

2022 GUIDE TO INCLUSIVE DIGITAL ENGAGEMENT

How To Become An Expert in Inclusive Engagement

Discover how to involve a representative cross-section of the community with online technology and turn your ambition for inclusivity into a reality.





The diversity of opinions and voices in our communities can help society face today's biggest challenges and come up with innovative, future-focused solutions.

Our 2022 Guide to Inclusive Digital Engagement explores the space between where we are and where we hope to be.

Executive Summary

The diversity of opinions and voices in our communities can help society face today's biggest challenges and come up with innovative, future-focused solutions. While we have come a long way in acknowledging that diversity creates better outcomes, not everyone is always given or can find a seat at the table. This could be due to blind spots in our approaches, competing priorities, or a multitude of systemic factors.

We wanted to understand the industry's perspective on inclusivity more deeply and in January 2022, we ran an inclusivity pulse check with our client and partner network. Using Social Pinpoint's online survey platform, we sought to understand the readiness for inclusive engagement among community engagement professionals from Australia, New Zealand, Canada, and the United States. We received responses from a mix of team members, managers, senior managers, senior executives, and executives in a range of government organizations, consulting and advisory firms, planning firms, and major contractors.

While 37% of respondents strongly agreed that inclusive engagement is understood in their organization, **only 18% strongly agreed that their organization's current community engagement strategies are inclusive.** Despite this gap between understanding and action, there was a clear appetite for inclusivity, with 59% strongly agreeing that their organization is ready to make its community engagement strategies more inclusive.

This guide explores the space between where we are and where we hope to be, sharing a tangible four-step process that your organization can take to make its community engagement initiatives more inclusive.

1. RAISE AWARENESS

2. IDENTIFY PARTICIPATION BARRIERS

3. LEARN FROM OTHERS

4. TAKE ACTION

STEP 1

Raise Awareness

If you want to spark change, it's important that everyone in your organization has a common understanding of what it means to be inclusive.

Why is inclusive community engagement important?

Inclusive engagement gives everyone in the community an opportunity to be involved in the decisions that affect their lives. It breaks down participation barriers to help decision-making become more equitable, accessible, empowering, and safe for all.

Inclusion is integral to ethical and effective public engagement because there are diverse groups in our population, whose perspectives and preferences should be explored. Listening to community members with diverse lived experiences leads to more innovative ideas, better decisions, greater public support of outcomes, and stronger democracies. By creating an environment where feedback is considered and embraced, diversity of thought and experiences can flourish. From there, we can generate more equitable and considered outcomes for all members of the community.

When diverse community perspectives are sought, decision-makers have more balanced advice that accurately reflects varied experiences and views. This includes harder-to-reach community voices who have been less heard via traditional consultation approaches. Engagement practices that incorporate diverse voices can also build lasting and meaningful relationships. When people see diverse perspectives reflected and represented in decisions, it also creates a sense of belonging and mutual understanding. However, when it's done badly, engagement can erode trust and lead to divisiveness.

It sounds great, so why aren't we all doing it?

Inclusive engagement is a compelling concept, however, it can be very difficult to be wholly inclusive in practice. Community needs are dynamic and there are many barriers that can prevent certain groups of people from participating in decision-making. Differing digital capabilities, decreased trust, attention deficit, and simply a lack of time are just a handful of roadblocks that community members can face.

The community engagement practitioner's own biases can also get in the way. It's easy to fall into the trap of designing community engagement strategies based on personal experiences, and it's essential to take the time to research and understand the various cultures and minorities that need to be involved in a decision.



Are you building or eroding trust? A sense of belonging and understanding is created when people see diverse perspectives reflected in policies and decisions. Inclusive engagement stems from this visibility and encourages all of your community to participate.

Should we take community engagement online to reach more people?

The global pandemic accelerated the adoption of digital engagement technologies at a time when face-to-face interaction was difficult and society was demanding more influence and input on decisions that impact them. As a result, organizations now have more online engagement tools at their fingertips than ever before.

Up until this transformation, small groups tended to dominate decision-making because traditional engagement approaches, like town hall meetings require a significant time investment and don't account for varied work hours, caretaking responsibilities, and transport costs.

So, should we take everything online to include marginalized and hard-to-reach groups who have been left out of public debates? Not exactly. Even digital tools bring their own participation barriers. For example, we need to ensure that people with lower digital ability understand how to participate and that people who are vision-impaired can interpret the information shared.

In-person interactions can also be incredibly meaningful and productive. Rather than prioritizing one tool over another, it's about finding the 'right mix' of engagement methods for your community, which can be very different depending on the nature of the decision being made and the people you are trying to reach.



“**Governments and organizations now have more online engagement tools at their fingertips than ever before.**”

Say hello to hybrid engagement.

Digital tools are being used in what we like to call a 'hybrid' community engagement mix, which allows people to engage online from anywhere with an internet connection and via face-to-face methods. This mix and match approach allows people to pick and choose how they would like to engage, based on their widely different schedules and commitments.

Examples of hybrid engagement could include a community meeting or pop-up, where people have the opportunity to talk directly to your team or submit their feedback through provided tablet devices, or a letterbox drop with a paper-based survey to fill out, as well as a QR code to complete the same survey online.

Ultimately, hybrid engagement is about providing flexible options that suit the accessibility needs of different community stakeholders and bridging any gaps that one method alone might not cover.

Prioritizing inclusive engagement amid new restrictions and the sharp shift to online.

A featured story from Shaylee Cowan, Stakeholder Engagement Specialist.

In 2021 I worked on a resource project in Victoria that was in early planning, and consultation with the community was critical to its success. The target audience for our engagement was the directly impacted property owners and residents within a 10km radius of the project. However, the COVID-19 pandemic was evolving and the mandated restrictions were continually changing, so the decision was made (with the approval of the company's Board of Directors) to shift most of the consultation process online.

Melbourne is an amazing, multicultural city and there are many people who don't speak English as their first language. We wanted to ensure that everyone had the opportunity to provide feedback on the plans for the project.

We pulled data from various online sources (Australian Bureau of Statistics, Google, and social media) and created a community profile of each of the suburbs that we wanted to consult. We learned there were many residents and property owners in the 'impact zone' who didn't speak English (~2%) or English wasn't their first language (~8%). In a demographic of more than 100,000 people, that's a lot of people who were at risk of being excluded from engagement.

In the context of the geographical area, approximately 10% of people living there (~10,000) would not have been able to interpret and understand the information we were providing. Had we not taken measures to ensure these important stakeholders were included in our engagement, we would have failed at our job to consult effectively and fairly.

We had all our materials and project information translated into the top five languages spoken across Victoria. We were able to upload these translated materials and translated text onto the project's Social Pinpoint consultation site. While we no longer planned in-person engagement, we did still undertake activities such as letterbox drops, phone calls, and installing signage or posters to promote the consultation. We contacted local churches, relevant community groups and clubs, asking them to provide the translated information to their visitors. We used plenty of visual graphics, animations, artist impressions, and we even uploaded virtual tours of associated infrastructure.

Apart from succeeding in reaching a broader target audience, I remember an email from one resident who thanked our team for providing translated information. It turned out the resident was someone the project had unsuccessfully tried to contact for six months about potential impacts to their property. The parents, who lived in the next suburb, received the translated information and they were able to contact the property owner about the project. The property owner then contacted the project team, and we were able to engage with them. It turned out they'd been overseas for work when the international border closed, and they had been unable to get back home to Melbourne.

There are far-reaching impacts when we choose to engage inclusively and tap into the collective knowledge and insights from all community members.



All materials and project information were translated into Greek, Italian, Persian, and Traditional Chinese.



Translated materials were available throughout the entire consultation period via their Social Pinpoint site.



10,000

Approximately 10% of people living in the targeted area (~10,000) would not have been able to interpret and understand the information provided if it had not been translated.

How to get your organization on the same page.

Before you start advocating for inclusive community engagement, it's important that you can use the right terminology consistently so that everyone is on the same page. So, here are a few important definitions.

Public Engagement

Public engagement is a variety of activities that meaningfully involve community members and stakeholders to inform decisions for planning, policies, programs, and services that will impact them.



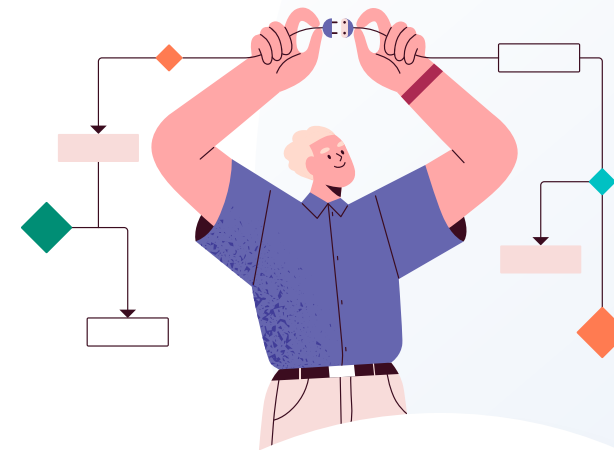
Equity

Equitable public engagement provides mutually beneficial opportunities for people to contribute and is mindful of power and privilege within engagement processes, institutions, and broader systems. It involves a fair distribution of resources and corrections for imbalances by operating in a way that empowers marginalized people with a voice.



Diversity

Diversity is the presence of difference. In the community engagement context, it is the representation of different identities and traits such as race, gender, identity, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and (dis)ability.



Accessibility

Exists when all members of the community impacted by a decision can access and fully participate in the engagement process.



Inclusion

Inclusion in public engagement means to involve people who reflect the demographic, attitudinal, and experiential diversity of the communities that may be impacted by a decision. It is a building block for modern democracies as it nurtures a sense of welcome, belonging, recognition, and safety for all people, where diverse perspectives and ways of life are valued and respected.

STEP 2

Identify Participation Barriers

At times, we can unintentionally exclude people due to a lack of awareness of the barriers that may prevent them from participating.

What might prevent your community from engaging with you?

Unless we actively seek to understand and expose public participation barriers, it can be very difficult to account for them in the design of our engagement strategies and draw participants who truly represent the demographic, attitudinal, and experiential diversity of the communities that may be impacted by a decision.

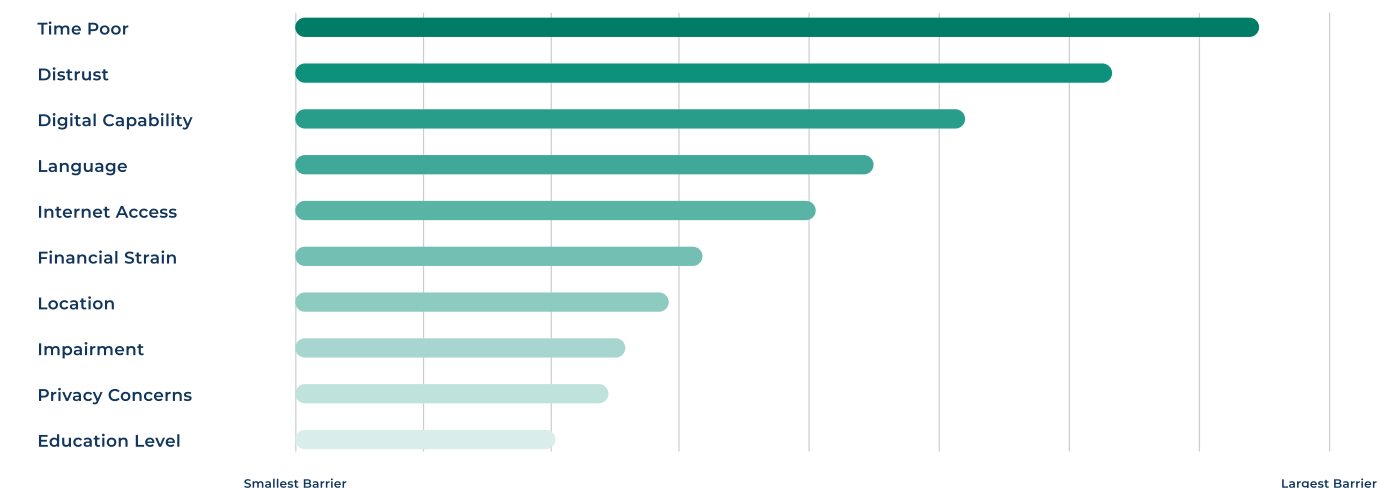
Even when a diverse and representative cross-section of the public is engaged, their voices may not influence outcomes equally, as differences in power and privilege play out in the way that final decisions are made ^[1].

At times, the logistics of engagement (such as location and timing) can conflict with other responsibilities, such as work or childcare. Many groups of people also face historic and ongoing marginalization due to identity or lived experiences, such as race, ethnicity, religion, gender, sexual orientation,

disability, socioeconomic background, citizenship status. These groups are often under-represented in decision-making or engagement processes due to overt exclusion and/or systemic physical, social, and financial barriers.

Engagement processes that don't address these barriers may cause more harm than good - reinforcing power imbalances, leading to poorer-quality decisions, and eroding trust in institutions.

Our 2022 pulse check revealed that lack of time, distrust and varied digital capabilities are currently considered three of the most significant public participation barriers among our network of community engagement professionals. While our ambition to be inclusive is high, these are still very real barriers that practitioners are discovering how to overcome.



We might all work, eat, sleep, and relax daily, but the time we allocate to these activities differs greatly.



How different people spend their time on regular daily activities, such as sleeping, working, eating, and enjoying leisure provides a lot of insight into understanding their living conditions, economic opportunities, and general well-being.

For example, people in wealthier countries tend to be able to afford to have more free time and studies have shown that there is a strong gender gap in leisure time in many countries because women are responsible for a disproportionate amount of unpaid work^[2]. It's important to understand the time constraints that your community is under in order to meet them where they are, in the right moments.

It's not easy to mend broken trust.

When people experience distrust, they are far less likely to engage with one another. So before you embark on a community engagement process, think about whether or not your organization has delivered on its promises in the past or if you have to do some serious relationship rebuilding.

If we take a look at long-run data from the United States where the General Social Survey has been gathering information



about trust attitudes since 1972, we find that people trust each other less than 40 years ago^[3]. This decline in interpersonal trust also coincides with a long-run reduction in public trust and, according to estimates compiled by the Pew Research Center since 1958, today trust in government in the United States is at historically low levels. Trust is a fundamental element of social capital and this is a big barrier to overcome if you want to achieve sustainable well-being outcomes.

The fast pace of digital adoption is widening the skills gap.

Different groups of people are equipped with varying levels of digital exposure and capabilities. Let's just take a look at older people. While the pandemic has accelerated the rate of digital adoption, Australian research suggests that older people may be feeling 'forced online'^[4].

The majority continue to be overwhelmed by technological change and their increased engagement with online environments appears to be prompted by perceived (or actual) necessity, rather than by seeing benefits in going online or feeling confident to do so. As life becomes more digitized and we start harnessing more online community engagement tools, it's essential to support older people's digital literacy and provide them with the skills to navigate what can be a confusing environment.



Take a walk in your community's shoes. Before you dive into your initiative, you need to do your research and understand the community's needs, aspirations, and roadblocks.

This will help you meet your community where they are and ensure you provide them with the right means to join your engagement journey.



Participation Barrier Checklist

Before you embark on your next community engagement initiative, check if you have addressed every participation barrier with every community stakeholder group throughout planning, design, delivery, and review phases.

Lack of Time

Not all community groups have sufficient time, capacity, and resources to attend and respond to all engagement requests. It's important to think about the timing of your engagement and compensation for those who need it. Parents and caregivers can find it difficult to participate in face-to-face engagement events. People who are employed can also find it difficult to attend during work hours.

Disability or Impairment

Disabled people can face accessibility barriers depending on the way that engagement is facilitated, and the location, facilities, supports, and technology should help them participate in a way that suits them best. For example, the use of interpreters, appropriate language, and subtitles need to be considered for physically and neuro-diverse people.

Distrust

People who have had negative experiences with governments or have had contact with the justice system may not be willing to share their thoughts and opinions. That's why ongoing transparency and inclusion are so important. Make sure to consider whether or not people have positively experienced democratic processes before. You also need to honor Indigenous knowledge and world views, while acknowledging and equitably addressing the impact of past and present-day colonialism.

Digital Capability

People with low digital capability may not be able to participate in online community engagement and communications efforts effectively.

Privacy Concerns

Asking for a lot of personal data could make residents fear that they could be a victim of discrimination or experience a threat to their livelihood, so it's important to be transparent about why you want particular information and explain how it will be used.

Language

It's important to understand the various languages that are spoken within a community and offer multilingual services so that people can interpret and engage with materials in their preferred language. Matching the right language level for the audience is equally important. Imagine if you were trying to engage children or young people. Keep language welcoming, simple, and jargon-free.

Internet Access

37% of the world does not use the internet^[5]. With more basic services moving online and the pandemic highlighting affordability challenges in wealthier nations, these deep digital gaps are intensifying inequality. People in rural communities can also have limited access to digital infrastructure and the internet.

Financial Strain

There are groups in the community that may experience financial strain as a result of participating in a community engagement initiative. It may not be feasible for them to take time away from work to attend a face-to-face meeting, or the costs of travel could be too high. It may be necessary to consider compensation for low-income groups and ensure that people's time and expertise are valued appropriately.

Education Level

People have had varying levels of access to education throughout their lives and it's important to provide the right amount of context and information to ensure that everyone has an equal understanding of the engagement process.

Location

People who live further away from the physical location of face-to-face consultations may find it difficult to attend. It's also important to consider if your community members live in an area or travel through it regularly. Are they homeowners, renters, or are they experiencing homelessness?

When identifying any potential participation barriers, it's not only essential to understand how they might intersect and affect each stakeholder group, also what what level of impact they will have on their ability to engage effectively.

Reflect on past project experiences and times when you have observed exclusion in the community. Running through each participation barrier will help you mitigate any risks right from the start in your planning phase.

- ☐ Lack of Time
- ☐ Disability or Impairment
- ☐ Distrust
- ☐ Digital Capability
- ☐ Privacy Concerns
- ☐ Language
- ☐ Internet Access
- ☐ Financial Strain
- ☐ Education Level
- ☐ Location

STEP 3

Learn From Others

We believe that speaking with others is the best way to improve our awareness and practice. Discover how PRR inclusively engaged a diverse community impacted by a transit-orientated development project in Seattle.

How PRR utilized digital engagement to build trust through inclusive practices.

Can you describe an online engagement initiative you recently worked on?

PRR collaborated with Sound Transit on a transit-oriented development project near the future Lynnwood City Center Station in Seattle. To build public awareness and engage the community in an inclusive process to inform developer procurement, PRR planned and implemented virtual community conversations in English and an online survey using Social Pinpoint in Korean, Spanish, and Vietnamese.

The site included alternative text in Korean, Spanish, Vietnamese, and English. Alternative text is used for screen readers which people with limited or low vision use. The survey ran for three weeks and generated more than 4,000 responses from approximately 1,200 participants, with more than 50 languages represented from participants who selected “Other” languages.

Who were you trying to engage?

People who live within a one-mile radius of the site, with particular attention on people who are historically underserved, left out, and left behind, including people who are Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC), people with low incomes, limited or low vision, and who use languages other than English.

Who was at risk of exclusion?

All people who have been historically left out and left behind in the public process are at risk of exclusion. We work to reduce barriers that exclude those at risk so that projects, like transit-oriented development, meet the needs of the communities they serve.

How did you identify these people?

PRR has extensive experience working in communities served by our clients. To identify who is at risk of exclusion, we start with members of our research team collecting and analyzing demographic data of the affected area. We work with our clients to understand how the project might impact communities and identify individuals and communities we want to reach.

We also use demographic analyses organized by our research team to better understand the race, age, education, and other socio-economic data of a project area.



Are you tapping into collective knowledge? Keeping up-to-date with how other experts inspire inclusive engagement will help you challenge your own practice.

How would your initiative have been different if they were excluded?

At PRR, we believe that communities and infrastructure projects are improved through diverse perspectives. We work to bring diverse community voices into decision-making.

We achieve this through reviewing engagement tactics through a diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) and anti-racist lens. We prioritize accessibility and reader-friendliness in all languages by integrating language services specialists in the project team from the beginning.

In this instance, the client's goal to develop a plan for transit-oriented development near a future light rail station would not have benefited from perspectives from any groups not included in the process.

Transit-oriented development has a meaningful potential to create access improvements for communities that have historically received less jurisdictional investment. Including their voices in this process increases the likelihood of righting historic injustices and creating equitable and proportionate investments in communities.

How did you overcome any participation barriers?

PRR approaches all work with the goal of inviting accessible engagement experiences for all community members.

To accomplish these goals, PRR works with a team of language services specialists to ensure that the engagement opportunities we provide in languages other than English are as thoughtfully produced as those offered to English readers.



“We have seen engagement statistics increase on projects where we have implemented Social Pinpoint.”

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For people with low and limited vision, we use minimal text on images to enhance the screen reader user experience.

To better reach people with limited internet, we design the site to be accessible and reader-friendly on mobile devices.

Using Social Pinpoint helps us to use localized, reader-friendly, and custom translations for all content on our engagement websites, including surveys, alt-text, and ideas walls.

Once we build our websites, our language services specialists review the site. Where they find errors or needed refinements, they suggest changes that will improve the user's experience in their chosen language.

Social Pinpoint's adaptable template builder enables PRR to build engaging sites that are screen reader accessible, easy to use for readers with low or limited vision, and navigable for most, regardless of their preferred language.

Before the site is ready to launch, our team uses a web accessibility scanner to confirm the site is compliant with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act, and Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG).

How did your inclusion efforts change the outcomes of your engagement?

We have seen engagement statistics increase on projects where we have implemented Social Pinpoint as one of our engagement tools to reach diverse communities with diverse language preferences, people who have low or limited vision, and communities with limited internet access.

In the case of our transit-oriented development project, **we received over 4,000 survey responses.** While only 1-2% of respondents answered our surveys in languages other than English, 15-34% of participants who answered the survey in English shared that they read and speak languages other than English at home.

Additional research showed that most survey participants used mobile devices. This includes communities with limited internet access, people with low incomes, and people who are younger. To support mobile use, we ensured that language navigation was designed for easy access for the reader.

About PRR

PRR is nationally recognized for its ability to generate consensus around challenging public issues by facilitating partnerships between communities and public agencies to develop and implement solutions that work for the real world. They specialize in engaging historically-underserved populations, including people who are Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC), people with low incomes, limited or low vision, and who use languages other than English.

Contributors: Laura Alonso Gonzalez, Emma Dorazio, Greg Eppich, Brett Houghton, Bree Narag, Keri Shoemaker, Traceé Strum-Gilliam, Julie Tonkinson, and Lauren Wheeler.

STEP 4

Take Action

While there is no one-size-fits-all approach to inclusive engagement, there are five key intervention points where we can take action.

Readiness

Building strong partnerships and relationships with key stakeholders at all levels within diverse representative groups will help to build your organization's readiness to engage inclusively. You can also use and maintain helpful datasets on population groups that you engage with regularly, and store shared records of community engagement to encourage ongoing knowledge sharing.

Creating a shared set of reporting templates, conducting workforce skills assessments, and building staff capabilities will also improve your preparedness to reach groups that may have traditionally been excluded.

Design

At the beginning of any authentic engagement process, it's important to have an open mind without predetermined conclusions or expected outcomes. At this early stage, you should clearly identify the needs, preferences, timing, and process of engagement for all target groups.

This is also an important phase for establishing budgets for any incentives and reimbursement of the costs of participation, in particular, where the engagement requires a significant time investment.

Be mindful that your engagement methods should enable diverse participation and allow people to contribute in a variety of ways at a time that works for them.

Hybrid approaches to community engagement, which include online and offline avenues allow you to tailor your approach based on all of the possible participation barriers.

Also, design your conversations in ways that avoid bias and leading questions, and build feedback loops into your engagement strategy so that you can track your effectiveness and share the results with participants.

Planning

If you want to ensure that you're getting eyeballs on your project, it's important to think through your launch strategy carefully.

Create a structured plan as to how will you announce and promote your engagement using a mix of online and offline channels, how you could target representative groups with media and marketing campaigns, and where might you place offline ads such as posters and flyers.

The more widespread your communications the better and you can also partner with local community leaders to spread the word. If residents see that your project is supported by a respected community member, they are more likely to participate.



Exclusion can also play out in the way that decisions are made.

Build feedback loops into your engagement process to catch participation barriers and biases playing out along the way. Feedback is very powerful and will ultimately shape how you navigate your Planning and Design phases.



Delivery

Seek to give marginalized and excluded communities to participate the proper tools, means, and knowledge to engage. Make sure that your messaging clearly explains how the outcomes of your project will affect participants and ensure that your engagement methods are setting your community up for success.

Resources need to be in a clear, simple, and understandable format. If you are using a digital platform, it's important to ensure that you are compliant with the latest Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) which provide a wide range of recommendations for making web content more accessible across all devices and for all people.

This ensures that you are getting the fine details right, like using colour contrast to make text easy to read and putting alt attributes on your images for blind and partially sighted people.

Aim for clarity over creativity. Simple, well-planned designs and layouts are often the most user-friendly. If appropriate, provide a physical space in public areas like libraries or town halls so that people without internet access can participate.

Review

It's important to follow through on your commitments and ensure you share the outcomes of your engagement with the community. If they feel like you had a genuine interest in their input and were clear about the scope of influence they had on the final decision, they will continue to engage more and more.

You should also reflect on the level and nature of engagement that you achieved and share the learnings with your team.

If you can continuously improve your ability to anticipate and address inequities, you won't force the community to advocate for themselves and, in turn, can build long-term, mutual trust.

Diverse voices lead to better discussions, decisions, and outcomes for everyone.

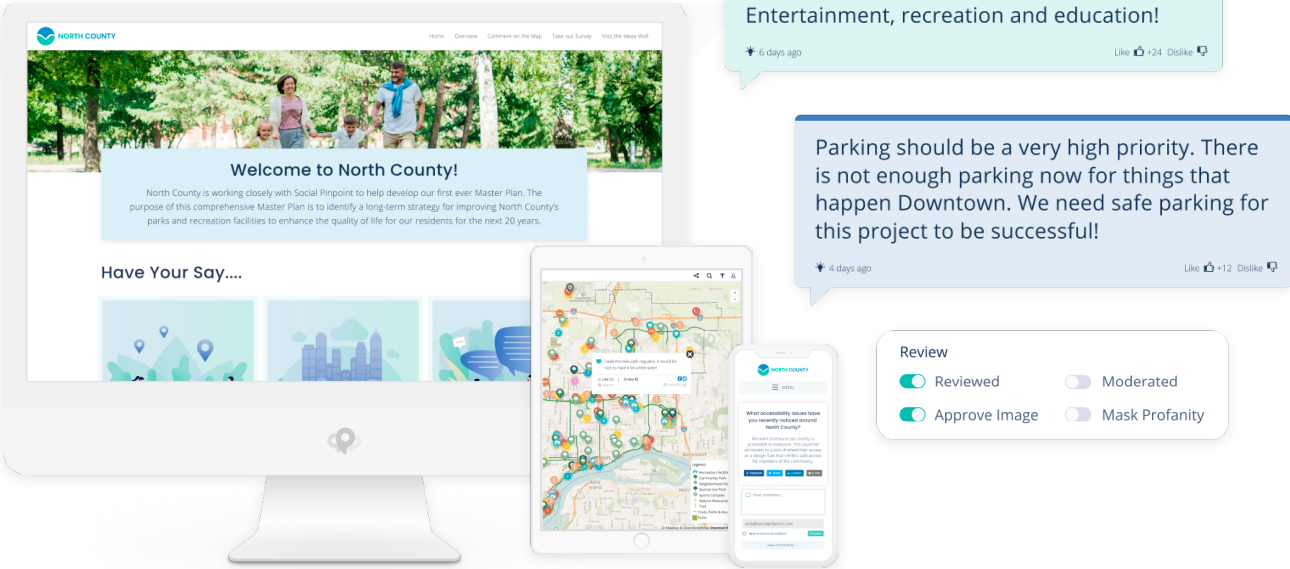
The participants of our pulse check also shared the words they feel best sum up inclusive community engagement and it's clear that inclusivity is a constant journey that requires intent and an open mind. We need to have a willingness to do our research, trial new techniques, and continuously challenge our own biases.



Ready to inclusively engage your community online?

Social Pinpoint provides a flexible suite of digital tools to enhance your community and stakeholder engagement.

Social Pinpoint will help you gather more community input in a platform that is safe, accessible and fun to use. Take your community on the journey with you, justify your decisions with data, and create transparency to build trust. **Discover how you can break down public participation barriers today.**



Our flexible, accessible, equitable, and inclusive suite of tools

Interactive Mapping

Engagement Pages

Ideas Wall

Online Surveys

Stakeholder Management

Forums & Discussions

Embeddable Widgets

Participatory Budgeting

Custom Branding

Regional Hosting

Document Library

Live Chat Support

Sentiment Analysis

24/7 Moderation

UTM Tracking

Knowledge Base

Reporting Dashboard

Language Support

Social Media Sharing

+ Much More

Request your free demonstration at socialpinpoint.com





What's Next?

We hope you are now well and truly equipped with some key principles to positively influence your inclusive digital engagement strategy. Discover how you can break down public participation barriers today and connect with our team of engagement specialists at Social Pinpoint.

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