

## A Guide to Community Engagement and Consultation



Good community consultation can be the key to success in any project, small or large. It can highlight ideas and opportunities not previously considered, encourage new volunteers, raise the profile of your church, attract funding and garner support for your church in the longer term. But consulting with people can be very difficult if you are not already engaging with them in some way.

**Consultation:** the process of discussing something with someone in order to get their advice or opinion about it.

**Engagement:** the process of encouraging people to be interested in the work of an organisation, etc...

It is quite common for people to think that consultation is the same as engagement, but it is not.

Whilst consultation is often considered to be a part of engagement, it generally refers to something which has a specific, one-off purpose, for instance, plans to widen/improve the use of a church building. Consultation tends to include more formal activities like public meetings and surveys, but it can also include workshops and open days which aim to engage people more deeply in the decision-making process. Consultation is **not** simply asking people if they like what you are proposing to do, or worse still, telling people what you are going to do. It is a process in which you invite opinions to collectively develop an idea or solution.

Engagement, by contrast, is an ongoing process that seeks to develop relationships with individuals and organisations. Every church should have a plan for community engagement to ensure it is meeting the needs of the parish and any other groups with links to or interests in the church. Strong relationships make it much easier to involve people in future plans - it is very difficult to carry out effective consultation if the people you need to approach don't already understand or feel any connection to your organisation or the church building.

“...if nobody loves them and nobody understands them, then there is no future for them...”

*Peter Aires Chief Executive of the CCT - Christian Today 2019*

## Know Your Audience

Whether you are looking to improve how your church actively engages with the local community, or start a consultation process, you need to gather some key information about the community and the people you will be engaging/consulting with.

### Key Questions

- Is the local population one of young families, older people, or mature couples?
- Is it an area of high unemployment? Or is it a mix of professionals and people working in low-skilled local jobs?
- Is it situated in the commuter belt?
- Who is around during the daytime?
- What type of housing is there and is there enough affordable housing?
- What does the community already have?
- What services are currently provided?
- What services are missing?
- What local development plans are there?
- What community groups and organisations already exist in the area?
- Where do people go to access things that are missing?
- What established organisations and groups are there?
- What activities are provided and where?
- Where are the gaps?

Remember to explore the potential for heritage learning opportunities:

- Is there a local history group or interested people?
- Are documentary records kept locally?
- Are there any arts, drama, wildlife groups or interested people?
- What do you currently do to tell the history of the church and the surrounding community?
- What potential is there to involve schools?

### The Congregation

You need to build up a picture of your local community, in particular to identify who you are not talking to and who isn't currently being reached by your work. It is often a good idea to start with the church community by carrying out an **audit of the local congregation** – a questionnaire for church members. Carried out over two or three consecutive Sundays over coffee after the main act of worship, it seeks to encourage a positive vision and energy from members of the congregation to the challenge of ministry and mission in that parish church. This can also help to gather a core group of people to undertake the wider community engagement/consultation, as it should not be the responsibility of just one person.

Questions to the congregation should be framed to encourage a positive response:

- What's the most exciting thing that's happened here in the last five years?
- Looking ahead five years, what would you most like to happen here?
- How could you help to achieve that dream?
- What changes in the community bring fresh opportunity for ministry?
- How can the church be helpful in giving greater voice and security to people on the margins of the local community?

- Which groups are particular priorities for this church to serve?
- Is the church building welcoming and easily accessible?
- How can our church building be enhanced to become an asset in serving our community ministry objectives?
- What great new opportunities come brilliantly disguised as unsolvable problems?

Ideally the audit/questionnaire will be tied into some teaching/sermon that looks appreciatively at what already works and invites everyone's dreams and aspirations for the future. If there is a particular opportunity to improve the physical facilities through reordering or redevelopment, then appropriate questions relating to this can be added.

### Research

Background information which will highlight how the area has changed and might be set to change can be obtained from the following:

- Parish Council
- Parish or Neighbourhood Plan – published or under development?
- Local District Council strategic reports
- Local Council of voluntary service
- Office of National Statistics
- The Diocese can also provide parishes with some census material, including their 'deprivation score' from the Index of Multiple Deprivation – measuring issues such as unemployment, access to health care, education etc...
- Community-led plan (Parish Plan)
- Getting involved with the development of a local plan can be a useful tool in addressing the wider strategy for community ministry. If you are involved, then the church will be included.
- Church records, including visitor books and records of past events will also identify changes in visitors, use of the church and perhaps even volunteer numbers.

### Liaise with Local Groups and Organisations

As early as possible make contact with groups and organisations already operating in the area such as:

- Your own Parish Council/Town Council
- Local Authority and Primary Care Trusts
- Current community users of your church
- Other local groups and organisations, for example the local Women's Institute, the Scouts and Guides, the Young Farmers, youth groups, pensioners clubs, parent and toddler groups, U3A, environmental groups and amenity and other civic groups, local schools
- Local services such as hospitals, the job centre, the police, schools and Age UK
- Make contact with community leaders and the organisations in your area that work with key groups such as children, the elderly, the disabled, their carers and other disadvantaged vulnerable groups
- Organisations that own the other community buildings
- Other faith groups, local businesses e.g. shops, tea shops, pubs, potteries, craft shops. Talk to other heritage attractions or sites?

*Don't duplicate and don't try to compete with existing activities – that's a waste of resources. Reach out and work with other groups, rather than working in isolation.*

### **What if there's no community to engage with?**

It's true that in some parishes there might not be enough of a community to sustain a church building, but it's rare that there will simply be *no community to engage with*.

It depends very much on your definition of community. If you limit it to the worshippers, your existing networks and people you are familiar with, and people living in the immediate area around the church, then there may well be few 'new' people to engage with. But if you widen the definition to include everyone living and/or working in the parish, neighbouring parishes, local schools, special interest groups and tourists, you will find that there is always some form of community to engage with. For instance, All Saint's (pictured) is located in the tiny village of Morborne. Despite being about 5 miles south-west of Peterborough it feels very rural and consists of just 14 households, 23 residents. The PCC are actively engaged with the community running many events, but they want to do more. They are keen to encourage more visitors through initiatives such as 'Champing' and to explore tourism through the church's link to some of the first settlers of America.



*All Saints' Church, Morborne*

### **Methods of Engagement**

Engagement tends to be informal and can often be spontaneous when an opportunity presents itself. It is essentially about ensuring your parish church, as both an organisation and a building, has a strong presence in the local community.

There are a variety of methods which depend very much on who you are trying to engage with. They include:

- Attend meetings of community groups, Parish Council etc...
- Invite groups and organisations to a working lunch, at which you outline your ongoing commitment to the local community. It will be important to listen to their expertise regarding local need and gaps in the current provision. It may be that this exercise leads into new working partnerships and potential income for the parish. At the very least it will have heightened the profile of the local church as a confident and serious potential partner for other agencies sharing similar concerns.
- Create a Visitor Welcome booklet to give to new residents in your parish. A video, guidance document and templates, can be found on our website to help.
- Have a stall at community events. Try to ensure you have something fun (or delicious) that is linked to the church but not too religious, i.e. homemade cakes, a tombola, arts and crafts sessions making easter bonnets or a simple posy of flowers etc....
- Hold an open day at the church with activities such as concerts, games, story-telling, poetry etc... Open days aimed at families tend to be the most successful at bringing in new people.
- Tailor some of your existing services and events to meet wider interests, such as an annual service for pets or a sing-a-long at Christmas where people can sing a mixture of carols and well-known popular Christmas hits.
- Social media campaign – ask people to share stories/memories/photos of the church.

- Communication – make sure you are keeping the whole community informed about what is going on at the church using a variety of methods such as leaflets, flyers, posters, websites, newsletters, email updates. This includes the condition of the building – many people express concern that they only hear about the state of their parish church building when it is almost too late to do anything.
- Get out in your community. Whether it is singing carols around the village or in a local supermarket at Christmas, working with schools and scout groups etc..., organising a village yard sale, doing an annual sponsored walk or running a pub quiz - don't give people a reason to forget about you!
- Encourage and support groups to use the church, whilst maintaining quiet areas/times for private prayer and contemplation.
- Interpret the history (architectural, social etc...) of the church building and surrounding area using a range of methods to suit different audience types, such as guidebooks, children's trails, exhibitions, oral history and reminiscence events, talks and workshops.
- Explore ways to engage people in the church as a Place of Worship i.e. a leaflet on 'Finding God's Presence in the Building', prayer trees, lighting of candles, meditation mazes, a silence hour etc... things that may appeal to people who are looking to explore their spiritual side rather than a religious belief. This can be a gentler way to introduce people to the Christian faith and encourage deeper exploration.
- Use the churchyard – this is the first threshold people have to cross and if you can get people using, exploring and even maintaining this space, they will be more likely to support activities within the building.

## Methods of Consultation

Consultation tends to involve more formal activities, with a more specific focus. As with engagement, the methods you use depend on who you are consulting and what the purpose of the consultation is. Methods include:

- Attend meetings of community groups, Parish Council etc...
- Invite groups and organisations to a working lunch, at which you outline your ongoing commitment to the local community. It will be important to listen to their expertise regarding local need and gaps in the current provision. It may be that this exercise leads into new working partnerships and potential income for the parish. At the very least it will have heightened the profile of the local church as a confident and serious potential partner for other agencies sharing similar concerns.
- Give people an opportunity to take part in the whole consultation process. At an early stage you may just be asking people for more general views on the church and area, to understand what needs changing and what they value or want to preserve. At a later stage you may want people to comment on more specific themes. Do not just ask people to provide feedback on pre-developed ideas. You could do this through a range of methods such as a stall at community events, via social media or a seminar/workshop. Empowering Design Practices have some useful guidance on this (<https://www.empoweringdesign.net/>).
- Talk to people where they gather (informally).
- Surveys or questionnaires by post, door to door or online Are there any other planned consultations available to join?
- Place suggestion boxes, beans in the jar or free form post-it note boards on a specific question at key locations such as in the pub, school reception, village hall etc...

- Hold an open day at the church and/or exhibition of plans with additional activities such as concerts, games, story-telling, poetry etc...
- Local media campaign – newspapers, TV, radio
- Leaflets, flyers, posters
- Website, newsletters, email updates
- Competitions e.g. for project ideas/designs
- Public meetings
- Customer Comment Cards
- Focus Groups/User Panels

### Surveys and Questionnaires

These tend to be the most favoured approach to consultations, but they need careful consideration as they can be time consuming and response rates low. Remember to frame the questions in a positive, appreciative way, otherwise the whole exercise will quickly become deficit/problem centred.

Think carefully about when, i.e. the depth of winter is not the best time of the year to be embarking on this exercise. Are you going to cover every street in the parish, knocking on every door? If you hand out questionnaires it's hard work getting them back, so do you just have a table outside the church for one week, or are there other key sites such as the church school, health centre, shopping centre, library etc..? Is there a church or village festival where church members could have a stall to publicise parish activities and get people to fill in the questionnaires?

### Analyse the Results and Keep in Touch

It is important to properly analyse the results of your consultation and make them available to people.

- Write a report and assess the feasibility of suggestions
- As plans become firmed up, ensure people have a further chance to comment
- Let people know where changes have been made to reflect their views
- Continue communication and develop opportunities for community participation wherever possible.

### General Tips

- Be careful with the language you use in communications and avoid words like 'outsiders' when describing people who are not part of the worshipping community.
- Be honest but try to focus on the positives and try to introduce your project in a way that is inspiring and engaging. For example, avoid the following as they do not set the right tone for getting responses.

*"we have a massive problem to fix and need to raise £££ so we want to know how you want to use the church"*

*"we want to put in a toilet so more people can use the building"*

- Be open to new ideas and uses.
- Embrace new volunteers even those who would prefer not to attend services and use support wisely - there will be parishioners who hate the thought of face-to-face encounters but are brilliant at researching facts and figures about the locality.

- Be clear in your reasons for consulting - is it to learn more about potential gaps you can fill, whatever they may turn out to be (e.g. loneliness/wellbeing, a pop up shop or post office etc...) and then explore the viability/capacity to deliver, or is it to test people's receptiveness to something you already want to implement? The questions for the two should look rather different,
- Ask questions that inspire a dialogue e.g. rather than asking "if we put in a toilet would you use the building?" ask questions like "what do you feel is the biggest challenge for our local community", "do you consider the church building to be part of community life, please explain your answer" "are there events and activities you would like to participate in, or do participate in, but need to travel further than you would like to access them"?
- Think carefully about what you will do with the information gathered; how will you thank participants and share/act on responses?

Community engagement and consultation can be time-consuming and challenging at times, so do remember to enjoy it when you can!



### Further Reading

Community Planning Toolkit – Community Engagement <https://www.communityplanningtoolkit.org/>

Crossing the Threshold Toolkit produced by the Diocese of Hereford. Download the whole guide or key sections such as *Chapter 2 - Undertaking a Community Audit and Consulting with the Community*. <https://www.hereford.anglican.org/>

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