6 methods for online consultation

How to engage your community with local policy decisions

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Introduction

You want to engage your local community online, but where do you start? More local councils are experiencing the value of complementing their offline consultation efforts with the various online engagement methods. Nowadays, there are many ways to consult your citizens, ranging from in-depth offline deliberation to direct online voting. Every type of approach provides an opportunity to achieve your council's goals but also involves additional benefits and challenges.

The very first question to ask within your local council is: **what do you hope to achieve?** Do you want to increase trust and consensus-building in your community? Gauge support for a particular policy plan? Or co-create policy? Setting your priorities straight will help to decide which consultation method fits your council's needs and how to go about your online participation project.

This guide offers an overview of the different online citizen engagement methods and the conditions they suit best. It outlines the pros and cons of every approach and the implications of involving citizens in various stages of the policy process. Note that there is no golden rule for successful civic engagement: good projects will always require customization - also online. What works often varies per community, which means that every process, in some way, involves some trial-and-error. Remember that, in the end, it's the combined result of different engagement models, methods, and stages that lead to a strong democratic process.

Do you have any questions or remarks after reading this guide?
Feel free to reach out to us!

When do you consult your community?

Continuous citizen consultation is something many of us aim for, but few seem to accomplish. In reality, governments often don't have the resources to involve citizens at every step of the policy cycle, but it remains essential to keep this end-goal in mind.

The policy cycle can serve as an excellent framework to better understand how a combination of different participation instruments at different moments will contribute to structural and ongoing citizen engagement within your community.

At what phase in the policy process will you facilitate active citizen engagement?
That decision is in the hands of your local council, and it will impact the outcome of your participation project and, consequently, your policy decision. If consulting your citizens in multiple phases is unattainable, your council will have to make a conscious decision on the best possible moment. The following overview guides you in making this decision and helps to ensure it's in line with your participation goals.
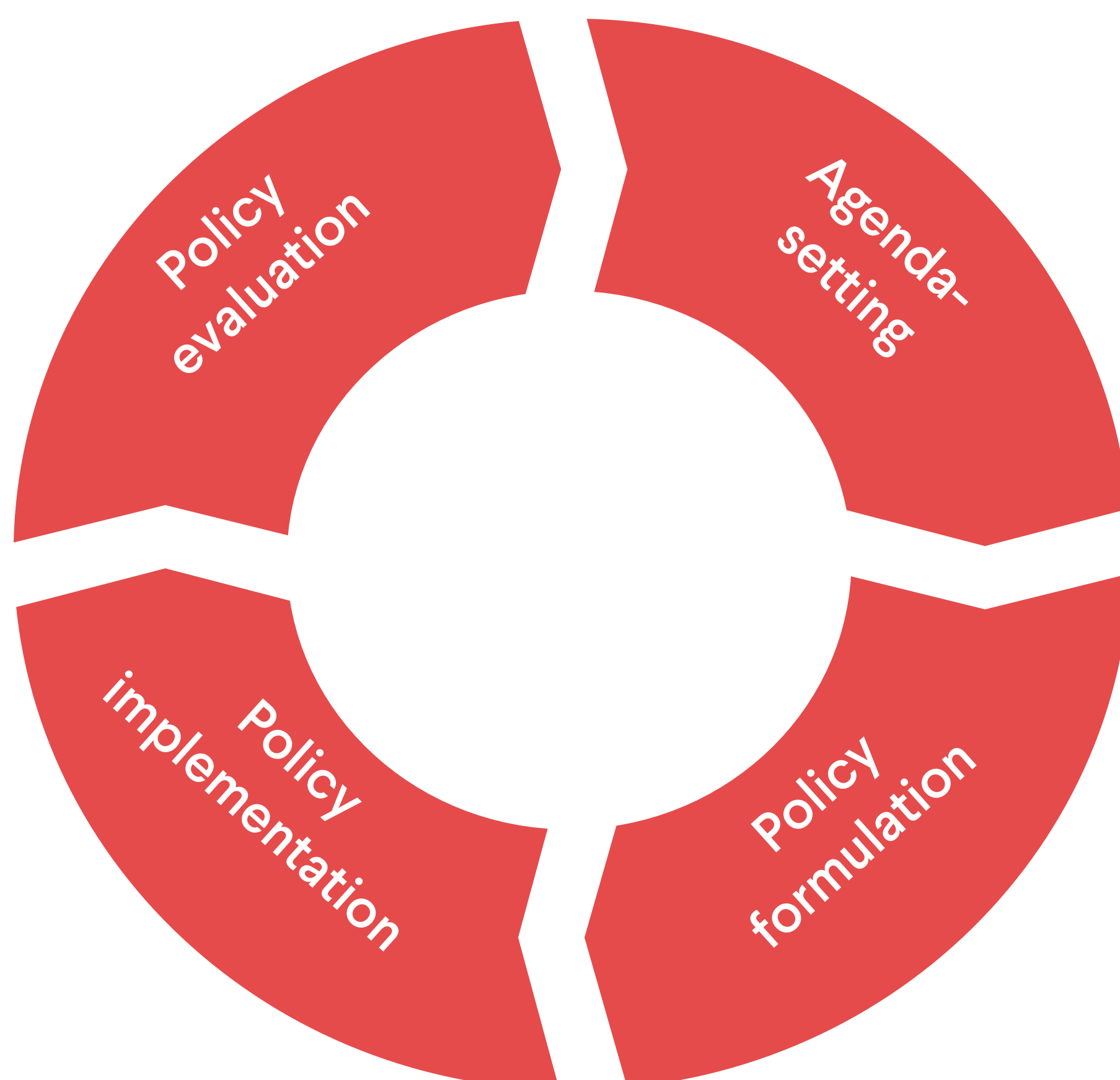
1. Agenda-setting:
Defining what issues to address first

This first phase of the policy cycle concerns the identification of problems and the prioritisation of policies within your city. While the political agenda may be set by local council members, listening directly to citizens can shed light on particular needs within the community that are often overlooked. Consulting citizens in this phase will facilitate the most bottom-up form of citizen participation, as the community will not only be involved from the very beginning but even decide where to start.

Helps to understand the needs within your community better. By involving citizens from the very first moment, you not only reduce the risk of surprises later on in the policy process, but you also make your citizens feel that they influence the policy-making and that you listen to their concerns. Engaging with citizens in this phase thus provides an excellent opportunity to rebuild trust with your community.

2. Policy formulation
Coming up with solutions

Policy formulation goes one step further and involves citizens in the development of an action plan. As a local council wyou want to get a bird's eye view on different perspectives, involve a variety of stakeholders and consider multi-layered opinions and arguments. This phase helps to **build support** for policy by engaging in dialogue, putting forward policy proposals as well as allowing citizens to contribute to solutions. This phase can require a time investment, but taking this time to engage with a variety of perspectives will make your final policy decision stronger.

Helps find solutions from the ground-up and tap into collective intelligence. Citizens have first hand knowledge of their issues and know what they need, so involving them at this stage ensures you find the best solutions i.e. if your city has a traffic problem, you might think you need to increase driving restrictions, but collective intelligence will tell you that what you actually need better public transportation.

3. Policy implementation
Setting up an action plan

During this phase, you involve the community to **translate the policy into a tangible action plan**. Citizens can think along on making the policy more concrete, e.g. how the available budget should be allocated to specific ideas and implementations. Even though the policy itself has already been formulated, participation in this phase still helps to gain policy support as you engage with your community into a dialogue about the plan, proposal or decision in question, i.e. you agreed that public transportation should improve but does that mean more busses or cheaper tickets?

+   **At this phase the policy action is getting more concrete**, which makes it rewarding for citizens to be involved. Their participation leads to tangible results of which they are likely to be reminded in their daily lives as it concerns local policy implementation.

4. Policy evaluation
Measuring the impact on the community

At the end of the policy cycle, you can involve citizens in evaluating the progress of the policy implementation, and solicit opinions on how these implementations affected them. While this is an often-forgotten stage, asking the community for input in evaluating policy can help to identify both problems and improvements, and can result in starting a new policy cycle together.

+   **Participation in this stage allows you to assess policy decisions from a citizen's perspective.** This, in turn, can increase your council's transparency and accountability, and build trust within the community, as well as ensure that budgets are allocated adequately.

BUT... Before your local council asks citizens to set the agenda or contribute to policy formulation, ensure that there's **sufficient political will and support** within your council and the entire administration. If you launch a consultation process but can't deliver on your promise, this can have the opposite effect of what you're hoping to achieve, and harm the trust between council and community.

So, at which stage do you start with engaging your local community?

While more local governments have started with implementing online citizen participation, this often only concerns the final stages of the policy cycle. Once the political agenda and policy proposals are formulated, citizens can voice their opinions within these boundaries.

While consulting citizens later in the process is better than not consulting them at all, it has been proven that consultation brings more value at the beginning of the policy process. Involving your community in agenda-setting allows citizens to pinpoint the main issues. Listening to them during this phase can also inspire them to come back and participate later on in the cycle, for instance, by finding or implementing solutions to the issues they brought to the table. Therefore, involving citizens early on should be a priority for your local council; it can prevent problems from popping up in the final stages and helps to increase legitimacy and trust! Multiple online methods can be implemented to engage your community early on in the policy cycle.

Tiago C. Peixoto, Senior Public Researcher at the World Bank:
"If governments bring citizens early on into the process, this can substantially increase the trust that people have in the process and, consequently, in the systems."

What methods are there?

At all four stages of the policy cycle, you can tap into a variety of engagement methods, even though some work better in certain phases than others. How do you know which approach suits your participation project best? It's often a matter of looking at your ambitions, resources, and the policy cycle phase in which you want the consultation to take place. Besides, it's also vital to consider the degree of control you're willing to assign to your community.

Below, we'll talk you through **6 commonly used methods** to consult your citizens, and share some success cases to spark your inspiration. While some methods differ from one another, others are closely aligned, and in some cases, projects can even benefit from multiple methods. It's all about finding the right mix to engage your local community to the fullest extent possible!
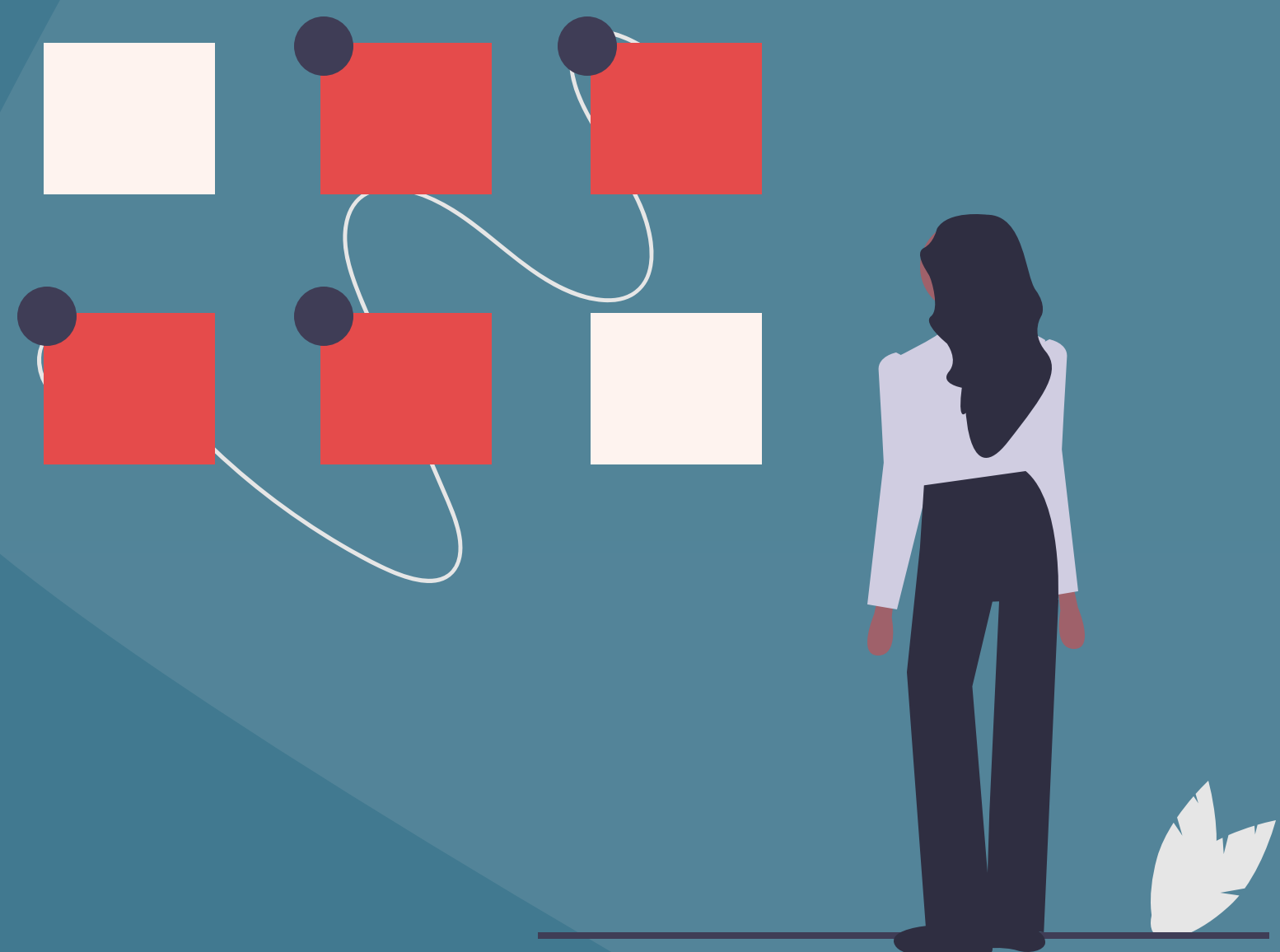
1. Polling

Does your local council have a specific question in mind to ask the community? A poll is a quick and easy way to gauge your citizens' ideas on a particular topic. By involving your community with a clear-cut, closed-ended question, your council can gain **straightforward insights** into your citizens' opinions.

In case you decide to ask participants to fill out personal information, an analysis of this data could also unveil whether the decision might differ between demographic groups and whether the vote is representative of the wider community. Carefully consider within your council if collecting specific data will enrich the decision-making process or not. To ensure the participants' privacy rights, you should aim to limit the request for data to what is relevant to the project.

Consider this method if:

- Your council has **a specific question** in mind to consult with the community and is looking for a low-effort way to hear citizens' viewpoints;
- This question can be asked **neutrally,** in order to not influence citizens' answers;
- You can **explain to citizens beforehand** how the result are taken into account, e.g. whether it will fully dictate the decision making or simply guide it;
- You're looking for a quick **sense of direction** and insights into the broader public opinion.

Pros and cons

+ Relatively **low-effort** and provides the opportunity to get a clear answer often from a large number of people within your community.

− A poll **doesn't allow for any creativity, nuances or dialogue** and can hereby in extreme cases contribute to polarization in the community.

Case study
Kortrijk, Belgium

The city of Kortrijk launched an online poll on their participation platform to consult its citizens on the question if there should be monthly car-free Sunday in the center. The vote was carried out over a week, and was open to all inhabitants over 16. The city launched a communication campaign to ensure all voters received clear information about the implications of the vote. It was also decided that in order for the result to be binding, at least 2,000 citizens would have to participate, and thee results would have to hbe 2.5 percentage points apart.

Result: In only one week almost **10,000 citizens cast their online vote** of which 52% was against a monthly car-free Sunday. Out of all citizens with voting rights 16% participated in this poll and hereby informed the cities decision.

2. Scenario Testing

Let's say your council wants to remodel a local square and has conceived five proposals. All of them can be financed and fit the main criteria, but which one is best? This case provides an excellent opportunity to involve your community and **ask citizens which proposal they prefer**.

Via scenario-testing, you present a couple of clear proposals to your citizens while providing information about the considerations and how these proposals came about. Citizens can often engage in an (online) discussion and eventually voice their final opinions through a vote. As several scenarios are put 'to the test', this method makes it possible to improve or revise certain situations and put decisions on the table for discussion. As a local council, **it's crucial to communicate the relevant differences between the proposals**, so that citizens can make an informed decision with their final vote.

Consider this method if:

- Your council has to **select one out of many** proposals for specific policy implementation;
- Multiple, **equally developed plans are on the table,** and the local council would accept any of them if citizens chose them;
- There's a **clear outline of the pros and cons** of each proposal, which you are willing to share with the community;
- You want citizens to ask questions and **get more detailed information** on different options.

Pros and cons

+ **Involves citizens with tangible solutions** and gives them a clear overview of potential options to make their decision.

– It can be **difficult to communicate all the nuances** per scenario as the overall decision is per definition multi-layered and may require the government to give its citizens enough background knowledge, which could make it a higher-effort endeavour.

Case study
Marche-en-Famenne, Belgium

Marche-en-Famenne, a small town in the Belgian province of Luxembourg, launched an online participation platform to involve citizens in the future of the "Place aux Foires" square. The city asked citizens to choose their two preferred architectural plans out of four possible options. The city invited citizens to express their views on the aesthetic quality, creativity, and originality of the four submitted drafts.

Result: Over **10% of the total population registered** on the digital platform and voted a total of 2,342 times, as well as leaving 400 comments. The winning proposal received 604 votes and was, after a final analysis on the city's criteria (quality of durability, maintenance, rate of fees and cost of the project), adopted by the local government.

3. Surveys

Surveys enable cities to engage their citizens on specific topics in a more comprehensive way than voting. It, for instance, allows for proposal ranking, multiple-choice questions or demographic questions. Combined with voting, a questionnaire is useful in **understanding how citizens' priorities vary** according to their location, age or income.

Surveys can provide your council with more precise and individual results compared to other engagement methods. However, this method isn't really collaborative - both in the experience for the citizen as well as for actual co-creation of policy. When establishing a survey, always consider the importance of not asking biased questions to ensure inclusion and decrease the potential drop-out rate. If you want to hear your citizens' voices, but in a more controlled and closed environment, it's good to start with a survey.

Consider this method if:

- Your council wants to **gain deeper insights** into what citizens think and why;
- There is **no easier way** to obtain these results (e.g. a vote);
- The **data is not already available** (has this research already been done in the past?);
- The collected **information is necessary** for informed and justified decision-making.

Pros and cons

➕ Surveys provide an **easy way** to understand how citizens perceive a particular policy issue and allow more nuance and argumentation compared to polls.

➖ It has a **low engagement level,** as it does not allow dialogue and is merely used for one-way communication about clear-cut questions.

Case study
Care Quality Commission, United Kingdom

The Care Quality Commission (CQC) aims to consult the community and shares their findings with the industry to improve the offered health and social care in England. With regards to the topic at hand, CQC consciously chose to ask relatively detailed personal information at the sign-up of the online participation platform, i.e. including questions on job positions as well as disabilities. To safeguard their privacy, users could always choose not to answer these questions.

Result: Since the launch of the platform a little over a year ago, **+3.500 people** have made an account on CQC's participation platform. Over 40 participation projects were launched, of which a vast majority tried to gain insights and a better understanding of some aspects in the sector.

4. Participatory Budgets

Participatory budgets are a powerful tool for participation, as they directly **involve citizens in the process of allocating municipal budgets.** Citizens choose projects they think the city should invest in, using money from a specially allocated fund. Some cities ask citizens to divide the budget between several scenarios; others start with an ideation process, followed by an analysis and budgeting phase. Participatory budgets can herein thus be used in combination with other methods.

This type of engagement is very **educational** as it allows citizens to project themselves into the budget exercise and to understand its constraints. For instance, if they decide to allocate 60% of their budget to a specific project, they then agree to reduce fundings for other projects. Extensive participatory budgeting exercises help strengthen the legitimacy of decision-making and increase citizens' support for public policies. Small-scale participatory budget processes, such as neighbourhood budgets, can be more natural to start with and might not provide these educational insights, but will still allow citizens to influence the budget allocations directly.

Consider this method if:

- Your council wants to **raise citizens' awareness** of municipal management processes;
- The **conditions for the implementation** of the participatory budget are clear;
- The projects proposed by the city are feasible, and **there is a budget available** to allocate;
- The council seeks to **prioritize several projects** and allocate a budget, rather than choosing a single plan out of several options.

Pros and cons

＋ Involves decisions about spending and devolving real power – and **lead to clear, tangible results**. Can be a very public process, which conveys legitimacy beyond the immediate participants. By being exposed to the tradeoffs surrounding financial decisions, participants can acquire a deeper understanding of the work of government and increase support for the policy decisions that follow.

– It can create **unrealistic expectations** amongst participants if managed badly. Moreover, Participatory budgets don't work well when only super restricted power or budgets can be handed over to citizens.

Case study
Rueil, France

After several successful consultation initiatives, the city of Rueil launched a project combining idea collection and participatory budgeting. In the first phase, citizens of Rueil were invited to submit innovative projects for the city and to vote for the projects they wanted to support. The proposals had to meet three criteria: serve the general interest, fall within the scope of municipal competences and cost less than €40,000. In a second phase, the municipality proposed to the citizens to distribute €200,000 between the selected projects.

Results: During the first phase of the project, more than **2400 citizens voted** for the **156 projects proposed**. The projects fell into 4 categories: development of public spaces, green spaces, leisure and miscellaneous. At the end of the budget distribution phase, **8 projects were selected** and are now in the implementation phase.

5. Idea collection

The ideation process is a way for the public sector to t**ap into the collective intelligence of your community and collect new ideas regarding predefined topics**. This method allows your community to contribute to policy formulation or development through participation. Idea-collection is a more complicated process than a simple vote and requires greater involvement from citizens. As a result, participation rates tend to be lower than for polling, but can also lead to qualitative contributions and the emergence of new solutions.

Once the ideation phase is complete, cities often go through an analysis phase and a voting phase. After having collected the ideas, the administration processes them and submits them to a citizen vote. Cities need to structure the debate and provide clarity about the criteria that are used to select ideas.

Consider this method if:

- Your council wants to find **new solutions** and investigate the community's priorities;
- The **quality** of contributions matters more than the quantity;
- There is a clear **plan in place to process and select the ideas**, and cities are comfortable communicating this plan to their citizens;
- Your council **can provide feedback** on the submitted ideas and is willing to take the contributions seriously.

Pros and cons

+ **Tap into the collective intelligence and creativity of your community**. Citizens may surprise and provide new solutions to tackle the issue at hand. Moreover, a council can gain insights into the leading trends within your community by clustering the input. You can deduce learnings from the recurring themes or solutions put forward by your citizens. The automated reporting features from the CitizenLab platform help cities gain insights into the main trends within the larger amounts of citizen input.

− It **requires time and resources to analyse all the ideas**, especially if there are thousands. Tools might support this analysis, but it always requires particular expertise or resources. Citizens took the time to share their ideas with you, so you need to take the time to share your feedback with them, which requires internal commitment. It's not feasible to respond to each idea individually, you still have the responsibility to communicate clearly why certain (popular) ideas are not picked up.

Case study
Leuven, Belgium

Leuven launched an online participation process that allowed citizens to share their ideas for the city's strategic muliti-annual plan 2020-2025, as well as vote for other suggestions from within their community. The platform was kickstarted with the help of a significant communications campaign to ensure citizens were aware of its existence and got the opportunity to participate.

Result: Over **3,000 citizens** registered on the platform and shared **2,331 unique ideas**, which received 31,492 votes in total. There was a lot of support within the community, as 91% of all votes were in favour of the ideas rather than opposed. The city managed to give an **official response to 96%** of the citizen ideas and was able to identify key five domains amongst all suggestions. These insights and the specific ideas informed the city's strategic planning for 2020-2025. Months after the actual approval of the plan, the platform is still used to give tailored feedback to all the citizens that participated.

6. Citizen Proposals

Citizen-led change is on the rise. A clear example of this is the popularity of citizen initiatives, a **continuous form of bottom-up participation** that doesn't fit within the constraints of a specific timeline or policy cycle. By collecting signatures or votes, citizens get the agency to set the political agenda at any time, on any topic.

Many countries have legislation aimed at national citizen initiatives, e.g. in the United Kingdom 10,000 signatures are required for a proposal to receive a response from the government and 100,000 for a petition to be considered for debate by Parliament. Local governments can also facilitate these processes on a smaller and more tangible scale in their community via proposals; councils set clear guidelines and give successful initiatives a platform to influence policy. It's important to set a certain threshold of signatures or votes in advance. Only when this is surpassed, the proposal receives an official response from the city.

Consider this method if:

- Your council aims to **build continuous dialogue** within the community, outside of predefined policy cycles, timelines or project frameworks;
- You want to **gain insight** into what citizens find important;
- There are **clear eligibility criteria** in place that manage expectations and define which initiatives require action

Pros and cons

╋ Empowers your community to voice issues that are close to their hearts and start a structured debate, while governments still are able to control the guidelines and expectations via clear communication. It gives citizens an easy way to hand in proposals and ideas in a continuous, controlled and transparent way.

━ If your council is unfamiliar with handling citizen initiatives, it may require some time to get used to. Before facilitating this type of participation, it's essential to clarify internal and external guidelines on the exact processes to ensure you can deliver on your promises.

Case study
Linz, Austria

Linz actively empowered its citizens by enabling them to launch their own proposals on the city's online participation platform. The mayor pro actively supported the adaptation of this method, which ensures there is strong political support behind the realization of citizen ideas. The city committed to providing an official response to proposals if they reached the threshold of 30 votes within 60 days. Once this threshold is reached, citizens received an email to make an appointment to talk about their ideas. In the case of complicated plans, i.e. traffic situations, experts are invited to attend this meeting as well or explain their argumentation on the digital platform directly.

Result: Within a couple of months, **24 unique initiatives** were launched by citizens. At this moment in time, nine initiatives have reached the set threshold. They have all received a response from the city, and **Linz is about to realize it's very first initiative**: new benches for the city center, designed by a citizen.

Conclusion

How will you start engaging your local community? And in which phase of the policy cycle? Despite the general recommendations in our overview, **participation should never have a "one-size-fits-all" approach**.

Participation projects with a lower level of engagement or that only involve citizens at the end of the policy cycle can be stepping stones to get used to these processes within your local council. With this, they offer real value too. However, if your council's goal is to rebuild trust, your need to dare and move towards higher levels of engagement. **Your goal should be to involve citizens earlier in the policy cycle and co-create policy through deliberation.**

Extensive engagement may not always be feasible, so it is up to your council to establish a proper engagement mix in your local democracy. There eventually are multiple approaches to involve your citizens and to complement your representative democracy via online methods. These forms are anything but mutually exclusive, as a combination of them will lead to more complete democratic processes, on all distinct levels:

- **Deliberative democracy**

The popularity of deliberative democracy has drastically increased in recent years. This surge is partly explained by a few successful breakthroughs in difficult policy areas, as a result of Citizens' Assemblies. Deliberation invites representatives of the community to have an informed **debate** and, through discussion and dialogue, find a consensus and formulate policy recommendations. It can bring **depth** to the policy process, as it requires real involvement from citizens to consider policy plans.

- **Direct democracy**

Municipalities seem to have a turbulent relationship with direct democracy forms, such as referendums, as it gives citizens the decision-making power to **vote** on policy proposals. It often receives criticism for not bringing the necessary depth to inform proper decisions, especially in polarized debates. But direct democracy offers another critical element: **breadth**. Rather than involving a sample of the community, everyone gets to voice their opinion.

- **Participatory democracy**

More citizens are calling to not only be part of the discussion or vote on proposals but also to contribute and be part of the solution. Participatory democracy is all about empowering citizens to take action by involving them in crucial moments of the policy cycle, and by sharing ideas to co-create policy decisions. Whether it's through a citizen initiative or a participatory budget, this form gives your community the power to not only contribute to the political agenda but truly shape it.

Steven Boucher, is the founder of Dreamocracy, a think-and-do tank: "Once implemented, citizen consultation is a process that can only move forward and there's no turning back once the movement is launched. Take the city of Paris: citizen consultation started on a small scale with open forums and suggestion boxes, before moving on larger and more meaningful participation processes such as participatory budgets and the funding of crowd-sourced citizen projects."

Want to engage your community online? We're here to help!

CitizenLab has worked with **+120 local governments** on online citizen engagement and launching a participation platform. **The platform offers a mix of participation methods**, allowing you to customize and utilize the toolbox differently per project. We're happy to walk you through all the functionalities of the platform and discuss how it could support your councils' participation ambitions.

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