

# Planning Aid

Planning Aid England and Planning Aid for London together provide free, independent and professional help, advice and support on planning issues to individuals and communities who cannot afford to pay for professional help. The service is delivered through a small team of staff and a network of volunteers, the majority of whom are Chartered Town Planners, who give their time free of charge. Planning Aid also works with developers, local authorities and others to help raise the standard of community engagement on planning matters.

## How you can contact us

Planning Aid is delivered through staff and volunteers based in the community:

### Planning Aid England

#### › Advice Line:

Tel: 0330 123 9244 Email: [advice@planningaid.rtpi.org.uk](mailto:advice@planningaid.rtpi.org.uk)

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› Planning Aid for Scotland 0845 603 7602

› Planning Aid Wales 02920 625 009

## Full contact details for Planning Aid services are at:

[www.rtpi.org.uk/planningaid](http://www.rtpi.org.uk/planningaid) and

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# Good Practice Guide to Public Engagement in Development Schemes

Developers

Decision Makers

Communities

# engage



# Good Practice Guide to Public Engagement in Development Schemes

For developers, communities and decision makers, one of the biggest challenges in taking forward a development scheme is to ensure that public engagement is undertaken in a way which is meaningful, inclusive and brings benefits for all involved.

This guide is intended to provide practical advice for all those involved in public engagement in development schemes which require planning consent. It is illustrated by real examples of good practice and provides information and assistance to those planning, engaging in, or assessing community consultation.

Good engagement reduces conflict, results in better development and most importantly allows communities to have an influence over the future shape of the places where they live.

## About Planning Aid

**Planning Aid** offers people the opportunity to get involved in the development of their local areas. We provide free and independent professional planning advice to community groups and individuals who cannot afford to pay professional fees. We work with communities to help them understand and play a role in the planning process. We are an independent source of advice and information on planning issues, and not part of central or local government.

Further information and contact details can be found at the back of this guide.

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Engagement is a two way process of openly sharing and exchanging information, understanding different views, listening and responding to suggestions, developing trust and dialogue to support effective working relationships to the mutual benefit of all involved.



There are many challenges to successful engagement with the community on development schemes, but they are small in comparison to the risks of failing to engage in a timely, meaningful and inclusive manner.

*“Good engagement motivates and inspires individuals and communities to help shape the future of their neighbourhoods, with positive outcomes for all involved.”*

Sue Manns, National Planner, Planning Aid England.

*“Effective consultation at the early stages of proposals improves schemes and creates value.”*

Mike Dunton, Consultant G L Hearn.



# Why Engage?



Depending on the size and type of development project, there are different legal requirements for community consultation. Larger projects, including nationally significant infrastructure projects now require considerable consultation by the developer before an application is submitted. Other projects, for example small developments such as a change of use or householder application, may only require neighbours to be notified by the local authority once an application has been submitted. Whatever the requirements, talking to neighbours and others before an application is submitted will often save time, reduce risks and most importantly result in a better scheme.

## It makes sense to engage

Good developments are those which work well with their local areas. This means that as part of the design process there is a need to understand how a place works and functions. The community are well placed to help with this information. Good community consultation and engagement is an essential part of a good development process, especially when undertaken early on in the process when changes to a scheme can more easily be made.

For **communities**, engagement means a chance to understand what is proposed, to explore how a development can bring value to an area, to identify which options would work best within a local context, to help shape solutions and to have their say on a scheme.

For **developers**, engaging with the local community can provide vital local knowledge, reduce the risk of challenges and delays, identify how a scheme can bring value to a local area and enhance the reputations of all involved.

For **decision makers**, good pre-application engagement will have identified those issues of importance to the local community and show how the proposal has responded to these. It will be for the decision maker to balance these alongside planning policy and other considerations, e.g. traffic impact, job creation and make a decision on the application.

When making design changes in response to comments from the community, it is important to be sure that the views are representative of the community, because if not, then it might not be the right solution. Inclusive engagement is the key to success.

Good engagement does not mean that a scheme will definitely go ahead as it may be unacceptable in terms of planning policy however, it will play a big part in helping all those involved to understand the issues and risks associated with an application and in reducing delays once an application has been submitted.

Good engagement is about more than just 'ticking a box'. If there is no real commitment, all the key decisions have been made, not enough time is allowed or there are insufficient resources to engage properly, it is likely that at best little will be achieved and at worst, may add to the frustrations of a community increasing the risk of objections, delay and possible refusal of consent.

## A recipe for good engagement

There is no 'perfect recipe' for good community engagement. Every development scheme and every community will be different. However this guide describes some good practice 'ingredients' which can be used to develop a positive and beneficial engagement process.

**"The typical participants in local decisions vary according to activity, but generally are more likely to be white, older, better educated, richer, middle class males."**  
Pathways through Participation: What creates and sustains active citizenship? Understanding Participation: A literature review. NCVO, IVR and Involve. Dec 2009

**"Change happens – and needs to happen – but people are often very uncomfortable with the uncertainties that change brings to their lives. Early and appropriate engagement in the development process can do much to minimise uncertainty, and help people make a positive impact on schemes rather than just sniping from the sidelines. This Good Practice Guide will help planners and other key players ensure that this happens."**  
Mark Middleton, Head of Planning, Worcestershire County Council.

Community consultation and engagement should not be carried out just to tick a box – it should have a clear purpose and be of value to all involved, otherwise it might do more harm than good!

Good engagement reduces conflict, results in better planning outcomes and most importantly allows communities to have an influence over the future shape of the places where they live.

When investing in a new product, a good business will invest in 'market research' or consultation to ensure that the product is fit for market. Development schemes are no different.

# Principles of Engagement



**Learn from the process** – identify what people think of the way the consultation has worked. What could be done better, what else needs to be done, was it a balanced and inclusive process. Identify the lessons learned and take these forward into other projects.



**Research and analysis** – explore the context, history, different communities and groups in the area who may be affected. Identify what will motivate people, what else is happening in the area, establish if it is connected and if so consider the potential to share events. Establish the goals - what are the benefits of engaging with communities and how will these be realised?



**Relationship building, knowledge and skills** – develop links with key groups and individuals who can assist and advise on what matters in the area. Consider how existing community groups, networks and representatives might be involved, what barriers might exist and what help might be needed to build the capacity to engage.



**Communications** – ensure that the information provided is clear, accessible and sufficient to tell people what they want to know, and to allow them to decide whether to engage. Be clear about what is fixed and why, and what is 'up for debate'. Check that mechanisms are in place to allow information to flow in all directions and that response dates are clear.

## Principles of Engagement



**Continuing to engage** – Has feedback been given and how will the relationships developed be continued into the construction and operational phases of a development project?



**Monitor and evaluate** – monitor engagement and use the results to identify gaps and inform actions to widen the process and ensure a balanced community response is achieved. Consider the comments received and how they can be taken into account in the design – is further engagement required?



**Inclusive** – ensure under represented individuals and groups are included and that they have an equal opportunity to be heard. Be clear when making changes that these do not respond to a vociferous minority but are a response to a wider community view.



**Timing** – be realistic, allow sufficient time to achieve the goals set at the start. Provide a clear timetable for the project identifying consultation opportunities. Ensure engagement takes place when things can be changed and when it is cost effective to do so. Allow sufficient time for considered and informed response. How and when will feedback be provided?

# Awareness to Engagement

Moving towards effective community engagement

Every development, no matter how large or small, can benefit from effective engagement. Talking to a neighbour before submitting an application for an extension to an existing building, listening to any views they may express and responding to comments they may make always helps, as does telling them when building work will start. This applies equally to a nuclear power station or major residential development. However, the approaches used, the time taken and the resources invested in consultation will be different, and should be in proportion to the size and impact of the development.

## Effective engagement

### Discuss and debate

### Consult and communicate

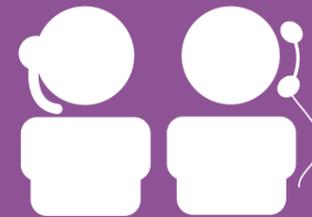
### Building understanding

### Awareness raising

Site notice, press notice, leaflets, talk to neighbours



More information about what is happening, where, why and when



Invite comments, listen and make changes, provide feedback



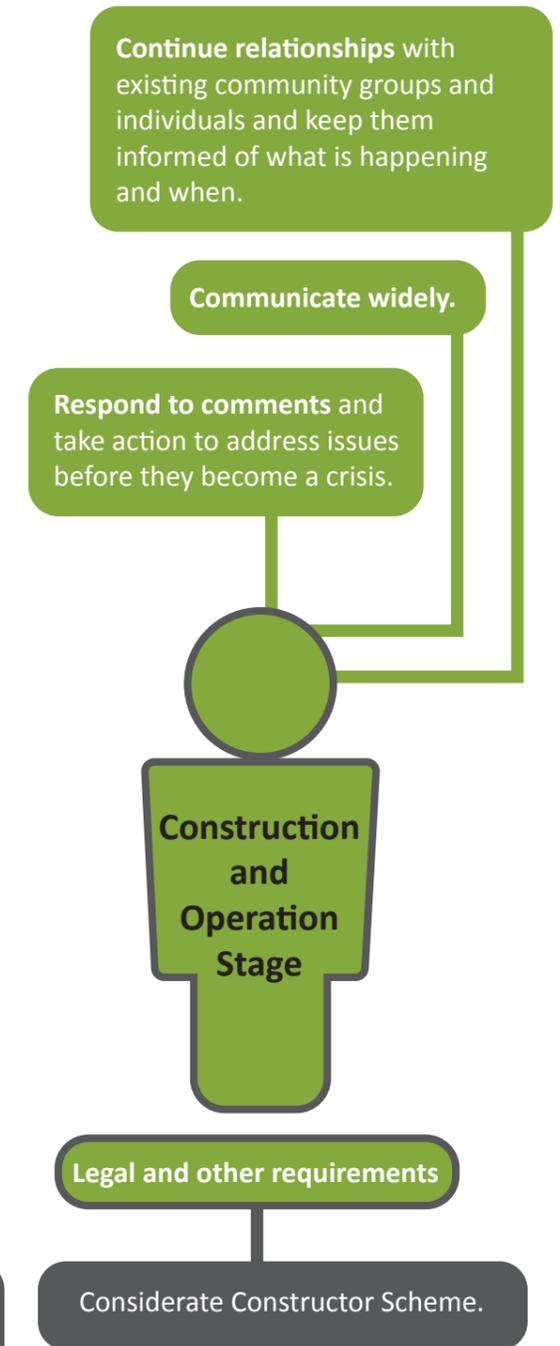
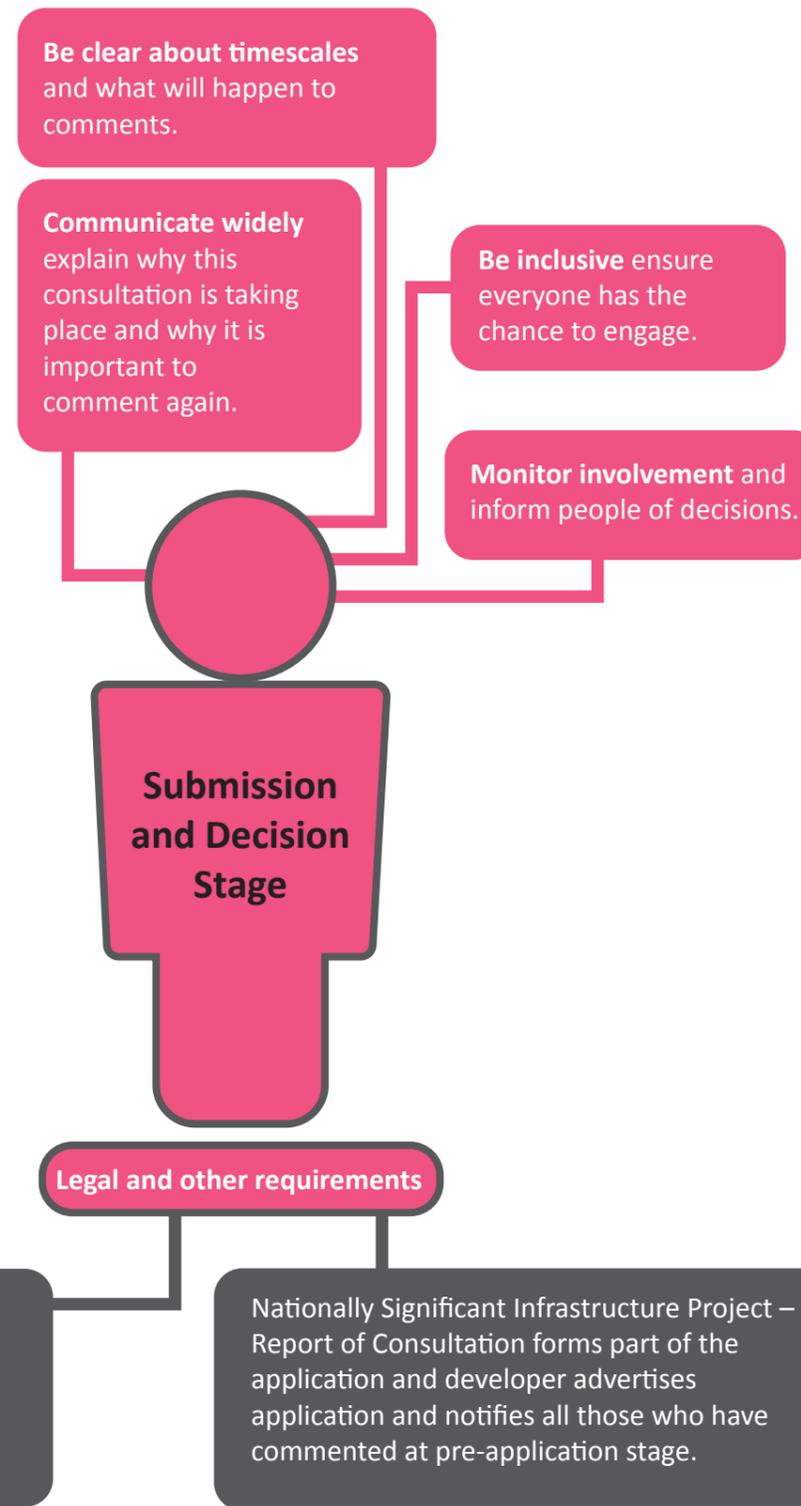
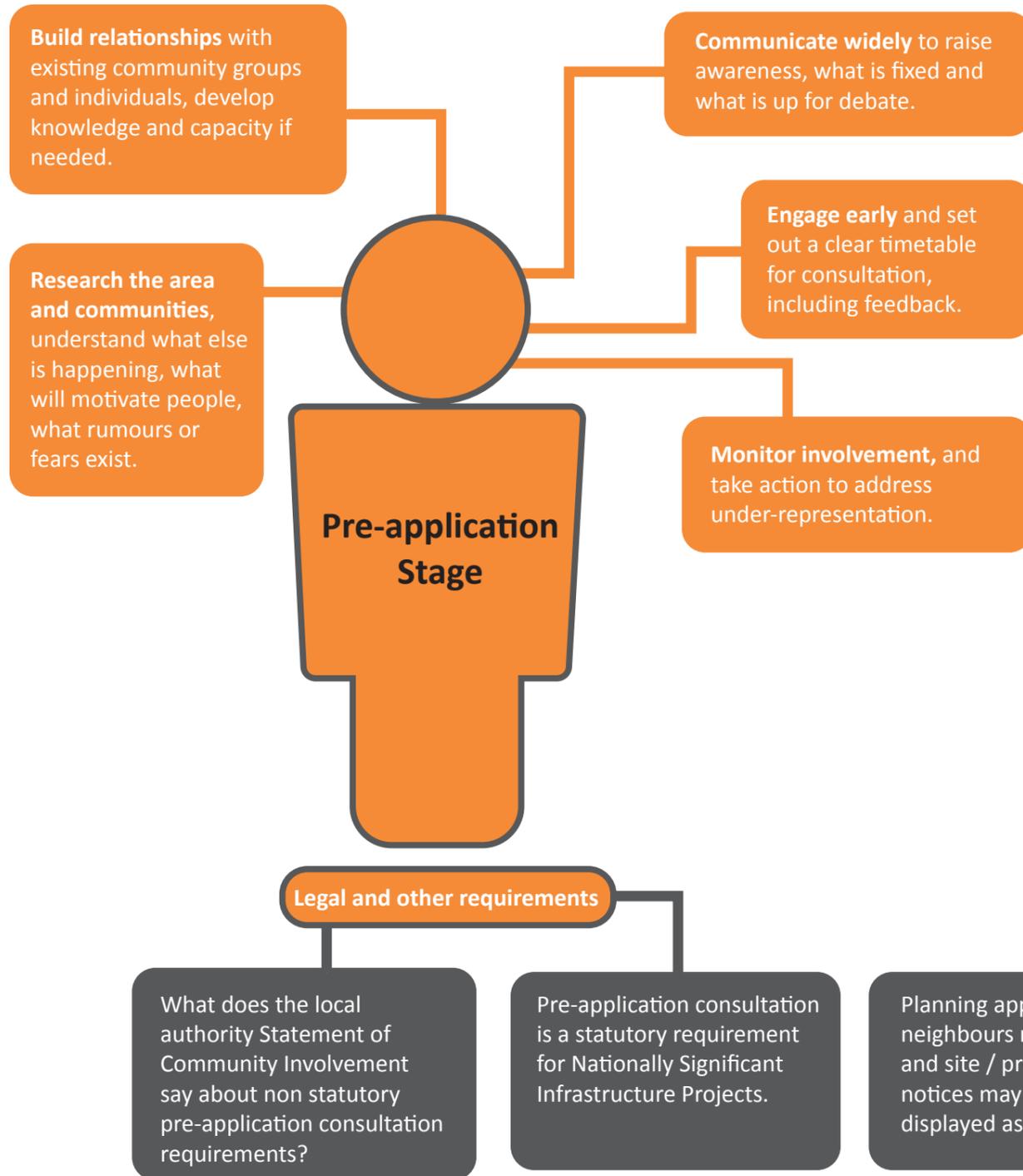
Forum to agree changes, embrace ideas and suggestions, responsive process



Build lasting, positive relationships

# Planning for Community Engagement

## The Different Stages of a Development Scheme



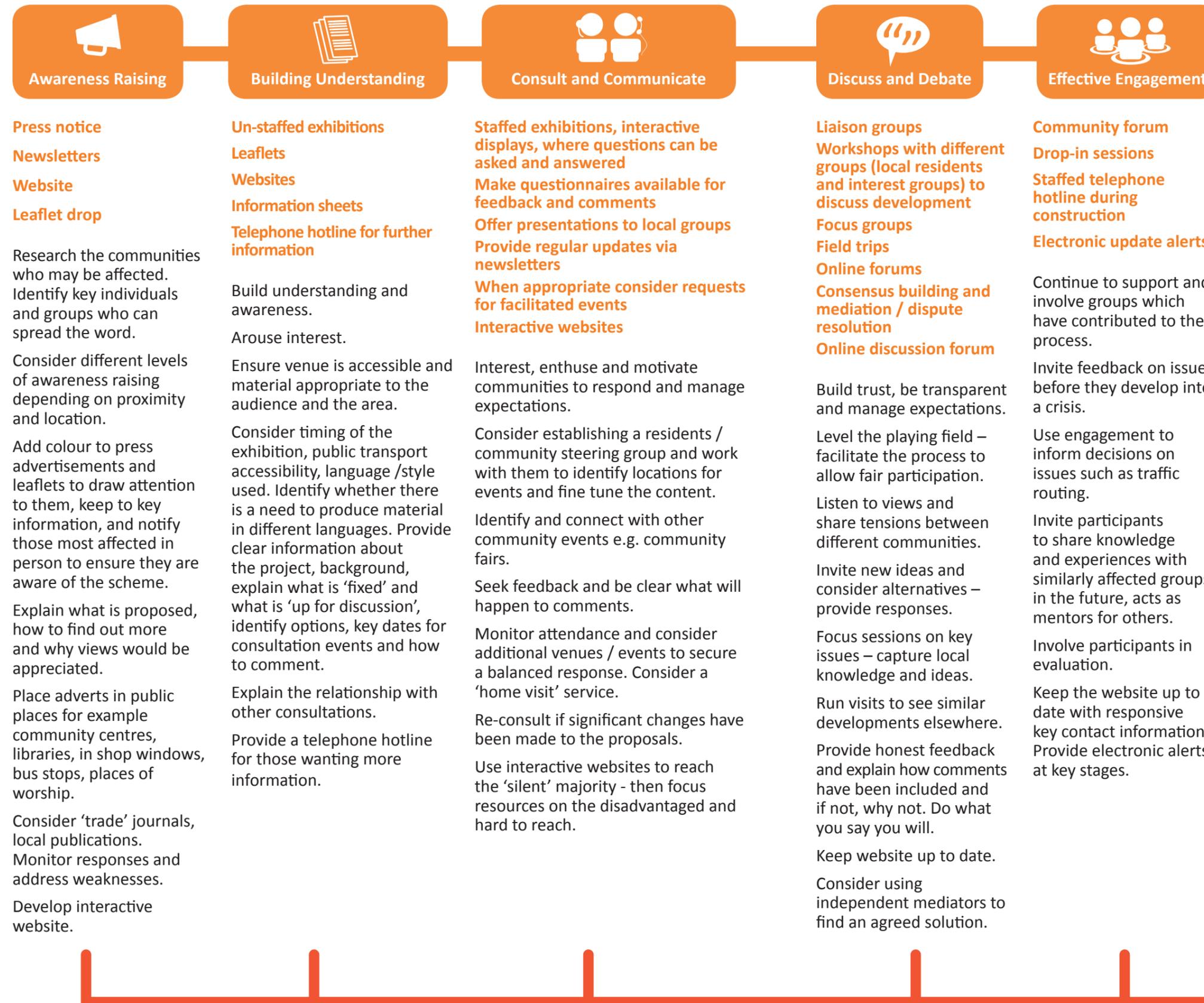
# Pre-application Stage

## Good Practice Approaches

Approaches

Good Practice Advice

Examples



### Examples

*"We aim to meet the challenges of 'consultation fatigue' and raise interest in the planning process by using local people to encourage their friends, neighbours and families."*  
 Mike Dando, Community Outreach Coordinator, Planning Aid England.

Planning Aid for London and Crossrail set up a Community Liaison Panel for residents of Whitechapel to help them be involved in each stage of planning and constructing Crossrail. In areas where English is not a first language, translation services have been offered to enable minority groups to engage.

EDF Energy held a series of workshops for school children and young adults to help to identify the issues and opportunities associated with a new nuclear power station in their area – the suggestions which resulted have influenced the project development.

*"The independent research helped to identify who was engaging in our consultation process in the early stages. By comparing these results with the profile of the population as a whole, we were able to identify groups that were missing and take specific steps to engage with them later in the process."*  
 Alex Kaufman, Head of Communications, EDF Energy New Nuclear Build.

*"Sharing plans with my neighbour resulted in some good ideas which saved money and improved the appearance."*  
 Member of the public.

- A 'Building Schools for the Future' consultation in Birmingham took place on a vacant site where a new school was to be located.
- A traffic calming consultation event was advertised on road signs at affected junctions.

# Submission and Decision Stage

## Good Practice Approaches

Approaches

Good Practice Advice

Examples



**Awareness Raising**

**Statutory requirements – either the local authority or developer will notify neighbours about a proposal. This notification could be by letter, site notice or a press notice.**

Letters should explain proposal clearly, why views are being sought at this stage and what will happen to comments. Consider drawing attention to the importance of the letter in different languages.

Letters can include reference to Planning Aid where independent advice can be obtained.

Explain relationship to other applications where relevant.

If they relate to an appeal, explain how the views expressed previously will be taken forward, and how people may get involved in the process.

Local Planning Authorities can alert residents to new applications in their area via their websites.

**Building Understanding**

**Application and all associated material made available for inspection. This can be electronic or hard copy.**

Ensure that written documents are easy to navigate and where necessary include a non technical summary.

Ensure plans displayed online are legible and it is possible to get an idea of scale – include key measurements in written form on plans.

Where there is a large volume of material break it down into bite sized chunks and link it electronically to avoid the need for those consulted to wade through huge documents to find the parts of interest.

Ensure paper copies are available for those without access to a computer and / or printer.

Ensure those without internet access can access and understand relevant documents – place in libraries and community centres and refer to Planning Aid.

**Consult and Communicate**

**Make plans and application documents available**

**For major schemes consider staffed exhibitions, where models may be available and interactive displays**

**Consider presentations to local groups**

**Make use of a website**

Ensure that material is appropriate and accessible.

Models are helpful to show a major project design and how it fits with its local area.

For large schemes consider 3D visualisations, interactive models etc.

Where changes are made consider the need to notify people of amendments and how they can comment.

Be clear about who is undertaking the consultation and why, and who comments should be made to.

**Discuss and Debate**

**Workshops with key groups**

**Community forums**

**Mediation**

**Online discussion forum**

Discuss with key parties / communities how conditions could be used to overcome concerns and how section 106 benefits could be used to address issues relating to the scheme for the benefits of those affected.

Consider using independent mediators to find an agreed solution.

**Effective Engagement**

**Community forums**

**Online discussion forums**

Keep community well informed of process, changes, decision and reasons.

If permission is granted, explain what conditions have been applied and what needs to be done to meet them. If permission is refused, explain why and what might happen next.

### Examples

Conflict between neighbours arose following refusal of planning consent for an extension which conflicted with planning policy. Due to the wording of a letter, the applicant thought refusal was also due to the objection from the neighbour and a long-standing friendship was destroyed.

Mediation may be a way of achieving an agreed solution where there is conflict between parties.

Kirkstall Forge (Leeds) is a Brownfield mixed use development of over 100,000sq metres. The developer works through the local liaison group to provide regular progress reports throughout the life of the application and subsequent amendments. Regular updates are also provided on the website and each year the developer attends the local community festival (attended by over 20,000 people) and has a stand to provide the latest details of the scheme and answer questions about the proposals.

A number of local planning authorities have a 'duty' planning officer available to help people understand planning applications and how to make their views known. In Birmingham there is also help for those who find it hard to use the online information system.

Many councils now include reference to Planning Aid on their neighbour notification letters as a source of independent advice on planning.

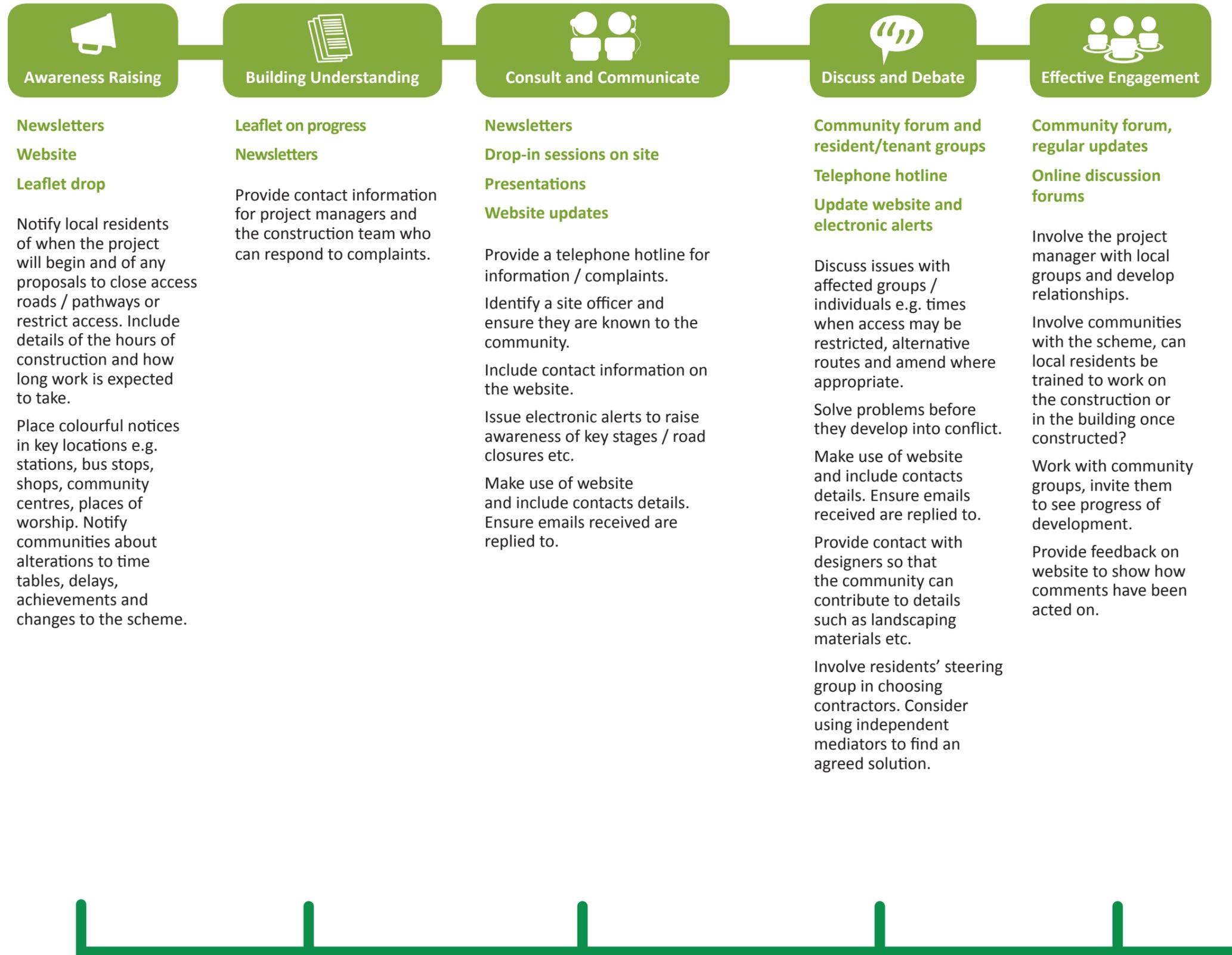
# Construction and Operation Stage

## Good Practice Approaches

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### Examples

Family Mosaic Housing Association held a competition to award 5 construction job apprenticeships to young people on an estate which was to be rebuilt as part of a regeneration scheme.

*"Lockleaze Voice is a Neighbourhood Planning Group open to all those living and working in the local community. Regular meetings are held at which the attendees can discuss and influence local concerns, particularly development schemes."*  
 Peter Whitehead, Community Outreach Coordinator, Planning Aid England.

The Docklands Light Railway employed a 'local ambassador' as part of the launch strategy for Langdon Park Station to promote the use of the station by liaising with the local community and distributing travel cards. This was so successful that local ambassadors will be appointed for future station schemes.

The Channel Tunnel Rail Link – High Speed project established a 24 hour helpline and appointed an independent Complaints Commissioner to oversee the project and report back to the local authorities.

The Bull Ring development in Birmingham included viewing areas and live web cameras where progress on construction could be followed.

# Delivering Good Practice

**Question:**  
 Consultation and engagement costs money, time and resources, so if it is not a statutory requirement why do it?

**Answer:**  
 Good engagement allows key issues to be identified, reducing risk and potential delays post submission for the developer whilst enabling the community to help shape a scheme at the point when changes are more easily made.  
 Consultation and engagement should be in proportion to the size and impact of the scheme.

**Example:**  
 Residents close to a proposal scheme delayed an application for 2 years as a result of a vocal campaign involving local councillors. Planning Aid met with the residents and found that whilst they did not object in principle they had concerns about access and felt ignored by the developer. The problem was subsequently overcome and consent granted. Pre-application consultation had not been undertaken, but could easily have helped avoid this situation.

**Question:**  
 When should consultation begin and what information should be provided?

**Answer:**  
 Start as early as possible – explain the processes and that early views are sought on key issues / options. Provide sufficient information to allow informed responses to be made. This will allow the early identification of key issues and potential ‘show stoppers’. It establishes trust and understanding.

**Example:**  
 When designing a flood alleviation scheme in Morpeth, the Environment Agency (National Environmental Assessment Service) approached the community early, were clear about what could be influenced, when, why and how, and kept local people regularly informed of progress. As a result they were able to dispel rumours, address local concerns and develop an option which had widespread support. This not only reduced the project risks, potential delays and complex land negotiations, but has resulted in a close working relationship with several interest groups which will bring longer term benefits.

**Question:**  
 Why carry on engaging with the community once the application has been submitted?

**Answer:**  
 The nature and type of engagement will change however, good neighbour relationships can avoid potential conflict during construction and operation. This can connect to the Considerate Contractor Scheme. Communities can also act as mentors to others and as ambassadors for a development, enhancing the reputation of the developer.

**Example:**  
 The Cambridge Waste Management Park has been proactive in hosting visits to the facilities on site, with public open days, conducted tours and fun events. The development has taken place in stages and these events have contributed to dispelling myths about waste facilities and with the added bonus of improving understanding of recycling and environmental issues.

**Question:**  
 How do you ensure that the pre-application consultation comments received reflect the diversity and mix of the local community, both geographically and from a social perspective – if not what action needs to be taken to rebalance this?

**Answer:**  
 The community is a kaleidoscope of different groups. Inclusive engagement ensures decisions taken reflect the wider community view, rather than a vociferous minority. It identifies key issues at a stage where they can be addressed rather than when it is too late to make changes.  
 Monitor comments received, involvement in groups and meetings in terms of geography, age, gender, ethnicity etc on feedback forms, through independent exit surveys, visual recording of visitors.  
 Reflect on how to fill any gaps to achieve a balanced community response— Planning Aid may be able to assist.

**Example:**  
 In response to a number of development and redevelopment opportunities and challenges in the Lockleaze area of Bristol, a Neighbourhood Planning Group was formed through Planning Aid. The group now organise regular open meetings, have an active web site, and engage effectively with development proposals.

# Delivering Good Practice

**Question:**  
How should comments received be reflected and what feedback should be given?

**Answer:**  
The supporting papers accompanying a planning application should show how the views of the community have been taken into account in developing a proposal. In the case of nationally significant infrastructure applications this will take the form of a Report of Community Involvement. A good engagement process will also provide an opportunity for feedback which should be linked to key stages set out at the outset of the process.

**Example:**  
Produce regular newsletters.  
Direct mail a personal response to those who have taken the trouble to make their views known and let them know what has changed and why.  
Planning Aid helped residents to produce a neighbourhood appraisal in Felling, Gateshead to support future regeneration. Residents presented their results to the Council and obtained feedback.

**Question:**  
How should consultation overload be avoided?

**Answer:**  
Those participating are giving up their time to contribute views on a development project. It is important to understand where and when efforts should be focused and to ensure responding to consultations does not become a full time occupation.  
Be innovative – connect with other events where possible. Explain the relationship with other consultations and what is different about each. Work constructively with others to ensure comments are passed on where relevant.

**Example:**  
In Herefordshire a consultation event was linked to a village Christmas Fair, with over 500 people visiting the exhibition.  
*“Joining up with the Christmas Fair meant that we reached a far wider audience.”*  
Sheena Terrace, Planning Aid England.

**Question:**  
Will creative and innovative approaches result in criticism?

**Answer:**  
Consultation should be meaningful, informative and enjoyable. People will not participate in something which is dull or uninteresting. A good event is one where people leave feeling that they have learned something of interest and their time has not been wasted – these people will continue to engage.  
What may work one time, may not with a different group, but do not be afraid to innovate and to listen and learn from feedback.

**Example:**  
A cost: benefit analysis exercise with young people helped decide the mix of play equipment which was to be included in a development.  
Planning Aid took local residents on an ‘eye spy’ tour of an area to help them identify local characteristics that could be reflected in a development scheme.

**Question:**  
How can I reach the hard to find, hard to engage, hard to motivate and hard to help?

**Answer:**  
These groups may engage if made aware of a project and its impact on them. There is a need to think through what might prevent them from participating e.g. time of day / location, culture etc and respond positively. Take advantage of existing local organisations, networks etc to disseminate information, use places visited by the wider community e.g. shopping centres, natural meeting places. Good decisions will be based upon an inclusive and balanced response. Advice on working with these groups can be provided by Planning Aid.

**Example:**  
Rochdale Metropolitan Borough Council used a public artist to engage Muslim Elders and other under-represented groups within a wider consultation process, to help identify common themes for inclusion within the public realm aspects of a scheme.

# Delivering Good Practice

**Question:**  
Can public meetings add value to consultation?

**Answer:**  
Public meetings are rarely an ideal forum to discuss and debate a development. However, if well handled they can be a good opportunity to listen to concerns and to provide information on a development proposal. Key things to consider include: using an independent facilitator who will ensure the smooth running of the event and equal participation for those who wish to speak, setting a clear agenda and rules of behaviour, inviting those 'opposing' and 'supporting' a development from the local community to speak at the start and end of the meeting, ensuring that those attending on behalf of the developer have sufficient seniority and knowledge to provide informed and authoritative responses.

**Example:**  
The Department of Energy and Climate Change, when consulting local communities on possible locations for new nuclear power stations, used an independent facilitator to help run the public meetings. Senior civil servants were also present and at Kirksanton, a community representative was invited to give the opening and closing comments. Effort was made to ensure people had their say and the meetings were generally felt to have been informative.

**Question:**  
Can I use the internet for consultation and if so, do I still need to do exhibitions and community events?

**Answer:**  
The internet is a useful tool to engage with busy people, and those who may not be able to get to exhibitions or events. The technology developed for web-based consultation can also be used at exhibitions and events e.g. fly-throughs and 3D visualisations. It can however, only reach those who have internet access. For the 'hard to reach' and those living in rural areas, access to the internet and / or broadband may be an issue. Schools, libraries and community centres often have web access where help is available to access the online consultation. Good monitoring of the website can help identify areas, groups who are under-represented in a consultation and allow other activities to be targeted to ensure inclusive engagement.

**Example:**  
A 3D virtual model was developed for the Ancoats Urban Village, Manchester. The model is accessible through the web so members of the public could see how Ancoats would look with the development proposals inserted. The use of gaming technology shows proposals in context and from every different angle. It also allows users to walk, drive or fly around the model without the need to purchase additional software. Being portable and transferable onto a big screen, the model is being used to assist consideration by councillors at planning committee and also with other consultation exercises with residents.



*"The RTPI fully supports the principles in this useful guide and is committed to better public engagement. Better engagement creates better developments and better places for everyone."*  
Ann Skippers, Past President of the RTPI.



*"Effective consultation of local people is often a rarity, and the greater the pressures for development, the greater the temptation to cut corners and ignore the public's views. However this guide will help everyone to raise their game and meet the challenges of effective and inclusive engagement."*  
Rhion Jones, Consultation Institute.



*"As an organisation committed to promoting and improving public participation in local and national decision-making across the world, IAP2 welcome the introduction of this helpful and insightful guide."*  
Nicky Leggatt, IAP2 UK Chair.



*"IEMA welcomes this guidance, as effective public engagement brings benefits to all concerned helping to identify the issues, explore solutions, improve proposals and support better decision making."*  
Jan Chmiel, CEO, IEMA.

*"Paying lip service to community consultation is no longer enough. Engaging with communities is crucial to capture local opinion, resolve issues and ultimately deliver quicker and better development schemes. We therefore welcome this Guide and the advice it contains."*  
Jeremy Handel, Director, Political Developments Ltd.

*"Raising public awareness and understanding of issues such as the need for new infrastructure to meet national and local needs, economic development, environmental constraints, climate change mitigation are key to securing balanced responses."*  
Jon Lord, Development Plans Manager, Tamworth Borough Council.