their memories of the old primary school.
 - This was recorded when a local group formed a community enterprise to take over the derelict primary school, to turn it into an arts and community centre.
 - They involved local people by hosting this meeting of previous students to share their memories of the old school.
 - Making a voice recording or podcast can be a good way of recording a session or meeting, which is less intrusive than video.

- [Village Development Plan](#) (*written in Estonian*)
 - Theoretic and practical learning material. Summary template for good practices and examples of identifying rural community needs and ways to activate local actors.
 - Description of the geographical community (people, economy, infrastructure, history, natural conditions, legislation, manmade landscapes, village movement and development trends).
 - The resource gives methods for the involvement of community members, with recommendations and examples, specifically for community activation around typically isolated or excluded groups.

- [COMCOT - An Innovative Tool for Improving the Competitiveness of Community-Based Tourism - A Handbook](#) (*written in English*)
 - This resource was created by the COMCOT project - an innovative tool for improving the competitiveness of community-based tourism. It gives detailed examples of good practice methods which were used to activate community engagement in rural communities in Finland and Estonia.
 - 3 practical community tourism development cases from Estonia and 4 from Finland are discussed. The resource captures the challenges of community involvement, encouraging community members to participate and how best to prioritise ideas.
 - Gives a collection of different practical methods used to bring people together and activate the community. This includes methods used to encourage and include new residents and second home-owners to participate in community meetings and activities organised by the village association.
 - The format of material is a report documenting the experiences of a development project in a village association (personal interviews, project plan and other written material).

- [Blending, Braiding, Balancing: Strategies for Managing the Interplay Between Formal and Informal Ways Of Working With Communities](#) (*written in English*)
 - Academic report which looks at the strengths and weaknesses of formal and informal community engagement. Page 8 has some interesting reflection on the situations where formal/informal community engagement methods are appropriate/inappropriate.
 - The author also reflects on the top-down approach which is often used by local governments and councils when interacting with community groups and how these formal public consultations can quash creativity and collective action.

- [Sustainable Village Card - A tool for rural village development](#) *(written in Finnish)*
 - Hämeen Kylät association has been among the first to adopt playing cards from Wales to Finland as one way of developing villages. The playing cards inspire and act as an aid in arousing thoughts in rural village development.

- [Community Development ABC](#) *(written in Finnish)*
 - This short guide gives examples of good practice in community development work from rural communities in Finland.

- [The Demonstrative Farm and Training Centre and Consultancy in Agriculture](#)
- [Video Presentation about the farm](#) *(written in Romanian)*
 - The material highlights information about the development of an educational model (Agricultural Training and Consultancy Centre) and a business model (Agrovision Demonstration Farm) to help small farmers make the transition from subsistence farming to commercial farming.
 - The resource is an example of good practice, to enable rural inhabitants to transform their farm into a business using a demonstrative farm model, training, exchange visits in other countries, and various community activation events.
 - The resource comes in the format of a 16 page report which gives a brief step-by-step guide for set-up, and more practical advice on hosting programs, sessions, and demonstrations.
 - Community engagement and activation through a) partnership with local schools, b) classes with international volunteers held at local centre for agricultural preparation and consultancy (English language classes, IT classes, entrepreneurship education for women).