My Community locality

Neighbourhood planning community consultation

eden project

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Introduction

Most of us find it hard to think about all the things we have on our list for tomorrow, so being asked to imagine what your community should and could look like in five, ten or fifteen years' time is understandably challenging. Yet, that is what people need to do in order to engage with the planning process.

It is not helped by the fact that most public conversations about future planning reduce the agenda to a series of dreary options – an extra bus stop, parking arrangements, a new supermarket etc.

In order to get more people to engage with planning we need to make the process meaningful to their lives and the lives of their families. To do this, we have to take a different approach, which puts people at the heart of the engagement process and allows them to take an active role in deciding the future of their community.

In this toolkit you'll find advice on helping people to imagine the future, engaging with different groups, organising events, engagement events, making the most of their community's physical assets and hidden talents, and some examples of projects that have pioneered this approach.

Community-led planning

The whole point of a neighbourhood plan is that it is community-led and that means researched, written and voted on by the people who live in the neighbourhood – that's you and your neighbours.

Neighbourhood plans are led and coordinated by a neighbourhood forum or a parish or town council, but other community members should be encouraged to become part of the team and the views of as many members of the community need to be represented in the plan.

There is lots of 'buried treasure' in communities: people with useful skills and knowledge. At their best neighbourhood plans are a way of bringing these people to the surface and using them in a meaningful way, strengthening the evidence base in particular.

People who can be doorknockers, tea makers, public speakers, bunting hangers, map readers, people herders, conversation starters, data processors, dedicated researchers, community campaigners, relationship builders, technical advisors, and designer makers all make particularly good 'treasure' for community engagement. Find people jobs and enlist them in the process.

The other thing to remember is that you *must* involve other people – it's the law. Whenever you get to a point where you think it might be easier to just do it yourself, remember that community engagement is a statutory requirement of the process. Planning legislation requires consultation and engagement on plans, including neighbourhood plans.

When a plan is submitted for independent examination they will expect to see a statement of community consultation and it will need to demonstrate that the legal requirements have been met. This is your chance to shine and show how well you have involved everyone in the process.

The thing to bear in mind at all times is that at the end of the process is a vote in a referendum, which means the whole process is a bit like a campaign. You need to make people aware that it's happening, ensure they understand what it's about – including what it can and can't deliver – and ultimately feel that they have a sense of ownership. The more people are able to express what they know about where they live as part of your plan, the more relevant, realistic and deliverable it will be.

In general, if people feel that they have been involved in the process the less contentious it will be later on. Not everyone will agree with everything in the plan, and these things will have to be worked through, but part of the point of a neighbourhood plan is to reduce some of the conflicts that otherwise would come too late in the planning process.

The 'Yes' or 'No' vote is a blunt end to a complex process. Only by being fully involved in the creation of plan will a community be able to fully understand what they are voting on. Good neighbourhood plans are built on a robust evidence base and committed community engagement. The plan is just the beginning. You will need to harness the momentum of the community engagement to bring it life.

Plans within plans

You will need to think about creating a community engagement plan for your neighbourhood plan early on. As the plan moves though different stages, your engagement approach will need to adapt and evolve, but it's still one continuous journey. You will need to be thorough but also light on your feet to make use of the opportunities and people that can help you.

The community engagement process

The community engagement process starts when you publicise the proposal to produce a neighbourhood plan. But, ideally you should have started talking to people informally beforehand about the idea, to get a sense of who might be interested in forming a group, or contributing to the process directly, as well as getting a general sense of whether the community is interested in doing a plan.

Step-by-step

These are the key steps you will need to follow in carrying out community engagement in your neighbourhood plan:

1) Publicise the proposal to produce a neighbourhood plan.
2) Identify key local partners and stakeholders and develop working arrangements to gain their involvement and support.
3) Formulate a programme of community engagement.
4) Carry out initial community engagement and analysis to identify issues and themes.
5) Undertake on-going community engagement to support the development of policy and content of the plan.
6) Provide feedback at all stages.
7) Consult on the draft plan.

Identifying key local partners and stakeholders

You will need to identify local partners and stakeholders to contribute to your plan

Although there aren't any official criteria for stakeholders, you should aim to involve groups and people based on their knowledge, skills, and connections to wider groups including minority groups. The local planning authority should be able to help in compiling the list and providing contact details, but it's worth doing your own homework on this too. If you are in a parish then the parish council should also have a directory of local groups.

Stakeholders could include:

- Elected local councillors
- Local shopkeepers, businesses, major employers and business organisations, including chambers of trade or commerce
- Community groups such as residents' associations, local civic or amenity societies, wildlife trusts, local history groups or sports clubs
- Landowners of key sites or organisations with significant property holdings and developers who have the legal agreement to buy a specific site if it gets planning permission (for example)
- Local trusts and project groups, such as community development trusts, land trusts or building preservation trusts
- Not-for-profit organisations representing minority groups e.g. elderly, disabled, young people, low-income, lesbian and gay groups, faith groups and ethnic groups
- Educational establishments such as schools, colleges and universities
- Community facilitators or activists
- Local institutions e.g. arts centres, performance venues, architecture, or built environment centres
- Health and social care organisations
- Local branches of professional bodies.

Starting out

First you need to make some noise. Get the word out and remember that most people will not have heard the phrase neighbourhood plan nor be that interested.

Use any means available:

- parish magazines
- flyers through doors
- posters
- banners
- flags
- local radio
- social media
- word of mouth
- chalked up pavements.

People will not get involved if they don't know it is happening. Don't make it too hard for people, use plain English and don't dazzle everyone with planning jargon. Make it clear that this process has direct relevance to their daily lives and the lives of their families. And make it look like something people will want to spend some of their time on.

Example messaging

The route you take to work, where you park, your bus route, the cycle paths you use, where you live, where your children play, your allotment, your schools, and the shops you use are all the result of planning. ***Here's your chance to have your say…***

If you are going to ask people questions in the early stages then keep them simple:

- What do you love about where you live?
- What don't you like about where you live?
- Describe where you live in three words.
- What makes this place good to live and work in?
- What would you change about this place?

Sometimes people find answering questions a bit intimidating, it can feel like a test and they are worried they will get the answers wrong. You can introduce some softer questions alongside the important ones to warm people up and get them to take part:

- What's your favourite place around here?
- Tell us about something funny/embarrassing/silly/memorable about this place.
- What are you most proud of about this place?
- If you could give an award to someone in your community for making this a better place who would it be and why?
- Are there any places that you avoid around here and why?
- Do you have a ground-breaking idea for making this place even better?

Once people get the idea you can start to introduce more specific questions about key sites, buildings, green spaces, business and retail, transport etc.

The first round of engagement should allow you to identify key themes and issues and use these to form the vision and aims of the plan.

Keep it going

Once you are off the starting blocks you will need to keep up the momentum, this could be hosting workshops and events to explore specific themes or issues that have emerged from your first community engagement approaches. You will also want to consult on the draft vision and

aims to make sure you are on the right track. Many groups use small working groups to tackle specific themes or issues. This part of the journey is all about gathering detail and exploring different options. The challenge is to keep people interested, so don't just go into committee mode and hope people will maintain their interest and commitment. Even working groups can make use of creative approaches, especially if there's a clear theme, and you make it easy for people to participate.

The last leg

Finally your draft plan is ready, by this time you will probably be ready to throw in the towel — but you will have achieved a huge amount and it would be a shame to stop now. Consultation on the draft plan is a statutory requirement — it is the pre-submission consultation.

Reading an entire draft plan probably won't fill many people in your community with joy, so make it easy for them. Break the plan down as a summary, including aims, main themes and general direction. You could also produce infographics if your data lends itself to them, and people are very drawn to good old fashioned maps. Getting to this point is worthy of celebration so it is worth exploring if you can invite people to some kind of event to take part and give their views. Your local authority will be able to advise on any legal requirements to consult with specific stakeholders and bodies.

Drafts are drafts because they can be amended so the feedback received at this stage needs to be reflected in the plan.

Principles

Every community is different, so there are no rules or sure-fire approaches to take, but we've developed some principles for engagement that you might find useful.

It's good to…

Start engaging people before you start your plan – it gives people time to use their imaginations and feel like they are part of the process.

Be clear and precise about what the plan could achieve and what you want people to contribute to. You will need to tread a fine line between getting people enthused about contributing ideas for the future of where they live while managing expectations that a plan is just the beginning and won't deliver things by itself.

Have an open door policy to people who might want to join in -don't underestimate the number of people you will need to publicise events, gather evidence and whip up enthusiasm to vote at the end.

Use specialist advice when you need it - there a number of toolkits available on the Neighbourhood Planning section of the MyCommunity website that can help you when developing your neighbourhood plan, including:

- Site Assessment for neighbourhood plans: A toolkit for neighbourhood planners
- Housing Needs Assessment at neighbourhood plan level: A toolkit for neighbourhood planners
- Commissioning consultants.

Grants are also available to groups undertaking neighbourhood plans. These can be used to hire venues, develop websites etc., but can also be used to hire professional planning consultants to provide specialist advice and to assist you in undertaking a range of technical activities, developing questionnaires and analysing community consultation responses.

Groups who are classed as complex will also be eligible for additional grant support and technical support. Technical support is a range of support packages which are delivered by expert consultants and includes undertaking Strategic Environmental Assessments (SEA), Site Options and Assessment and Urban Design and Masterplanning. Further information on this programme of support can be found in the grant and technical support guidance notes.

The My Community Network allows you to access support and advice from experts through forums, learning hubs and connecting with community champions.

Share what you find out as you go along - at community engagement events people will be genuinely interested in what other people are saying and this will also help them form their own thoughts and opinions. Try and offer ways in which people feel part of a collective process - display their responses rather than hiding them away, this will encourage others to get involved. Some groups use websites to share updates and drafts of their plans, so people can see how the proposal has progressed.

Listen - even if you feel like you probably have a better grasp of the evidence and could predict what people might say, make sure you listen to people - they could surprise you. After all that's what engagement is all about.

Make an effort - people will be more inclined to take the time to engage if you go to the trouble to create an interesting and fun engagement event. It shows you value people's input.

Go to them - Don't expect everyone to come to you. Consultations should preferably be within walking distance of people's homes, and you may also have to go to where groups are in order to talk to them – visiting old people's homes, schools, community centres or attending residents' groups meetings. Make it as easy as possible for people, for example – setting up a stall on the high street, at a market or in the leisure centre. You'll talk to people who would never usually take part in a consultation or come to a meeting. Think of consultations as moveable feasts.

Things we take for granted

- I can read.
- I can write.
- I have a postcode.
- I can leave my home.
- I have time.
- I speak the same language.
- I am confident to speak.

Be hospitable - you're asking people to spend their own time, so offering them something to drink and eat always goes down well. This also shows you value their time.

Consider your audience's needs - Communities are diverse places and you need to take an inclusive approach that acknowledges that people have different needs.

Improvise and adapt - If you can't find the right place to hold a consultation event then create small moments of interaction. Conversations on street corners might tempt people who might be put off by more intensive processes. People may be more likely to stop and talk to you if they can see a way out! Or if they feel in control of the amount of time they are giving you.

Work with the community's existing social calendar - You don't have to invent a community consultation event from scratch — find out what else is going on — fetes, events, and celebrations are all good places to piggy-back your consultation on to. This will also reach a wider group of people and give them more chance to own the process.

Trull, Somerset

Sometimes people need a bit of an incentive to get involved.

The Trull Neighbourhood planning Group in Trull, Somerset held a raffle for which the price of entry was a filled-out questionnaire. Two £50 vouchers, one for the local post office, and one for the local shop were the prizes.

Try to avoid…

Giving the impression that all the decisions have been made - people will need information to help them understand what it's all about, but they will also need space and time to contribute their opinions. Make sure it's clear which things are suggestions for places rather than fixed ideas.

Using open meetings as form of engagement - Large open meetings which invite people to be briefed and ask questions are great for telling people about something that is going to happen but they don't work as a way of encouraging people to give their opinions. Only the most confident tend to speak, they can turn confrontational quickly and can be hijacked by a single issue.

Tettenhall,Wolverhampton

Maps and models are always popular, but if the thought of papermache fills you with fear then you could follow the example of Tettenhall's neighbourhood planning group. They commissioned a local community organisation to work with unemployed people from the local estate to create colour-coded maps of current and proposed developments in the area using 3D printers.

Techniques

Just as there isn't a definitive list of approaches, the list of engagement techniques could go on forever, but here are a few to get you started.

Lead-in activities can help broaden participation. A series of creative activities with different sections of the community that are based on themes, or the history of an area can create material to display at events. Models, artwork, slide-shows and films can create a sense of anticipation and involvement and encourage people to come to a final event. Conversations with local groups before the events can help to explain why they should take part.

Workshops are essential participatory events where people can work through challenges, discuss issues, find consensus and create something that can be shown to others. Workshops suit smaller groups and allow you to go into more detail. They will need planning, materials and good facilitation but they can yield a lot when done well and the results can be shown to others to stimulate more engagement.

Questionnaires can reach large numbers of people and be cheap to produce but you need to factor in the amount of time they will take to analyse. There are online questionnaire formats such as Survey Monkey or Google Forms that can also help you analyse the data, but you will still need to try and reach those people who may not have access to the internet. Paper

questionnaires can be combined with door knocking that can help to raise awareness of the planning process. Including questions that can be answered as a family can help to make the process feel more collective. But if you rely solely on surveys then you may miss out on the interchange of ideas that can arise from conversations and discussions across communities of interest and place.

Fete stalls – single fete stalls are often a compact and bijou way of capturing opinions. They can be slotted into someone else's event or used as a pop-up installation in an area of high foot fall. They can be colourful, intriguing and informative. You will need to edit your information and the number of things you can ask people but they are great for the first stages of engagement when you are testing the water. Multiple fete stalls can be used to create an entire engagement event. Each stall can be themed around a different issue and you can set dress around them to create interest and the overall appeal of the event. Allowing people to be self-led from one stall to the next gives people a sense of autonomy. Fetes often have strong cultural resonance and may appeal to people who may be put off by a more formal workshop event.

Transform an everyday space - this can be a powerful way to connect with people. It could be an empty shop, or an unloved patch of space. Transformation changes people's perception and demonstrate how things can be changed for the better. There is also something intriguing about seeing something you walk past everyday suddenly turned into something else. It's a great way to lure people in.

Make answering questions fun - writing things on large objects — presents, cardboard rockets, tablecloths — will encourage people to contribute in their own words and allow them to interact with each other on paper.

Park the negative - there are always negatives in any communities — you need to acknowledge them so people can move on and start to use their imaginations, otherwise you'll end up with 'dog mess' or 'nowhere to park' written on everything. Create a place where people can get their gripes out of the way and if you're hosting in a venue, put it near the door, so it's out of the way early on.

Go 3D - making models and 3D maps can help people understand places in a different way. Simple cardboard boxes can give amazing results but 3D maps of villages have also been created in cake with the added advantage of giving people another reason to get involved.

Work across the generations - conversations across generations are special and can help break through the 'I'll be dead' mentality amongst the older generation. It also represents a respect for the past and investment in the future.

Children enjoy being interviewers - with intergenerational projects there is a tendency for conversations to go one way ('how things used to be') so it's important to provide rules of engagement so that children ask questions and shape the conversations, and don't end up just listening.

Make something - include creative activities that actually add no real value to the process other than encouraging people to come along and spend some time with you.

Include child-friendly activities - parents of young children might not have much time to spare, so, a creative activity for kids where parents can see them, can give parents the space and time to participate in your consultation.

Transect walks - a fancy term for walking around your neighbourhood to look at what you do have, sometimes called 'Walk and Talks'. Sometimes maps don't trigger the same ideas and opinions as getting out and being in a space. Group walks are sociable and can help get the conversation flowing.

Go digital - a digital approach to community engagement can help maintain momentum and provide a vital communication channel for the process.

Working with schools and colleges - Schools are busy places with a specific job to do so you need to make sure that getting them involved in your neighbourhood plan suits them and the themes that they are trying to teach and existing lesson plans. That said, neighbourhood planning is a great way of getting young people to see how subjects such as geography apply to

the places where they live. Some university departments are particularly keen for students to use neighbourhood planning to support student projects, try departments of architecture and digital media, as well as more obvious ones such as geography and planning.

Something to write on - Think about what you are giving people to write on. If you are asking people to contribute ideas at an event you have the chance to design specific question cards that reinforce the theme. For a cheaper off-the-peg option you could use luggage labels or postcards, both of which can be displayed easily on washing lines so people can share their responses. Rant boards appeal to young and old alike – large boards painted with black board paint, reams of old wall paper, even chalked up pavements and walls will suffice.

Running a consultation event in the community

The places where we're invited to take part in conversations are important. Imagine that you're meeting someone for the first time and you want to ensure that you'll get on well and encourage them to linger and chat to you for a while. Where would you choose to meet? How would you tempt them to stay?

People have a natural nosiness, they are intrigued by things that are out of the ordinary, they respond to creative provocations and they like shiny things. It's important that you give as much thought to how you frame your engagement as the engagement activity itself. Much can be achieved by stealth…

Things to consider when choosing a location

Positive and negative associations

Buildings can have associations for people and the most obvious community spaces may not be as neutral as you think. Sometimes, if a particular group is the primary user of a space that can put off other groups of people too – the Working Men's Club, the Conservative Club, the Scout Hut, the Church Hall, and the Cricket Club.

Tattenhall, Cheshire

Getting young people thinking about the future of their neighbourhood can be challenging. Tattenhall neighbourhood plan held a 'rave' in the church hall to draw in teenagers, the ticket price? A completed neighbourhood plan questionnaire.

It doesn't mean you can't use these spaces it just means you may have to work a bit harder to encourage people in if they have a particular perception of the place.

If the places where you can have collective conversations are limited then perhaps we need to make new ones. It may often look like there are limited places to talk to people but if you look closer there may be other places you can use, an empty shop perhaps, under the awning of a supermarket, on an odd triangle of green space, outside the post office, or even a street corner.

Using other people's events

You may choose to take part in someone else's event but you can still create a little space of your own. A table top, a cosy corner, a picnic blanket – these can all be used to create convivial spaces.

And who says the spaces that we engage with people should be fixed in one place? Conversations on the move can be short and focused or take in specific routes that people feel are important to them which in turn can capture different values and opinions. Whatever space you choose make sure it's accessible.

Entrances and Exits

First impressions count. How you enter a space sets the tone for further exchanges.

Getting people to step into a space they might not be familiar with and do something they are not used to doing can be tricky, but you can use this to your advantage. Changing the entrance to a place can change how people feel about stepping through the door and creating a façade for a space is a way of framing the conversation. Flags, bunting, flower garlands, red carpets, painted doors and fairy lit tunnels can all be used to great effect.

Some people don't like to enter an enclosed space unless they can clearly see a way out. Outdoor spaces sometimes work better because people feel like it's easier to control the time they spend with you.

Promoting your event

Getting people's attention

Be bold. Small posters tucked away in the corner of the post office window or crinkled up and soggy on a telegraph pole will not do it. Flags, bunting, and banners let people know something is going on.

Build anticipation

Introduce yourselves slowly with small provocations, events and interventions that let people know something is coming.

Create local ambassadors

Find people who can become part of the engagement, enlist them for jobs, share ownership of the process and widen your sphere of influence through theirs.

Invite people properly

Invitations make you feel special, try and make it so beautiful you want to put it on the mantel piece or display it on the front of the fridge.

Make the ordinary extraordinary

Transform a space that people take for granted. Don't opt for the most obvious venues. Are there places that people walk pass every day that you can commandeer? Empty shops are ideal but it could also be a street corner.

Put yourself in full view

Don't hide yourself away in a meeting room at the back of the town hall and expect people to find you.

Create a proper welcome and sense of belonging

It's important to make people feel wanted and at ease, a simple old fashioned welcome can help to pull the hesitant into your space.

Weather permitting

If you're inside then check the temperate is ok – people generally don't like extremes, but if your venue is cool on a hot day, or warm on a frosty morning, then people might be more inclined to hang around. If you're outside then choose somewhere out of direct sunlight in the summer if you can – a tent or umbrellas could do the trick, the same goes for rainy weather. If it's cold don't expect people to hang around for ages. Whatever the weather, have a backup plan in case it turns nasty.

Refreshments

Giving people something to eat or drink builds trust, shows them that you value their time and encourages them to stay.

Let people go at their own pace

Good engagement should be an opportunity for reflection, a moment for people to immerse themselves and consider some of the big questions we need to ask ourselves but rarely do as we busily get on with our everyday lives.

Familiar faces

People are often wary about engaging in conversations with people they don't know so enlist fellow locals who represent different groups of people in your place (age, sex, culture) and actively seek out 'people who know people'. This is where your ambassadors can shine.

Opening gambits

- If you could change places with someone for the day who would it be and why?
- If you could instantly acquire one skill what would it be?
- Who or what is the love of your life?

Make it homely

While there's no place exactly like home, research has shown that people are most likely to linger in places that feel like home. It's one of the reasons why we are seeing more bookshops with cafes and cafes with sofas.

Headington, Oxford

Perched on a hill above the city of Oxford, the suburb of Headington, has sprawled in recent years, causing a lot of questions about what is, and isn't in Headington when it came to neighbourhood planning. To engage people in a more positive way, they invited local children to enter a drawing competition with four options to draw:

1. Your favourite place in Headington.
2. What you like doing most in Headington.
3. Something new for Headington.
4. A logo for the neighbourhood planning group.

The artists were invited to hand their masterpieces in at the stall the group held at the Headington Fair in the local park, providing an opportunity to engage parents at the same time.

Find common ground

Even if you know the people you are talking to quite well, you may feel nervous talking about subjects that may feel unfamiliar to us. Start by asking some general, open questions that anyone can answer and engage with. See the Opening Gambits box on the preceding page.

Be generous

Giving a gift encourages reciprocity – when we are given something we often feel compelled to give something in return. Biscuits, paper roses, packets of seeds, apples, poetry cupcakes, and windmills have all been used as gifts to encourage participation.

Digital engagement

The Internet offers an incredible number of ways to let people know about your ideas and events. Over 80% of the UK's population has access to broadband, and on average people spend over 30 hours a month browsing online (over an hour a day) which means you can't afford to ignore the internet when engaging with your community. Easy and instant, it can help you advertise meetings and events, and update people on progress. Used well, it can help foster a cohesive community and galvanise it into action.

Social networking is probably the most obvious way to engage with people — 73% of adults and 93% of young people have at least one social media profile, but websites and email still have an important role to play in your community engagement plan. An integrated approach is best, but you should look at using social media (e.g. Facebook, Twitter) as a minimum.

Websites

A dedicated website for your group or project is still one of the most useful ways of keeping people up-to-date on what's going on and who's involved. There are services online to help you create a basic website, such as Wix.com or Wordpress, or you can enlist the help of web designer. You can also integrate social networking platforms such as Twitter and Facebook as well as embedded Youtube videos. A website can help make your activities or group look professional and official – it will create a home and an identity for your community or project. With the right management it can provide an important presence and service to your community.

Email

Email is a straightforward way to share information and encourage feedback. If you use web-based software like MailChimp then you can easily design professional-looking e-newsletters, and also monitor the responses and click through rates. If you do use a standard email account for a circular then put the email addresses, ensure that you use the BBC (blind carbon copy) box in the BCC box so they're not visible to everyone. Remember, however you use email make

sure that everyone on your list understands why they're on it, how to unsubscribe, and that if someone says they don't want to be emailed again, they aren't!

Social media

On average, people in the UK spent two hours and thirteen minutes a day on social media in 2015. The importance of a social presence online for businesses and community is growing at staggering – over 59% of the UK population are active social media users, and this is only set to increase.

Twitter focuses on a live scrolling newsfeed of information –good for connecting with influencing types and spreading news. Facebook is focused more on engagement with people. It's the most active social platform, and attracts a slightly older demographic than Twitter or Pinterest. Creating a Twitter account or a Facebook page for your neighbourhood plan is free – however, building the community within them is the challenge.

Successful and engaging social media networking can lead to valuable engagement for your neighbourhood plan and is worth the time and effort to build your social presence.

Abram, Wigan

Minecraft is a game that allows the user to build 3D worlds out of blocks, but one group is using it as a tool to help engage young people with planning. Keen to ensure everyone is heard, the neighbourhood planning group in Abram, Wigan is using Minecraft to get year 5 students at local schools and their parents actively involved in neighbourhood planning. If this sounds like it's just for kids - it's not - the UN is funding a project that uses Minecraft to help communities plan their futures from Kenyan slums to solar parks in Bangladesh. So it could be time to get off the starting blocks.

Five golden rules for using social media for neighbourhood planning

1. Post regularly

Make sure your social spaces don't have tumbleweed blowing through them. That means making your social media updates as important a task as writing your newsletter. Share the job amongst trusted people in the community (multiple users can log in to the same Facebook, Twitter and blog accounts). You could also try to get someone on board from within the area who's really into these social networking tools (teenagers often know a lot about this!).

2. Publicise your online spaces

Don't forget to tell people in the community that they should 'like' the Facebook page or 'follow' you on Twitter. Include the link on your printed newsletters, or on a relevant website, remind residents at meetings, drop it into conversation on doorsteps if people are hesitant to actually 'sign up' to anything – they might just have a look online and be inspired by what they see going on.

3. Try a range of social media tools

You'll learn that different people like different ways of communicating. You might find Facebook best for getting residents involved, whereas you might discover Twitter is better for networking across the country with other groups (use the hashtag #neighbourhoodplanning on Twitter).

4. Create dialogue

While it's up to several key people to lead on social media and post regular updates, they should be facilitating the debates, rather than being the only voice. For example, Facebook posts should ask questions and encourage participation rather than simply project information one way.

5. Keep it visual

Never underestimate the power of images. Facebook, blogs *and* Twitter can include photos. Use photos to inspire people to get involved.

Five social media platforms to use

1. Facebook

Facebook is the most popular social network in the UK. Rather than use your own personal account, set up a Facebook Page instead, and consider whether a Facebook Group is appropriate for your neighbourhood plan.

A Facebook Page offers an easy way to update your community, post photos and ask questions but they are visible to everyone on the Internet whether they have an account or not, unless you change the settings so treat it as a public platform. You can also have more than one administrator – which means that you can share the burden of updating.

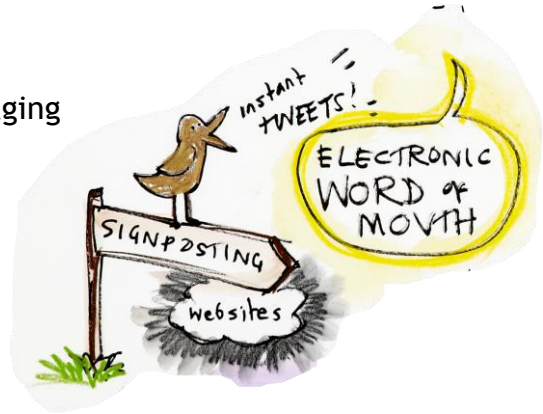
Facebook Groups provide space to collaborate and talk about specific issues or projects, they can be open to everyone, visible but invitation only, or invisible.

2. Twitter

Twitter offers a really easy way to cascade information to people with an account. Tweets are limited to 140 characters so keep it short and use photos and links to websites or other social media to provide more information if necessary. Twitter is great for updating on the go, or live tweeting an event so more people can join in.

3. Pinterest

Pinterest is a picture-based network. It works by encouraging you to 'pin' things that 'interest' you to your Pinterest page in categories, which makes it a sort of public scrapbook. You link to photographs and products that you like, as you might on a pin-board. You can then use Facebook or Twitter to 'Like' or 'Tweet' about them.



Unlike other social networks Pinterest is less of a communication tool, but it can help you create 'mood-boards' and 'curate' websites, stories and photos that you think are worthwhile.

It could be a great way of sharing projects or ideas with the rest of your community. The majority of users are female so it's a great way to get women of all ages involved.

4. LinkedIn

LinkedIn is a professional network so it might not seem an obvious place for a group involved in neighbourhood planning — even if members of your community are on LinkedIn it's unlikely that they'll choose to link with your neighbourhood planning group there in significant numbers. But, it's a professional network and that can make it a great place to find experts on different aspects of neighbourhood planning. There's even a LinkedIn Neighbourhood Planning Group, and some experts have posted guides and presentations on the site, so it's worth a look if you need some support.

5. Storify

Storify can help you make good use of your social media accounts by pulling together your online activity into a narrative. You can pick and choose which posts to put in your Storify story, and can provide context for these posts with a few lines of text. It's a useful way of showing the real world and digital impact of your consultations — for example, you could take photos or video of an event in progress and then pull together social media posts by anyone who was there along with posts by people who weren't.

Examples of good social networking

Facebook pages

- Thorne and Moorends Neighbourhood Plan
- Eden Bridge Neighbourhood Plan
- Ramsgate Neighbourhood Plan

Twitter accounts

- St Neots Town Council
- Knightsbridge Neighbourhood Forum
- Our Plan West Devon

Case studies

Lawrence Weston, Bristol

A post-war housing estate in North West Bristol, Lawrence Weston has used the neighbourhood planning process as an opportunity to engage its community about the wider future of the area.

Known to some as L Dub, Lawrence Weston's 7,000-strong population has lost many essential local services and is poorly served by public transport.

Local community group Ambition Lawrence Weston started by surveying people for a community plan which took a holistic approach to the community's needs - covering housing, planning, facilities, jobs, crime, and young people and families.

As well as gathering and sharing data via regular meetings, drop-ins and social media, over 1,000 people were surveyed door-to-door by local people who had been specifically trained in community research.

The data for the plan helped inform the priorities for the subsequent neighbourhood development plan, and a further round of door-to-door surveys was undertaken in the six week consultation process, and an animated film was made to help explain the aims and ambitions of the neighbourhood development plan and how it could transform the area.

Southbank & Waterloo Neighbourhood plan (SOWN)

With over 500 members the Southbank and Waterloo Neighbourhood forum is one of the country's biggest groups.

South Bank and Waterloo neighbours have taken a proactive approach to getting people involved by launching a SOWN together campaign to recruit volunteers. They have appealed for people with skills in copywriting, community liaison, event management, planning policy, planning law, youth work, marketing, getting access to social venues, translation and canvassing.

Forming a multi-skilled team has allowed them to be creative and celebratory in their approach to engagement. They have worked with the seasons and held planning workshops combined with Christmas parties, held a free Winter Tea Dance for older people - along with dancing lessons for those less confident about tripping the light fantastic, and hosted summer parties with screenings of vintage films and documentary clips about the area alongside discussions about the neighbourhood plan.

They have hosted online debates to find out peoples 'burning issues' and collect their ideas about the good, the bad and what's needed to secure the future of Southbank and Waterloo as a great place to live and work.

They convey a strong sense of wanting to hear from every member of their community and a genuine interest in their stories and opinions.

My Community locality

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Visit the My Community website to find out more:
http://mycommunity.org.uk/
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