

10 Steps TO BETTER PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

The budget is the most important document a local government produces because it outlines how resources will be utilized to address a community's policy priorities. Citizen engagement is therefore foundational to a sufficient budgeting process, providing benefits including increased government legitimacy and reduced public cynicism.

1 Quality over quantity. More public engagement is not always better. Select suitable issues for engagement, set clear goals, and avoid overburdening the public with excessive information. By focusing on quality interactions, public finance initiatives can make the best use of resources and give citizens the best experience.

2 Build or bolster institutions to support public engagement. Collaborate with existing departments specializing in public information or communication, create internal facilitation teams, or seek external resources like universities, community foundations, or civic organizations.

3 Think of public engagement as an improved capacity for sense-making. Move beyond conventional engagement methods that collect individual opinions and preferences and instead focus on deliberative engagement processes that facilitate interaction, nuanced discussions, and exploration of trade-offs.

4 Help the public engage with complexity. Many of the issues that most inspire the passion of citizens are complex problems. Complex problems pose distinct challenges to democratic discourse, but embracing complexity and fostering dialogue can enhance public understanding, refine priorities, and promote collaborative actions to address complex challenges.

5 Push back against the politics of cynicism with the politics of co-creation. Public engagement can be designed to promote common understanding, and it can be used to jointly work toward solutions. Rather than focusing on what divides the community, focus on what unites it and begin public engagement efforts from a position of mutual understanding.

6 Revitalize the "responsibilities" that go along with "rights." Shift citizens' mindset from being individualistic consumers of public services to active participants in addressing community issues through coproduction and trade-offs. Ask how they would solve the problem instead of just what they want.

7 Develop robust strategies for dealing with bad actors. Design the engagement to minimize the potential for bad actors, like using deliberative engagement methods, small group discussions, and trained facilitators.

8 Understand the role of the "expert" and play it with care. The public is less likely than it once was to defer to the expertise of a local government's professional staff, so try adopting a facilitative approach that encourages citizen discovery rather than simply presenting facts.

9 Balance expert judgment and public engagement to find the solutions. Public engagement is not the same as direct democracy. Quality public engagement weaves together input from both experts and the public to help public officials reach wise decisions.

10 Make public engagement work for elected officials. Elected officials have a lot to gain from high-quality public engagement, but they also face risk when it goes wrong. Work with them to codesign public engagement so it manages risks and reduces the public officials' direct time investment.

