

DIVERSE  
INCLUSIVE  
REPRESENTATIVE

TRUST  
TRANSPARENCY  
OPENNESS

# BEST PRACTICE STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT:

## LEARNING FROM THE EVIDENCE

FAIRNESS  
SHARED LEARNING  
EQUITY

LOCAL KNOWLEDGE  
EMPOWERING  
SUSTAINABILITY

### Best practice engagement infographic pack

This infographic pack provides a summary of a report which explores the evidence for best practice public engagement in environmental decision-making processes: '[Embedding an evidence-led, best practice culture of engagement: learning from the evidence](#)'. It is aimed at practitioners and practice enablers who aim to involve public and stakeholder participants with environmental planning and decision-making processes.

This infographic pack can be used either as a booklet or as individual infographics. For more information on any of the topics included, read the accompanying [evidence report](#) and follow the references to other resources.

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# INTRODUCTION

**Engagement is key to making better quality decisions for more sustainable outcomes.** This infographic pack contains key insights from an evidence review of UK and international research on best practice engagement. It is suitable for anyone who is thinking about engaging, including practitioners, practice enablers, researchers, and policy makers who aim to involve members of the public and other key stakeholders in decision-making processes. This focuses on engagement in environmental decision-making, but is intended to be more broadly relevant to other areas of research and practice.

## This booklet can help us to understand:

- What engagement is.
- Why it's important and useful.
- Different models and frameworks.
- The importance of a flexible approach.
- The main benefits of good engagement.
- The risks of poor engagement.
- Pros and cons of digital engagement.
- Key considerations for best practice.



Author: **Caitlin Hafferty** (Countryside and Community Research Institute) based on an evidence report: Hafferty, C., 2022. Embedding an evidence-led, best-practice culture of engagement: learning from the evidence. Natural England Commissioned Report NECR448. Online at: <http://nepubprod.appspot.com/publication/5365328451469312>

*The opinions expressed in this infographic pack are that of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of Natural England.*



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# WHAT IS STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT?

It is important to be clear about what we mean by key terms used. This is because definitions relating to 'engagement' are **complex** and can **change** between different areas of research and practice, which can lead to confusion and contradiction.



Engagement includes a range of ways to **involve members of the public and other stakeholders** in decision-making (and other processes, like research).

Generally, anyone who could be affected by, or can affect, a project or decision should be engaged.



We can define stakeholder engagement as "**a process where individuals, groups, and organisations choose to take an active role in decisions which affect them**".

Stakeholders can be members of the public or interest groups like scientists, regulatory bodies, charities, and organisations.



This can include more **focused engagement** with specific stakeholders, or **wider engagement** with broader publics.



# WHY IS ENGAGEMENT IMPORTANT?



Stakeholder engagement is key to making better quality decisions for more sustainable outcomes. Environmental issues are typically complex, dynamic, and involve **multiple stakeholder groups** and **different types of knowledge**.



People have the right to be involved in decisions that affect their lives.

## THREE MAIN REASONS TO ENGAGE



Engagement helps make more trustworthy and legitimate decisions.



Engagement helps make better quality decisions based on diverse information.



# WHAT DIFFERENT TYPES OF ENGAGEMENT ARE THERE?

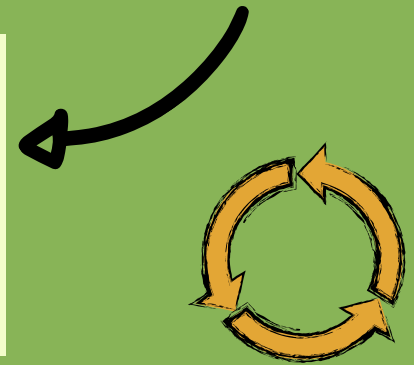
There are lots of different 'types' of engagement which can lead to different outcomes. To help provide clarification and structure for '**what works**', typologies have been developed to define what type of engagement can be carried out, what's involved, the role of different actors, and the goals or outcomes.



One classic example is Arnstein's (1969) *ladder of participation*, which has since informed frameworks in both research and practice (e.g., IAP2's *spectrum of public participation*).

Inform  Empower

Although it remains central to debates, Arnstein's ladder has been critiqued for having a static, linear, and hierarchical structure. In reality, engagement processes can (and should) vary between different **contexts, demographics, and purposes**.



Other approaches have been developed which further incorporate **contextual factors** in the design, process, and evaluation of participatory processes (e.g., engagement 'wheel' and 'tree' typologies; also see the evidence report). This can help us to understand how different engagement strategies are '**fit for purpose**'. It is good practice for engagement to be flexible and adapted to the context and purpose in which it is needed.



# THE **BENEFITS** OF GOOD STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT

There are numerous benefits for engaging which vary between different decision-making contexts.



**Diversity and representation**

Encouraging processes that are more representative of diverse voices.



**Empowerment and co-production**

Empowering stakeholders through the co-production of knowledge.



**Sustainable decisions**

Promoting more sustainable, holistic, and resilient decisions.



**Shared learning**

More opportunities to learn from one another and develop relationships.



**High quality data**

More robust outcomes based on high quality information.



**Meeting local needs**

Capturing local interests, values, needs, and priorities.



**Support and ownership**

Helping to create a sense of ownership over decisions-making outcomes, promoting support.



**Trust and confidence**

Fair, transparent processes can increase trust in decisions and decision-making organisations.





# THE RISKS OF POOR STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT

It's important to be aware of the risk factors and consider how they could be mitigated.



**'Means to an end'**

Decisions have already been made and participants can have little influence.




**Legitimising top-down power**

Top-down approaches viewed as reinforcing unequal power structures.



**Not engaging early enough**

Goals and objectives aren't communicated early on in the process.



**Under-representation**

Failing to represent and/or marginalising groups and individuals.




**Misbelief in a consensus**

There's no guarantee that engagement leads to shared outcomes.



**Over-promising**

Not considering project constraints, over-promising and under-delivering.



**Complex and confusing**

Technical processes require specialist knowledge which can cause confusion, delays, and exclusions.



**Participant fatigue**

Poorly managed engagement can lead to participants becoming disillusioned.



**Unsuitable methods**

Not recognising that tools and approaches have different impacts in different situations.



# 📶 OPPORTUNITIES & CHALLENGES FOR DIGITAL ENGAGEMENT



## ACCESSIBILITY AND INCLUSION



Promoting fair and inclusive outcomes by widening participation and reaching new groups.

Creating barriers and 'digital divides' which can prevent people from gaining equal access.



## DIGITAL SKILLS



Offering more opportunities for people to develop skills and confidence in digital literacy.

Exclusions due to lack of knowledge, skills, confidence, or fear of engaging online.



## TIME, COST, AND RESOURCES



Digital engagement can be more flexible and cost-effective, saving valuable time and resources.

Digital tools can be expensive, complicated, and require technical equipment, skills, and training.



## POWER RELATIONS



With a skilled facilitator, digital tools can help promote equal opportunities to participate.

Difficulties 'reading the room' online, making it harder to ensure that everyone can contribute.



## TRUST AND RAPPORT



Digital tools can help develop and maintain relationships, promoting openness and credibility.

Online environments can restrict dialogue and relationship building which is essential for building trust.



## PRIVACY AND SECURITY



Helping to make more robust, secure, transparent, accountable, and data-driven decisions.

Concerns over confidentiality, anonymity, bias and inaccuracy, safe storage, ownership, and control.



## DIGITAL WELL-BEING



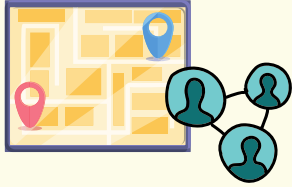
Digital tools are flexible, efficient, and can integrate seamlessly with people's day-to-day life.

Engaging online can be draining and impact mental health, especially when in-person contact is limited.

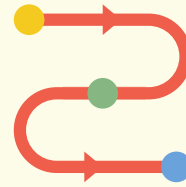




# KEY CONSIDERATIONS FOR BEST PRACTICE ENGAGEMENT



Understand the **local context** and demographics



Engage as **early as possible** and throughout the process



Integrate different **knowledge types** (e.g. local and professional)



Manage **power dynamics** using skilled facilitators



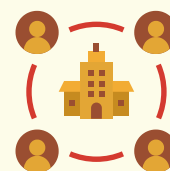
Consider the **length, time scale,** and how often to engage



Manage **realistic expectations** and communicate goals



Carefully select the **appropriate methods** for the context and demographics



Engagement should be underpinned by an **organisational culture**