

A Quality of Life Code of Practice

For effective community consultation
and engagement in development,
planning and design

Beta version

Be
accountable

Be
effective

Be
transparent

Be
inclusive

Be
timely

Support mutual
learning

Demonstrate
impact

Publish
feedback

Quality of Life Foundation, 2023

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01 Introduction

Community consultation and engagement are both important parts of the development planning process. This is in the context of major applications, design codes, estate regeneration, infrastructure projects, local plans, master planning, neighbourhood plans or town centre regeneration projects.

Engagement takes shape in a range of ways, including face-to-face meetings, workshops, digital platforms, household newsletters and surveys throughout the lifecycle of a project.

However, ‘consultation’ and ‘engagement’ differ in their objectives, scope and level of involvement with local communities during the design development process or with project teams.

Community consultation typically involves seeking feedback from communities on planning proposals or projects, often on early concepts or on partially formed proposals.

Community engagement, on the other hand, is a broader and more collaborative process that involves working with communities throughout the planning and design process. This can be from brief refinement and idea generation to project implementation in some cases.

We believe there are shared ethical standards that support effective consultation and engagement processes for all involved. We have brought those practice standards together in our Code of Practice.

The importance of community consultation and engagement is acknowledged in planning policy across the four nations:

England: National Planning Policy Framework | 2023 update

"...Good design is a key aspect of sustainable development, creates better places in which to live and work and helps make development acceptable to communities. Being clear about design expectations, and how these will be tested, is essential for achieving this. So too is effective engagement between applicants, communities, local planning authorities and other interests throughout the process."

"...Applicants should work closely with those affected by their proposals to evolve designs that take account of the views of the community. Applications that can demonstrate early, proactive and effective engagement with the community should be looked on more favourably than those that cannot."

Wales: Development Plan Manual | 2020

The Development Plan Manual makes clear that, when preparing the local development plan, local planning authorities are expected to involve the right people at the right time, seeking greater consensus and strengthening community involvement in the plan making process.

Scotland: National Planning Framework | 2023

National Planning Framework 4 contains a cross-cutting outcome for 'a fair and inclusive planning system'. This includes the expectation that everyone involved in planning takes steps to ensure that a wide range of people are involved in shaping their future places. Opportunities for engagement in development planning 'should be early, collaborative, meaningful and proportionate'.

Northern Ireland: Planning Engagement Partnership Review | 2022

The Planning Engagement Partnership recommended the use of a Pre-Application Discussion with a list of "key community stakeholders and interest groups" to tailor engagement, and for any pre-application community consultation report to "contain feedback on how issues raised by the community have either influenced the proposed development or why they have not."

02 Why a Code of Practice?

At the Quality of Life Foundation, we know that having a decent, affordable home in a safe, well-designed neighbourhood is the foundation for a happy and healthy life. So we are committed to improving people's quality of life by changing the way the development industry and public agencies design, deliver and care for homes and neighbourhoods. Together with the communities in surrounding neighbourhoods, we must design and build homes and places that support healthy lives, wellbeing and resilience to climate change and climate related extreme events.

Every project and team that measures up well against this Code of Practice will have developed a good understanding of the distinct needs and wants of the place and its communities. They will then be empowered to affect change in a far more customised manner, achieving higher sustainable development outcomes and community wellbeing and resilience than otherwise would be possible through their work.

Community Consultation for Quality of Life

From 2021-23, the UK Research and Innovation (UKRI)-funded Community Consultation for Quality of Life project gathered evidence from the four nations of the UK to establish what good community consultation and engagement looks like. It is a collaboration with the universities of Reading, Edinburgh, Cardiff and Ulster, where the project has tested different ways of doing community engagement well – using digital mapping, urban rooms and community outreach. The project gathered data and engaged in conversation about what does and doesn't work, what challenges exist and what can be done to overcome them.

This Code of Practice is based on this research and best practice in the field, and, when finalised, will have been scrutinised and improved by peer review and learnings from focus group conversations. Together, with you, we aim to forge pathways to mainstreaming existing best practice across the industry.

03 Barriers to more effective consultation and engagement

There are many examples of excellent development projects in the UK, which advance the practice of more inclusive and effective community engagement. Many explore ways of co-designing plans and proposals with communities and with other stakeholders. They achieve this through collaboration and partnership working with local communities towards more sustainable places, often putting health and wellbeing for people and the planet at the core of their ambition and from the outset.

However, mainstream development industry practice is, at best, varied and is held back by an absence of a proper statutory framework and regulations clarifying rights and obligations, codes of practice, benchmarks, monitoring, redress and evaluation procedures.

Public sector

Those that work in the public sector can refer to the four '[Gunning Principles of Fair and Lawful Consultation](#)' and the '[Seven Principles of Public Life, the Nolan Principles](#)', which operate as legal and ethical standards. These public sector standards perhaps do not often enough translate into inclusive and effective community engagement practice, but they do exist, and can be expected to be met and scrutinised if necessary.

The Consultation Institute's Consultation Charter (2017) provides a set of cross-sector and cross-industry best practice principles which offer helpful perspectives from the consultees' and consultors' standpoint on each of its seven core values.

Private and third sector

The private and voluntary sector in the wider development industry lack a recognised Community Consultation and Engagement Code of Practice altogether. A recognised Code of Practice, raising and supporting the professional engagement practice for inclusive and effective consultation and community engagement processes, does not exist in the mainstream yet.

Commitments in organisations, contracts and shareholders may or may not be supportive of inclusive and effective community engagement or deliver projects that are shaped by local community and neighbourhood needs and wants. Briefs, programmes and contracts for projects rarely specify services and outcomes such as inclusive and effective community engagement processes, improved health, wellbeing and resilience outcomes for current and future populations.

Fundamentally, in the current state of the system, the effectiveness of consultation and engagement is highly dependent on the skills, knowledge and willingness of those commissioning, leading and facilitating community engagement processes.



04 The opportunities

The benefits of effective consultation and engagement are far-reaching. Having a sense of control over decisions affecting your environment is a key cause of wellbeing – a way of empowering individuals and communities to shape the changes they want to see in the places where they live, work and socialise.

Consultation and community engagement are an opportunity for everyone involved to influence development for the better – to promote social, environmental, economic and cultural values, and to promote intergenerational justice.

By proactively working with people's needs and wants, community wellbeing and a place's sustainable development are supported more effectively and will evolve to reflect this. And in the context of a changing climate, engagement is a key driver of social equity; generally, those who are disproportionately affected often have less influence, something that consultation and engagement done well can change.

For residents:

Having a sense of influence over decisions affecting your environment is a key determinant of wellbeing – a way of energising individuals and communities to shape the changes they want to see in the places where they live, work and socialise.

For developers and professionals:

But the benefits of better consultation and engagement are far-reaching. Crudely, planning applications that have gone through a process of meaningful engagement are more likely to gain assent. Community consultation and engagement done well offers the opportunity for this to be more efficient and effective than ever before, through the professionalisation of the engagement industry, together with traditional face-to-face activities and improvements in digital engagement.

For us all:

And in the context of a changing climate, engagement is a key driver of social equity; generally, those who are disproportionately affected have less influence, something that consultation and engagement done well can change.

Community consultation and engagement done well offers the opportunity for this process to be efficient and effective, through the needed cultural shift in the development industry at large and supported by professional standards. Collaborating, engaging positively, genuinely and continuously with the broadest range of local communities and other key stakeholders is central to a good process and outcomes.

Digital, face-to-face and hybrid engagement

There will be crossovers and distinctions in digital, face-to-face and hybrid engagement in terms of their context, purpose, scale and format. To be effective, the presumption in the Code of Practice is that public engagement should have a digital presence because this type of engagement provides reach, transparency and long-term public access to data, which are essential for good practice. However, digital, face-to-face and hybrid engagement each has its important place throughout the stages of the process: brief, design, build, use and post-occupancy.

Good or excellent practice?

The CCQOL evidence identified a need to differentiate between community consultation done well (good) and community engagement done in a systematic and participatory way (excellent).

Ultimately, we want to support practitioners in the industry and community engagement to advance pathways from the often rather transactional nature of community consultation to more diverse dialogues leading to more sustainable and equitable places and lives.



05 The Code of Practice:

You can sign up to the Code of Practice [here](#). Please enter your details where prompted at the end of this section.

We, as a key stakeholder, commissioning body or service provider, commit to advancing inclusive and effective community consultation and engagement in our place-based projects. We understand that working collaboratively with local communities and other key stakeholders is vital to the short-, medium- and long-term wellbeing of those places, its nature, its economy and its people. To uphold this ambition, we adhere to its eight standards:

1. **BE ACCOUNTABLE**
2. **BE EFFECTIVE**
3. **BE TRANSPARENT**
4. **BE INCLUSIVE**
5. **BE TIMELY**
6. **SUPPORT MUTUAL LEARNING**
7. **DEMONSTRATE IMPACT**
8. **PUBLISH FEEDBACK**

1. Be accountable

We will:

- Hold ourselves accountable for the impacts of our developments, working to minimise negative consequences and boost benefits for the wider community
- Prioritise net zero and sustainable practices and outcomes, minimising harm to nature, economic and social structures. By doing so, we will support people's quality of life and their abilities to adapt and respond well to climate change and climate related extreme events
- Strive to create places that enhance the quality of life for current and future communities

2. Be effective

As good practice we will:

- Set out the scope and limitations of consultation and engagement processes early and proactively
- Clearly share the purpose of activities, how people can influence decisions, and ensure feedback
- Gather feedback to shape development and design outcomes

As excellent practice we will:

- Tap into insights and connect with people to empower them to co-create desired outcomes
- Involve people with the built environment project and co-produce a strategy that's meaningful and impactful

3. Be transparent

As a basic we will:

- Openly publish and share information about our project goals and ambitions, approaches and research, and engagement programmes to ensure accessibility and honesty
- Share the learnings from our conversations with local communities, and how those conversations have shaped the project, whilst ensuring data protection

4. Be inclusive

As good practice we will:

- Actively seek to have conversations with a diverse range of local residents and other key stakeholders, valuing different perspectives and supporting fair participation practice
- Respect local customs and traditions
- Meet people where they are to reach a wider range of people, taking information, methods, and tools to them
- Ensure that voices remain heard and valued, and that the places we build help positive social connections with existing communities
- Use language tools for translations and account for lower reading abilities, confidence, and people's communication needs
- Create a strategy identifying key groups and channels to reach people so they have the ability to engage
- Use evidence to understand the demographic make-up of the place and ensure the process includes a mix of people. Publish statistics on inclusion and the numbers engaging

As excellent practice we will:

- Upskill people who represent different groups impacted by a development to assist with our outreach and engagement
- Enable people to experiment with a wide variety of formats as appropriate for different people
- Offer a mix of quantitative and qualitative options to start conversations and capture insights
- Make sure we reach beyond community 'gatekeepers' as they're not always representative of groups and individuals
- Provide well-presented, simple information with options that enable people to interact, relate and comment in ways that suit them
- Develop urban/ rural rooms and mobile consultation formats to facilitate community relationships. This includes easily accessible physical locations to set up information and outreach to activities



5. Be timely

As good practice we will:

- Actively seek conversations with communities, gather feedback and provide recommendations at times in the project lifecycle when those conversations can shape forthcoming decisions
- Give adequate time for people to voice their opinions
- Make sure a wide range of people are included meaningfully in discussions during the process. These need to be throughout the process so it's always timely and continuously happening

As excellent practice we will:

- Give people time to understand information, reflect, debate and see the impact of their involvement
- Actively listen to build trust early and so that people feel they are genuinely involved, listened to and valued

6. Support mutual learning

As good practice we will:

- Maintain long-term, two-way and ongoing positive conversations with communities to build trust, balance the power relationship between consultant and consultee, and maintain established networks
- Support mutual learning and partnership working between project teams and communities throughout the project lifecycle
- Find the right balance between voluntary participation and incentives. This includes compensating people for time spent in some form and/ or making it clear how they will benefit from sharing their views
- Provide clear and direct routes to encourage people to get involved
- Offer clear information that can be understood to make educated choices
- Ensure engagement is both online and face-to-face to reach as many different people and communities as possible
- Build on existing community social media and pay for advertising

As excellent practice we will:

- Unearth and build the capacity in communities so skills and knowledge go hand-in-hand with experiences
- Use the ladder of participation model with tangible activities that are local to a place/ the community
- Build long term relationships to share information and encourage participation

7. Demonstrate impact

As good practice we will:

- Work in partnership with local communities on refining project briefs, altering and improving plans and places
- Explain openly when ideas and concerns had an impact on decisions and when we could not or not fully deliver on them
- Widely shared clear feedback on the impact that the community had on a project and why

As excellent practice we will:

- Research the local demographics and best ways to benchmark to ensure we're reaching people, reviewing our impact, and tailoring our tools

8. Publish feedback

As good practice we will:

- Publish information on the process of engagement and the progress of projects at key stages, regularly and proactively. This includes providing a clear indication of our approach, the number of participants and key demographics to show who has taken part
- Provide digital and traditional channels to receive feedback on proposals provided by residents and other stakeholders
- With the feedback, include measures and tangible actions to illustrate how contributions will inform decisions and timescales

As excellent practice we will:

- Encourage that digital information gathered becomes shareable and useful to people
- Use feedback as an opportunity to continue and develop community learning and planning strategy
- Ensure we're reaching people to continue the conversations long-term, providing context and traceability to support decision-making

NAME:

JOB TITLE:

ORGANISATION OR GROUP:

DATE:

CONTACT EMAIL:

06 Routes to supporting the Code of Practice:

We are exploring a number of routes to help individuals and organisations use the Code of Practice and embed it within both their own work and their organisations' culture.

These include:

Code of Practice Informal Commitment

- You are committed as an individual or an organisation to understanding and working towards the Quality of Life: Code of Practice and undergoing self-assessment

Code of Practice Self-assessment

- Critical self-assessment of your community consultation and engagement practices and activities against the 8 Standards to enable good practice in the sector. You will:
- Complete a self-assessment framework
- Submit documentary evidence for publication as good or excellent practice

Code of Practice Quality Assurance

- Your organisation is committed to embedding the Quality of Life: Code of Practice within your organisation and governance. You will:
- Complete a self-assessment framework
- Attend a training session for your leadership team with the Quality of Life Foundation
- Commit to applying the Code of Practice to all your place-based projects starting from an agreed date and submitting a review of your projects to the Quality of Life Foundation for assessment and feedback

Code of Practice Accreditation

- Your organisation is committed to the full integration of the Code of Practice, Toolkit and Framework into your organisation's processes. This includes:
- Attend a one-day training session for your leadership team with the Quality of Life Foundation
- Undertake a strategic review of your Sustainable Development Goals, training, regular best practice and continued professional development for your team, and reviews of all briefs and programmes for place-based projects
- Everything will then be reviewed and discussed by an independent panel who will provide the overall rating for the organisation
- Feedback Report with scores and recommendations for improvements

Code of Practice Awards

- Your organisation would like to gain recognition of the good work you are doing in consultation and engagement, and will:
- Submit a project to be assessed for a Quality of Life Outstanding Project Award

07 Next steps

We would really appreciate your feedback through answering some general questions about our approach to good and best practice and about the principles.

Please complete this short online questionnaire - link below:

<https://forms.gle/4ppod7p4m535PoE66>

This is the beta version of the Code of Practice. Its purpose is to raise standards for everyone in the industry, so we have outlined practices that lead to good and best practice. This beta testing phase is part of the support provided in packages 1 or 2 of the Code of Practice self-assessment. This distinction was a key recommendation from the UK-wide Community Consultation for Quality of Life research.



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Quality of Life Foundation