Shetland Partnership
Things to Think About Beforehand

Developing a Participation Strategy

The following will help you develop a Participation Strategy and approach, for your planned work. This doesn't need to be a large or complex document; it just has to be sufficient to ensure that you have a clear purpose and process, with a robust plan to support delivery.

Underpinning everything is having a clear understanding of the high-level purpose behind the work:

- **Why?** – What is the reason behind this piece of work? What is the driver behind it?

- **What are the desired outcomes?** – What difference is being sought, what changes need to happen?

A strategy helps to keep participation activity focused and aligned to the purpose and desired outputs from the work being done. It is an effective way of identifying:

- Opportunities for participation

- Participants

- Timeframes for participation activity

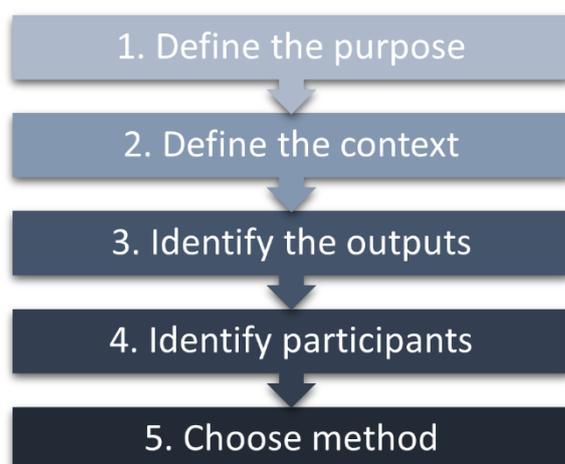- The best methods of participation.

Planning Participation Activities

Participation can range from small-scale, to a much larger exercise with multiple strands and methods. Once the purpose is understood, the 5-step framework in Figure 1, can be used to take steps to think about the practical elements of carrying out participation activity. The 5 steps in the framework are as follows:

1. Define the purpose (Why?)

2. Define the context (and opportunity)

3. Identify the outputs (What?)

4. Identify participants (Who?)

5. Choose method (How?)

1. Define the purpose
2. Define the context
3. Identify the outputs
4. Identify participants
5. Choose method

Figure 1: a 5-step framework for planning engagement activities

Define the purpose (Why?)

Understanding why participation is required and agreeing a clear purpose with those involved creates a solid base to build activity on.

Consideration should also be given to the stage of the decision-making process at which the participation is required.

These three questions can help to define the purpose of activity:

- What knowledge or understanding can be added by carrying out participation?
- What questions or problems are participants being invited to address?
- What can change as a result of any participation?

Define the context (and opportunity)

When planning participation, it is important to understand the wider context:

- What has come before?
- What is the history behind this or similar work?
- What awareness is there around the topic or issue?
- What is practical in terms of budget, resources and time?

The following questions can help to understand the context:

- Is the time right in the decision-making process for participation?
- What are the opportunities for participants to influence the decision-making process(es)?
- Does this activity duplicate other activity, or come after a similar process that has involved similar participants?
- Is there sufficient resource to carry out any activity?

Identify the outputs (What?)

Outputs refer to the type of information the participation will produce. What does the participation need to achieve?

Knowing what information you need will help with choosing the right method, choosing what questions to ask, and with identifying who needs to be involved.

Examples of some of the outputs that engagement activity can deliver include:

- New ideas

- Identification of issues

- An increased understanding of the needs of service users

- Clarity on priorities for improvement

- Feedback of how services are currently being delivered

- Recommendations

- Preferences towards proposals

- Gaining an overview of perspectives / concerns.

Identify participants (Who?)

Deciding who to involve is a key part of planning.

Understanding the different roles that participants can have in a participation activity will help to identify who should be involved. These could be stakeholders, individuals, citizens or community representatives, for example.

Some useful questions are:

- Whose voice is needed to be heard to deliver what is needed?

- Why should people participate?

- What impact will the participants' involvement have? How can this be made clear when seeking participants?

- Will different participants be involved in different ways and at different stages of the process?

- Will the engagement activity be open to anyone wishing to participate, or does it need to be targeted in terms of reaching participants?

- Are there barriers to anyone being able to participate? For example, consider:

  - Do participants need to have experience, awareness, knowledge or interest in an issue or topic?

  - The timing and format of the activity.

  - The technology and / or digital skills required to participate.

  - Are there any language requirements?

  - Do participants need to agree with a specific desired outcome, or is hearing from opposing points of view important to the defined purpose of the engagement activity?

Choose method (How?)

There are a wide range of different methods of participation that can be used. Often it is beneficial to approach activity with an understanding that different methods will be needed.

More information on methods, and local case studies can be found following the links below.

- Methods and Techniques
- Local Case Studies