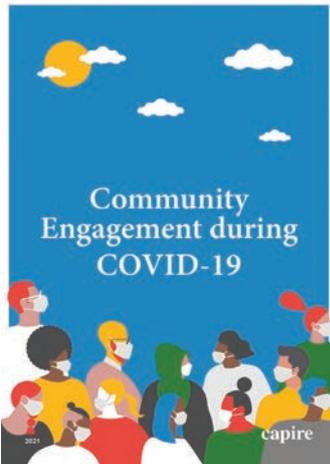




Community Consultation through the Pandemic

Niamh Moynihan

The pandemic has been disruptive for community engagement but it hasn't been all bad. Niamh Moynihan offers some reflections from a community engagement consultant.



At the beginning of the pandemic, community engagement paused when the first work from home orders were put in place. With so much uncertainty including how long we would be working from home and a pending lockdown, there was only a short moment to consider how we would continue to deliver our community engagement activities. It soon became clear that decision-makers

still wanted community engagement to occur to support their projects. We needed to find a way forward to deliver inclusive community engagement activities. So, what have we learnt?

Asking if it is the right time to engage was important

If you cast your mind back to the start of the pandemic, you might remember there was information overdrive as well as a deep sense of worry about how our lives would be impacted. These two factors combined affected people differently – some people were able to continue going about their lives whereas others were deeply impacted. In many instances we asked our clients is now the right time? Can this engagement period be delayed? In the early days projects delayed their engagement activities for a short period however the longer we went into the pandemic the more organisations resolved to engage. This meant we had to think carefully about our participants and how they might be feeling when they arrived at an online session or answered our phone call. Taking time to check-in with people and acknowledge the range of feelings people were experiencing was important.

Picking up the phone helped reach a diversity of community members

Phone calls have always been part of the community engagement toolkit, however they are now used less when opportunities such as pop-ups provide face-to-face interaction with a range of community members in busy locations. The pandemic saw a return to phone calls with interested community members. Speaking to someone directly has its benefits. Often these phone calls provided insights about a local area through the eyes of the caller that may not have been captured through an online survey.

We found phone calls a useful alternative to another 'online meeting' with people already feeling overburdened by the amount of screen time they were experiencing (including this writer). Phone calls also ensured equity across our engagement as they are not dependent on having internet data, access to a computer or technical skills. We found phone calls worked well with a project that involved public housing tenants when seeking their feedback on an open space master plan. We were able to call or text the tenants

to agree to a convenient time to discuss the project as well as identifying if they needed any language translators to support them during their call. By calling the tenants there was no cost to them which is an important consideration for those experiencing financial vulnerability and it supported good levels of participation. During a call to seek feedback on the project, a facilitator would complete an online survey on a tenant's behalf and with their permission. This approach gave tenants space to share their ideas and feedback through a structured conversation that was easily analyzed and reported back to the project team.

Building or leveraging existing community networks helped to reach a range of community members who may not have participated online

Community Champions emerged as a successful tool to engage with a diverse group of community members over an extended period. A Community Champions group is made up of 10-15 community members who are recruited through an expression of interest. A key criterion is their ability to reach and connect with a broad network. The Community Champions are then inducted into the project by providing them with a presentation and information pack with lots of time and space to ask questions. Armed with key project information they are instructed to chat with their networks about the project and encourage their participation in the engagement activities.

We have found that community members are more likely to trust and accept a project and the engagement process, when they hear about it through a friend, family member or someone in their social network. Community Champions would then meet every few weeks to report back on their conversations including the feedback they are hearing. Importantly we also learned if there was concern or misinformation within the community that could be addressed as part of the engagement activities.

Creating a positive participant experience was a key design focus when replicating face to face engagement activities online

We learnt early on that online engagement sessions need to be shorter than the equivalent face-to-face session. Expecting participants to sit and stay focused in front of a screen for over two-hours is a big ask. Once we had established that we turned our focus to the participant's experience. How do we make sure people have an enjoyable session? How can we effectively sustain their engagement online? Fortunately, there are great online tools to help with this. Key to our agenda design is breaking the two-hours up into small pieces that each have a different purpose. Often with online sessions you provide information, respond to questions and then collect feedback. Here's what I've learnt about how to deliver these three session components well:

- Providing information that's engaging. The presentation of information should be no more than 30 minutes in total for the whole two-hours. The content should be presented using bullet points, images, and graphics to support different participant learning styles. Replacing presentation sections with animations or pre-recorded videos helps to mix it up and keep audiences engaged.
- Responding to questions. Depending on the size of the group, there are a range of ways to respond to questions. If the group is larger than 20, the chat or question and answer functions work well to ensure all participants have equal opportunity to ask a question. If the group is smaller than 20, participants can be encouraged to

ask their questions by raising their virtual or physical hand, turning on their microphone and addressing the presenter. In both cases it is important to manage participant expectations on the length of the Q&A component, address questions that weren't able to be responded to and our role as facilitator in balancing the number of questions asked by each participant.

- Collecting feedback. The upside of online engagement is the ability to collect instant feedback in many ways. Some online meeting tools have inbuilt quick polls to collect instant individual responses. Online feedback tools like MentiMeter enable participants to provide feedback using their phone or computer using a range of different survey question types such as polls, word cloud, open text, checkbox and multiple choice. Putting people into small groups using break out rooms provides space and time for conversations before collecting feedback from each small group using a digital worksheet.

Inclusive engagement is driving our design

My organisation Capire Consulting Group has always had a strong focus on inclusive engagement. We ensure that a diverse range of community members who may be First Nations, younger, older, living with a disability, Culturally and Linguistically Diverse or experiencing financial hardship have an opportunity to participate in engagement activities. This became a bigger focus for us during the pandemic. We invested more time in understanding how we could ensure participation in our activities was diverse and that no one's participation was unfairly hindered by the pandemic. In some cases, this meant reimbursing participation costs such as internet data or teaching people how to use online tools before an event so they felt confident to participate.

Hybrid engagement is here to stay

Hybrid engagement in this context refers to a mix of online and face-to-face activities as part of an engagement program as opposed to an engagement session where there are a mix of in person and online participants. We are now seeing a mix of online and in person engagement activities included in nearly all requests for quotes and client briefs.

As a society our digital literacy has experienced a big uplift through the pandemic with more people familiar with using online meeting technology and feedback tools. This means people have more choice about how they would like to

participate and can choose to attend an online or in person session depending on what suits them best. We've learnt that some participants prefer online events and participating through the chat function as they are not confident speaking in public. We have also seen higher attendance for mid-week evening events as it is easier to turn on your computer than travel to a venue, especially in winter. Online events also provide a participation opportunity for people not willing to attend an event due to the risk of COVID-19 transmission or other health conditions.

On the flip side, other people enjoy being back in a room and engaging with the project team directly.

A key consideration for hybrid engagement is to ensure equity of participation in online and in-person events – this means the participant experience and opportunity to provide feedback should be the same no matter if it's online or in person.

Another benefit to hybrid engagement is its less resource intensive than a full program of in person events. Having a mix of in-person and online events means staff resourcing, catering, venue hire, printing and material costs are reduced in comparison to a program that is fully delivered in person.

A Plan B for face-to-face engagement activities is necessary

We've learnt to be flexible! Last year we had planned an in-person focus group and on the day a lock-down was announced. In a couple of hours, we called each of the registered participants to let them know it would be online and they would be emailed a link to the meeting. Calling each of the registered participants prior to sending the email meant we only had a small number of drop-offs. We then adjusted our agenda to an online format and used online worksheets instead of butcher's paper and sticky notes. Participants appreciated that the event still went ahead.

Read our Community Engagement during COVID-19 Toolkit to learn more

As we learnt from each of these experiences collected during the peak of the pandemic, we thought it was important to share this knowledge broadly. Last year we produced a toolkit to help organisations determine when it is the right time to engage and how to design an inclusive process responsive to the level of restrictions in place. Download our toolkit here <https://capire.com.au/impact/publications/>

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