GUIDE | COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT FOR DEVELOPING A NEIGHBOURHOOD STRATEGY

What is a neighbourhood's greatest asset? The people who live there! Residents have the most knowledge about the neighbourhood and can offer keen insight into the best things about living in the neighbourhood and what could be improved. If you are looking to build a neighbourhood strategy, this guide will provide you with tools and resources to assist you in engaging the community and, ultimately, developing a meaningful, actionable strategy.

OVERVIEW

In our first guide, you learned about building a case for a neighbourhood strategy. In this guide, we are focusing on the why and how to incorporate authentic engagement to ensure that your strategy is meaningful and relevant for the people it is designed to impact.

Ensuring that authentic and meaningful community engagement happens takes courage, creativity, patience, and a willingness to be open to surprises or results that contradict expected deliverables. Indeed, community engagement can feel like a daunting venture and yet, the outcome is worth it. When the community is involved in the design of strategy, it sets the stage for greater ownership in the strategy and ultimately a greater chance that the strategy will be animated and sustained. There are four areas that you will need to think about to engage your community:

Why are you engaging?	Who are you engaging?	How do you engage?	Implement your strategy

If you are planning to develop a neighbourhood strategy, you inevitably know that community engagement is important and is a necessary component of building a neighbourhood strategy. Every community is unique which means there is no one-size-fits-all approach to neighbourhood development or community engagement. While there is no set roadmap, there are promising practices and common phases; the constant and most essential element is to ensure that residents are at the center. Residents are the key to developing relevant and actionable strategies and for bringing the strategy to life. Connections, trust, relationship and action are key ingredients in effective community engagement.

" **At its heart, meaningful Community Engagement is a process by which citizens are engaged to work and learn together on behalf of their communities to create and realize bold visions for their shared future.** **"**

Resources & Tools

- **Engagement Continuum Tool:** Based on the IAP2 framework for community engagement, this tool helps you think through what level of engagement is appropriate for the project, what stage you are in and who you are engaging.

- **Community Engagement: An Overview:** This two-page document provides an overview of what community engagement is, who should be involved, and some key criteria for effective engagement.

- **Community Engagement: A Foundational Practice of Community Change:** This paper is an in-depth look at the field of Community Engagement. It highlights the reasons for and benefits of community engagement. It also explores key considerations for designing your community engagement strategy.

- **Community Engagement Matters (Now More Than Ever):** Learning from unsuccessful attempts at system change, the authors share their biggest learnings on evidence-based social change efforts. Foremost in their learning is the need for authentic community engagement. Using the lessons learned, they offer six essential Factors of Engagement for building community support.

- **Collective Impact through the Lens of Asset-Based Community Development and Results-Based Accountability:** This webinar offers a deep dive into why community engagement is important, explaining why engagement is less about "how do we involve people?" and more about "how do we get involved with people?"

WHO SHOULD YOU ENGAGE?

Often when we talk about building a strategy, our first thought is that we need to involve the experts. But when it comes to experts in community and neighbourhoods, who knows best? The professionals or the people who live there? Certainly, they both have important knowledge: one about content and the other about context.

Citizens, context experts, are in the best position to know what makes their neighbourhoods unique, what the strengths of the neighbourhood are and where they could use some outside help to make where they live even better. As such, if we are looking to build a neighbourhood strategy, we must include the people who know the area and whose daily lives may be directly impacted.

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> **Content Experts** are professionals, staff in your organization, service providers, and leaders with formal power who have knowledge, tools, and resources to address the issue.
>
> **Context Experts** are people with lived experience of the situation, including children and youth. They are the people who experientially know about the issue.

To be meaningful and authentic, it is crucial that those who want to be involved can be involved and that the engagement is representative of the people, values and interests in the neighbourhood. The ABCD Geometry Lesson below illustrates shifting the power of decision-making from professionals to residents, a model wherein residents lead and professionals support as needed:
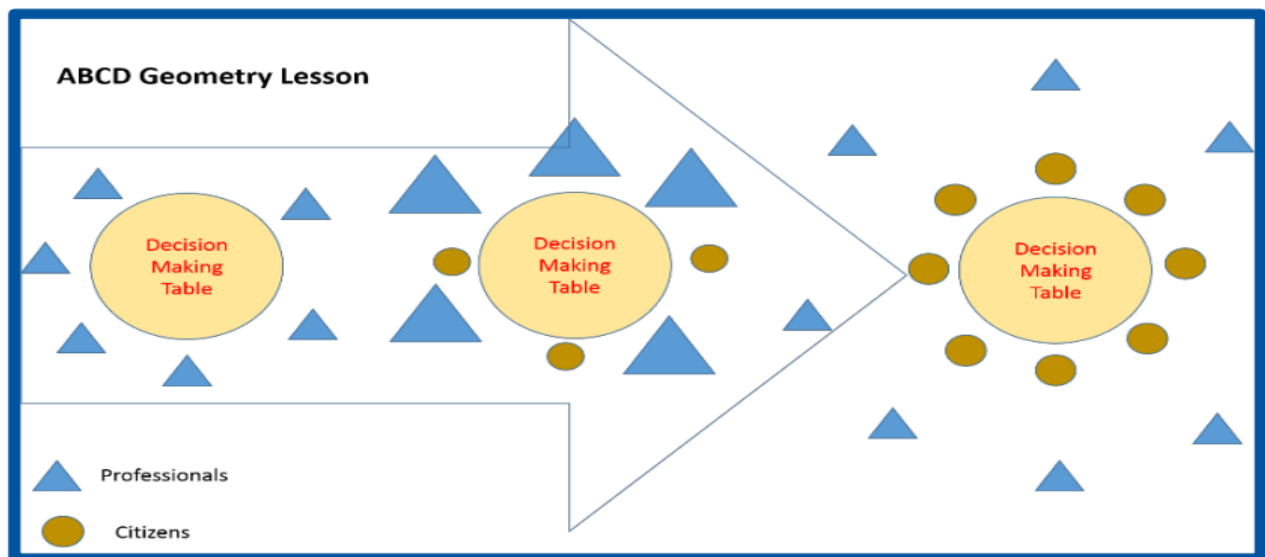
Resource: The Components of Effective Collective Impact by Dan Duncan

When in doubt, step back and check in with people who can either share directly and/or help inform decision-making or sharing of a collective voice. One essential role organizations can play is in assisting in connecting to the people they serve. In this way, organizations can help ensure that the diversity of the neighbourhood is represented with the community engagement.
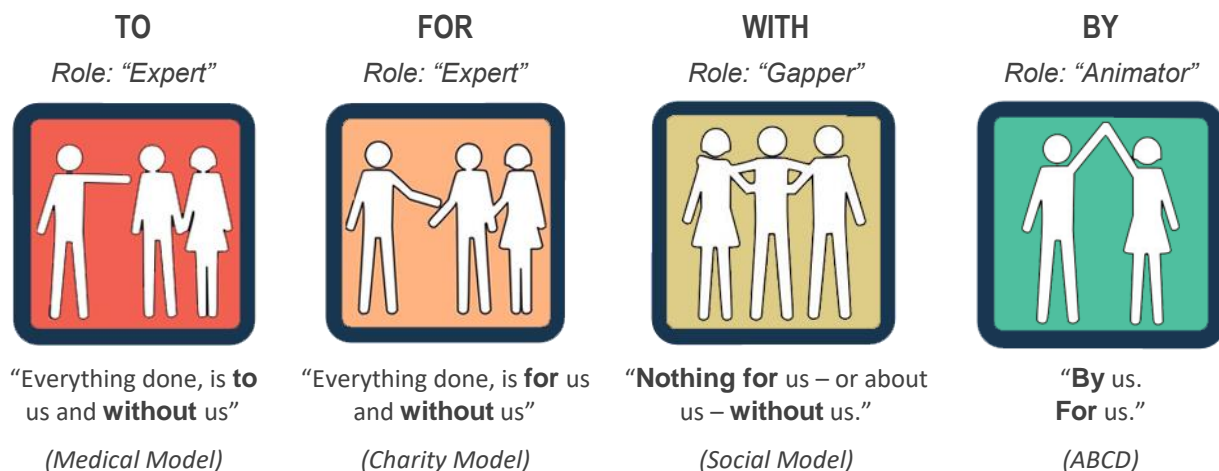
Resources & Tools

- **Who Do We Want to Engage:** This easy to follow guide assists groups in clarifying their goals for engagement, identifying who needs to be engaged and how to go about engaging them.

- **The Context Experts:** Authentic community engagement requires leaving behind the notion of 'doing for' community and leaning into the practice of 'doing with' community. Authentically engaging with community opens up the opportunity for shared learning and co-generating new possibilities. This paper shares best practices in context expert engagement and provides examples of authentic engagement in action.

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- [Trust: An Essential Ingredient in Authentic Community Engagement:](#) A key challenge in community engagement is that residents and neighbourhoods are often hesitant to participate in engagement activities. One of the core factors driving this reluctance is a lack of trust that the engagement is authentic, that people's voices will be heard and meaningfully represented in the outcome.

- [Turf, Trust, Co-Creation and Collective Impact:](#) Community change can only happen once a foundation of trust has been established. Building trust takes time, but it is a crucial first step that can't be missed. When organizations can demonstrate that they are willing to set aside their own goals for the shared goals of the community, then trust can flourish.

TOKENISM OR AUTHENTIC ENGAGEMENT?

Navigating through limited resources, tight timelines and pre-determined deliverables there is always a danger of community engagement becoming just another box to tick. It sometimes seems easy to just send out a survey or interview a few keen people we know will respond in a way that verifies our thinking; it's also tempting to dismiss feedback as uninformed when it contradicts our line of thinking. It takes a great deal of courage and commitment to share decision-making power, it is also the best way to ensure that your strategy will have meaning for everyone.

TO	**FOR**	**WITH**	**BY**
Role: "Expert"	Role: "Expert"	Role: "Gapper"	Role: "Animator"
"Everything done, is **to** us and **without** us"	"Everything done, is **for** us and **without** us"	"**Nothing for** us – or about us – **without** us."	"**By** us. **For** us."
(Medical Model)	*(Charity Model)*	*(Social Model)*	*(ABCD)*

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When community engagement becomes something we have to do rather than the way we do the work, our methods are at the greatest risk of being tokenistic. There are times when simply informing people of what we are going to do is appropriate. And there are times when it makes the most sense to gather input from people and use this information to inform our work. However, neither of these methods offer deep engagement, nor do they foster ownership in the process or the result. If we want to create a neighbourhood strategy that resonates with the neighbourhood and one that the neighbourhood is keen to support, we need to involve them in the whole process and share decision-making power. Through an Asset-Based Community Development lens, we need to consider Cormac Russell's model of moving away from 'doing to' and 'doing for' community towards 'doing with' or 'doing by' community.

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With this in mind, it's important to begin as you mean to continue. As you begin to plan, involve members of the community you want to engage. Pre-engagement with a small group of context experts can help shape the engagement process to ensure that it is meaningful, relevant and accessible for those you want to engage. Beginning in this way also means that you are working with the community, honouring their knowledge and setting the stage for how you intend to continue.

Resources & Tools

- **Hart's Ladder of Participation Activity:** Hart's Ladder of Youth Participation explores the various ways youth are engaged, from being manipulated or used as decoration to youth initiating and directing projects. While it is designed with children and youth in mind, it is reminiscent of **Arnstein's Ladder of Citizen Participation** and provides an interesting backdrop against which to consider our engagements overall. This specific tool promotes ways of increasing meaningful engagement.

- **IAP2 Spectrum:** As you work through an engagement plan with your community, the International Association for Public Participation (IAP2) has provided a solid starting point for community engagement. It walks through a spectrum of community engagement ranging from simply informing people what you are going to do to giving people the power to make decisions and what inherent promises come with each level of engagement. The IAP2 tool helps to clarify the purpose of each engagement activity.

- **Pre-Community Engagement: Setting the Stage for Authentic Community Engagement** Ensuring authentic community engagement means involving potentially affected residents as you build your plan on how to engage the community. Residents have key insights that can help you develop a robust engagement strategy.

- **Asset-Based Community Development At A Glance** Asset-Based Community Development is an approach to community development that focuses on the gifts and strengths of people. This tool provides a quick overview of the approach including the principles, key elements and defining differences from other community development frameworks.

HOW TO ENGAGE?

As you think through how you will go about engaging the neighbourhood, you will want to consider where people are already gathering. The best way to ensure that people show up is to go to where they already are. Go to their neighbourhood, visit the local parks, attend local events and spend time with local clubs and services. Partnering with agencies who are active in the neighbourhood is a great way to reach people who might otherwise be missed.

Once you have determined the level of community engagement that fits with your project, and know who you want to engage and where you will host your engagements, how do you go about actually engaging them? For this, there are a plethora of amazing examples from communities across Canada. What follows are a few that might get your creative juices flowing.

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City of Kitchener – Love My 'Hood

Lemonade Stand – Who doesn't love free lemonade? Staff and volunteers took a travelling lemonade stand to public spaces across the city; they handed out free lemonade while residents completed a short survey. To catch a different crowd, they also went across the city handing out hot chocolate.

Throw a Party – They hosted a free, family-friendly event with free food, live music, activities, and inspirational speakers. They provided free childcare to allow adults to participate in small focus group discussions.

Place-making – Kitchener staff wanted to find out what types of place-making residents wanted to do and what barriers stood in the way. The provided grants to several neighbourhoods to do place-making initiatives and learning from and alongside residents in the process.

City of Kelowna – Strong Neighbourhoods

Online discussion forum – While the City of Kelowna used a traditional survey that could be completed online or on paper, they also used technology to host online discussions about what people value in their neighbourhoods and what makes a great neighbour.

Photo contributed by the City of Kelowna

Party in the Park – Staff travelled to neighbourhood parks throughout the city bringing games and entertainment. As people would join the party they were invited into group discussions about life in their neighbourhood.

Community Art – As part of the activities in the park, staff also brought giant, blank puzzle pieces and invited residents young and old to draw or write their favourite thing about their neighbourhood. These were themed and used to create a community art piece which visually represented what was learned through the community conversations and survey results.

City of Waterloo - Neighbourhoods

Kitchen Table Talks – Community volunteers hosted focus groups with their neighbours to gather input for the neighbourhood strategy.

Resident Panel – community members met several times to learn about the current context of neighbourhoods, participate in conversations on a range of neighbourhood focused topics, and engage in developing and revising the strategy as well as setting priorities.

Resources & Tools

- Hosting a Data Walk: An effective tool for deepening everyone's understanding of an issue and for encouraging the sharing of multiple perspectives.

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- **Mobile Engagement:** Technology is at our fingertips and can be a powerful tool for engagement. This tool looks at some ways to engage online.

- **Love My Hood: Kitchener's Neighbourhood Strategy:** This case study offers a closer look at Kitchener's engagement strategy and more engagement activity ideas.

- **Strong and Connected Neighbourhoods: Waterloo's Neighbourhood Strategy:** Learn more about Waterloo's strategy and how they involved a resident panel from the onset of their engagement planning.

- **Index of Community Engagement Techniques:** Organized around the IAP2 framework, this resource presents a large volume of ideas for engagement based on whether your goal is to inform, consult, involve, collaborate or empower the community.

IMPLEMENTING YOUR ENGAGEMENT STRATEGY

Nothing is worse than a well-written strategy that sits on a shelf. And yet, how often does that happen? Often these are written with the best of intentions, based on current research and best practices from other communities with innovative elements. But what use is a plan if it sits on the shelf? How do we ensure that a strategy will be animated? As part of their Community Engagement Planning Toolkit, Peterborough Public Health put together a chart of questions to ask when forming an implementation plan:

Implementation Plan

Activity description	What **audience(s)** are we looking to engage?	What **communication channels** are we using to invite/share?	What are our **anticipated outcomes**?	What is our **timeline** for getting this done?	Who is **responsible** for this activity?	How will we use the **feedback** we receive?	What **resources** (new or existing) are needed?	What data needs to be collected for the evaluation plan?
E.g. Community newsletter with feedback form	Primary: All people in Ward 3 Secondary: All city residents	• Email • Social media • Printed copies delivered to Ward 3 mailboxes	• All community members are informed • Receive feedback from Ward 3 individuals who are concerned	Draft newsletter – April 15 Printing – April 20 Distribution – May 1	Project manager to draft content and manage design, printing and distribution. Project director to approve content.	Provided to the project team for review and analysis. Summary of feedback shared back to community in the July newsletter	Design - $x Printing - $x Distribution - $x	-Number of attendees, respondents or visits to sites -Community Feedback in process -individual experiences

Source: Peterborough Public Health Community Engagement Planning Toolkit

Answering these questions will allow you to create a realistic and actionable engagement strategy.

One of the final critical steps in community engagement is to check back with the community. Collating all of the data from the various engagement activities can lead to more questions. When you think that you have accurately captured what people have been sharing, it is essential to present the results to the community and ask if what you think you heard resonates. Checking back helps ensure that the evaluation of engagement responses accurately reflects resident realities and facilitates trust-building.

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Resources & Tools

- **Engagement Funnel:** A tool to help determine who needs to be involved when and to what extent.

- **Community Engagement Planning Toolkit:** This toolkit provides several worksheets to help you work through the purpose, stages and activities of your community engagement process.

- **Community Engagement Guide:** There are many steps to authentic and robust community engagement, this guide illuminates the benefits of engagement and describes in detail the process and the work of each stage.

- **Strengthening Public Engagement in Edmonton:** A comprehensive look at the key ingredients of a community engagement strategy; including tools and practical examples from Edmonton.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Authentic community engagement is not easy, but the results are worth the effort. As you consider your next community engagement process here are some recommendations from your peers to keep in mind:

1. Begin as you mean to continue – involve residents from the beginning to ensure your engagement activities will be meaningful to residents.

2. Offer multiples ways for people to engage – everyone is different and has varying preferences on how, when, and where they are willing and able to participate.

3. Be accessible – go to where people already are, use plain language and offer translation, transportation and childcare to reduce barriers to participation.

4. Make engagement fun and creative – engagement fatigue is real, to encourage people to participate keep your activities fresh and meaningful.

5. Always check back with the community to make sure that you have heard them correctly.

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