



INCLUSIVE AND ACCESSIBLE

Engagement Position Paper

In recent years, the expectation of engagement has evolved from involving a small minority to including the ‘whole’ community.

This paper explores inclusive and accessible engagement, why it is important for contemporary engagement practice, how it can be championed throughout engagement practice, and the role of Engagement Institute.

Engagement was once primarily the domain of those who were connected, confident, resourced, and mobile. However, as decision-makers and communities increasingly recognise the benefits of inclusive engagement, there is a growing call for broader participation. This shift is reflected in the International Association for Public Participation (Engagement Institute)’s Core Values, which emphasise the importance of involving the entire community (the ‘public’). In other words, the aim is to engage the ‘whole’ community, encompassing a diverse range of people from different backgrounds, demographics, and interests.

Engaging the ‘whole’ community begins with understanding its diversity. This involves recognising and valuing the differences among individuals and groups, which could include different ages, genders, sexual orientations, cultural and linguistic backgrounds, religions, and physical, mental, and cognitive abilities. Diversity in communities for policy making also extends to people from different geographic locations, identities, or shared interests.

Creating engagement for the ‘whole’ community needs to achieve two criteria: being inclusive and being accessible. Being inclusive ensures diverse voices from the community are actively included by removing barriers and treating people fairly. Being inclusive also means people feel welcome when participating, and their contribution is equally valuable. The process also needs to be accessible by creating environments where these diverse voices can be heard using appropriate tools, providing support and giving people options.

What is exclusive community engagement?

When engagement lacks inclusivity and accessibility, it can be described as exclusive. This means it favours certain groups or cohorts over others. There are various reasons why engagement may be considered exclusive rather than inclusive and accessible. These reasons often include a lack of awareness about the engagement within specific groups or cohorts, reliance on limited engagement methods (such as solely online or solely in-person), or failure to provide necessary support for participation.



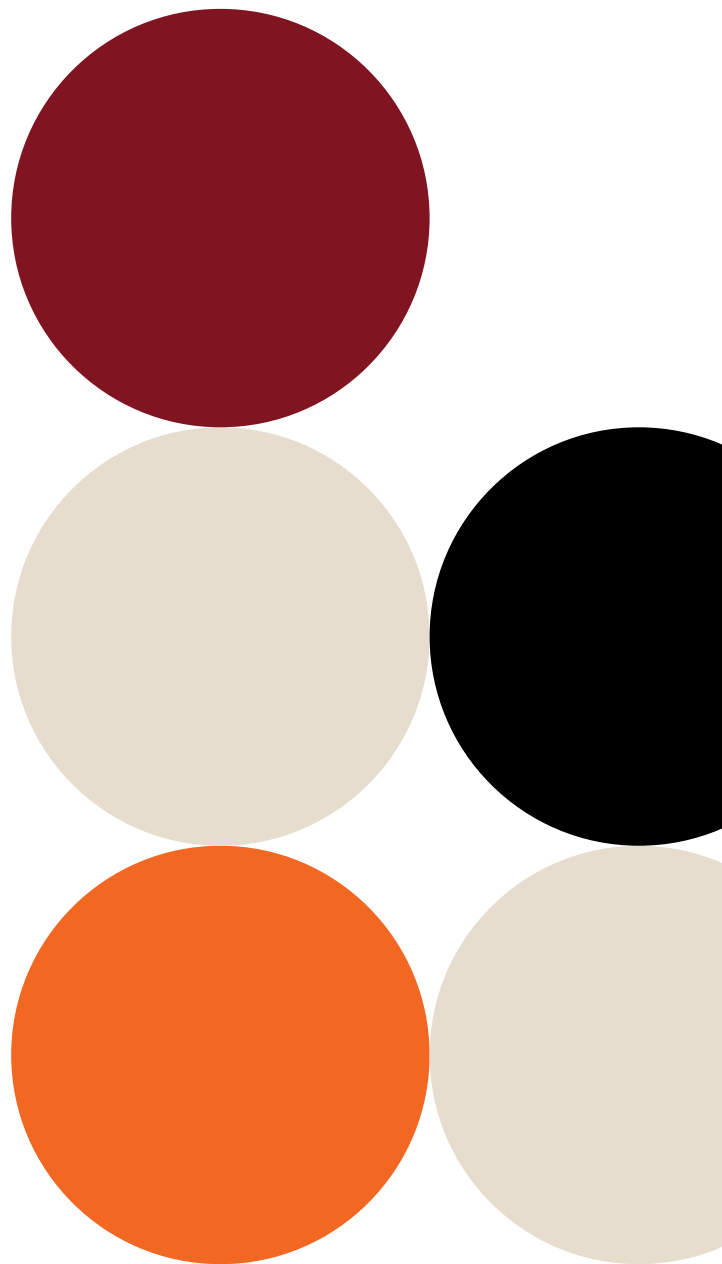
WHY IS INCLUSIVE AND ACCESSIBLE ENGAGEMENT IMPORTANT?

Inclusion and accessibility are the very foundation of public policy worldwide. Public policy makers strive to achieve social equity by addressing systemic disparities among groups with varying levels of social advantage or disadvantage. In this context, the importance of inclusion and accessibility in contemporary engagement practice cannot be overstated.

Many researchers have examined the complexities, benefits, and consequences of including diversity in policy making. Experiences and reflections have shown that when diversity is central to policy making, more comprehensive, forward-thinking decisions can be made to achieve more equitable outcomes for a community with diverse needs.

However, diversity is only a description of a community. It does not lead to equitable outcomes but requires a considered engagement process to foster meaningful interactions between different stakeholder groups.

This requires a comprehensive understanding of the community's diversity, that is not overgeneralised or based on inaccurate assumptions. Building knowledge about community members, their interests, and what is required to help them access an engagement process is essential. There is also a need to design and deliver an engagement process that facilitates meaningful interactions where people feel safe sharing, contributing, and exchanging ideas.



WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS?

Inclusive and accessible engagement has significant benefits for project outcomes, decision-makers, and the community at large. First and foremost, it ensures that every member of the community is given the opportunity to share their voice and can influence decisions about their future. This leads to creating policies, plans and projects that cater to the needs, and address the concerns, of as many people as possible. This approach not only widens perspectives but also minimises knowledge gaps and incorrect assumptions, resulting in more comprehensive evaluations and assessments for decision-making processes.

For decision-makers, inclusive and accessible engagement serves as a bridge to fill knowledge gaps, informing their decisions and daily practices. Diverse input helps identify potential unexpected findings or unintended consequences early in the process, reducing project risks later. It also promotes transparency and accountability. It facilitates more efficient resource allocation by providing a clearer understanding of community needs and gaps, thereby preventing errors and minimising the need for reworking in later stages. Finally, it can foster ongoing relationships and connections with diverse community members, enhancing mutual understanding, building trust and creating opportunities for collaboration.

For communities, inclusive and accessible engagement promotes active participation and a sense of belonging in the decision-making process, thereby cultivating shared responsibility for shaping the future. It also facilitates capacity building by enabling community members to acquire knowledge and skills during the engagement process, which they can apply to their personal lives, for example, employment opportunities. Participating in engagement activities has been linked to increased well-being, confidence, and social cohesion among citizens. Additionally, it strengthens community connections by removing barriers between groups and cohorts, builds trust among community members and strengthens relationships. Ultimately, inclusive policy decisions positively impact community well-being when they are made and implemented together.



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WHAT ARE THE BARRIERS?

Inclusive and accessible engagement aims to break down barriers that prevent people from participating in engagement. This process begins with identifying these barriers, which can vary widely—from physical obstacles like accessibility issues to social barriers such as lack of representation or understanding.

How participants are identified and invited to contribute can impact the level of representation in an engagement. People self-select to participate in engagement, and even inviting participants at random still requires the individual to opt into the process.

Communities are diverse and multifaceted. Each individual encompasses a range of identities and experiences, influencing how they interact with and are impacted by policies and initiatives. For instance, factors like education, abilities and disabilities, language proficiency, and socio-economic status can significantly shape a person's ability to participate in community engagement.

The term 'hard to reach' often refers to marginalised and vulnerable groups and reflects the broader inequalities in communities. It can denote the systemic barriers that individuals or groups face due to their geographic location, social status, or discrimination. These barriers can create a cycle where certain voices remain unheard or underrepresented in decision-making processes. Additionally, assumptions about these groups create further barriers that influence their ability and tendency to participate in engagement.

Effective engagement strategies must acknowledge and accommodate these complexities. This involves more than superficial efforts; it requires deep understanding and proactive measures to ensure inclusivity. Representation from underrepresented groups is critical in shaping policies that genuinely reflect diverse needs and perspectives.

On a practical level, the format of engagement activities itself can be a barrier. Activities requiring physical mobility or prolonged sitting may exclude those with mobility issues or health concerns. Budget constraints also pose challenges, limiting the resources available to implement inclusive practices effectively. These factors underscore the importance of holistic planning to foster genuine inclusivity and accessibility in community engagement.



Described below are some of the key barriers to inclusive and accessible engagement:

Participation Barriers

Language: Challenges related to language differences and communication methods.

Literacy and Numeracy: Issues related to varying literacy and numeracy skills.

Age and Learning Styles: Variability in how different age groups and learning styles process information.

Costs: Financial barriers related to participation, such as transportation, lost work, or childcare expenses.

Health Issues: Physical or mental health conditions that affect participation ability or confidence to participate.

Cultural Barriers

Cultural and Social Norms: Certain groups, such as younger people, women or people with a disability, may not be treated or listened to as equals due to social or cultural norms.

Historical Sensitivities: Issues related to engaging at sites of historical trauma or involving leaders lacking cultural competency.

Engagement Process Barriers

Timing: Inconvenient scheduling of engagement activities.

Venue Accessibility: Challenges with physical access to venues, including issues with mobility aids and transportation.

Notice and Planning Time: Insufficient time for participants to prepare and plan for engagement.

Technology Access: Barriers related to access to technology, internet connectivity, and digital tools.

Motivational Barriers

Skills and Confidence: Lack of confidence or skills affecting participation, including difficulties with digital platforms.

Previous Experiences and Relationships: Skepticism or reluctance stemming from past negative experiences or strained relationships with the organisation.

Consultation Fatigue: Weariness from frequent consultations, especially when previous input has not been addressed or acknowledged.

Trust: Distrust in institutions or government, leading to beliefs that community feedback may be ignored.



ENABLE INCLUSIVE AND ACCESSIBLE COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

There is a wide range of strategies for inclusive and accessible engagement, some of which are described below.

Representation

The community engagement industry must have practitioners who reflect the community's diversity, and there are various pathways to enter the sector and gain experience.

Cultural knowledge and cultural load

Gain permission from First Nations leaders to share cultural knowledge and identify if knowledge is protected as intellectual property to cultural leaders. Be aware of cultural load and provide support systems, such as cultural training, mentorship, and creating inclusive environments that acknowledge and value cultural diversity.

Intersectionality

Acknowledge and respond to intersectionality and its impact on engagement. People have multiple, overlapping identities. When reviewing engagement outcomes, it is important to disaggregate data and layer multiple identities; for example, what do queer women with a disability have to do to feel safe in their community as compared to other voices.

Understanding the community

Actively listen to communities to understand their needs, barriers, and preferred participation modes. Approach the community in ways most convenient for them, and offer multiple engagement opportunities at different times, locations, and formats to accommodate diverse schedules and preferences.

Engage with representatives prior to broad engagement

Prioritise engaging with advocacy groups and community representatives on your engagement program to gain input or feedback into engagement approaches before full implementation.

Transparency

Participants should receive clear information about the process, expected outcomes, and their level of influence. They must also engage with communities and provide updates on progress and the impact their participation has had on the decision-making process.



ENABLE INCLUSIVE AND ACCESSIBLE COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT *Cont.*

Education

Educate communities about the project and the engagement process so they have the knowledge and confidence to participate fully. Design project materials to be easily understandable, available in plain language, culturally appropriate language, and accessible in multiple formats such as audio, video, and visuals. Designate contact persons for inquiries, including information about specific engagement tools like online forums or workshops.

Translation and interpreters
Offer sign and language translation services in engagement invitations to ensure comprehensive language accessibility. Translate documents into different languages and prepare them in accessible formats for people using screen readers and other visual aids.

Accessible language

Use clear, accessible language and definitions. Collaborate with representative organisations to understand diverse engagement preferences and avoid technical jargon.

Engagement methods

Use a combination of tools and formats, including online and in-person interactions. Encourage creativity in engagement strategies by exploring beyond traditional methods. Give people options in how they receive information and how they participate.

Creating awareness

Build awareness of the opportunity to participate by using a diverse range of channels and mediums. This could include different types of advertising, linking with community networks, and connecting with local events and activities.

Inclusive environments

Host in-person engagement events in venues that are universally accessible and have appropriate amenities for participants. Use a mix of locations as this will attract different types of people.

Role of facilitators

Facilitators play a significant role in managing the engagement process and must ensure inclusive discussions. Facilitators must maintain a nonpartisan approach, ensure everyone has a voice, and hear all concerns and arguments.





Flexibility

Be flexible during the engagement process to gather formal and informal feedback from participants or colleagues. This might involve adjusting workshop flows to support people with disabilities or changing the time and location of focus groups to accommodate specific cohorts.

Compensation and incentives

Compensation and incentives, such as covering travel or childcare expenses, should be provided to broaden community participation. Lowering participation barriers can promote greater equity. For instance, offer stipends for engagement participants where extensive participation is required, such as in deliberative processes.

Evaluate and reflect

Allow time to evaluate and reflect after each engagement to help identify what is working and what needs improvement. Review the engagement process to understand its effectiveness in enabling diverse representation and recognise the barriers that may have excluded certain community members to gain insight into how these challenges can be addressed in the future. Continuous evaluation is important in ensuring engagement practices can evolve to become more inclusive and accessible.

Long-term relationships

Build and sustain enduring partnerships with community groups to strengthen engagement efforts over time. Respect participants' investment of time and energy, which is crucial for sustained participation and involvement. This could involve consultative groups or a standing community panel.

Time and budget

Engaging with diverse community members requires time and budget. An engagement program may require different types of activities and participant support, which also requires time and money.



WHAT CAN ENGAGEMENT INSTITUTE DO?

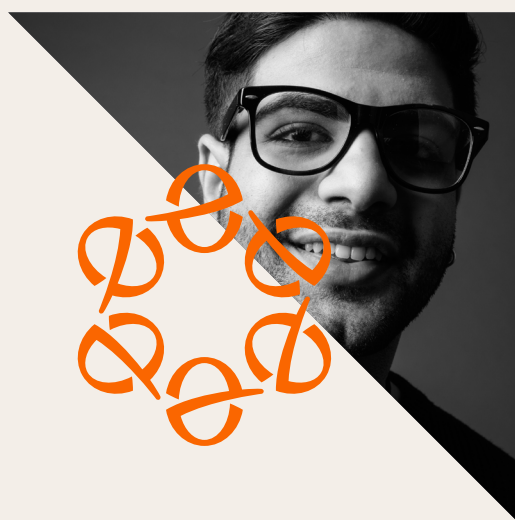
As the leading professional association for community engagement practitioners, Engagement Institute has a role in advocating for inclusive and accessible engagement across our industry – from our members to their organisations, and their communities. A first step in championing this agenda is the creation of a principle for inclusive and accessible engagement.



Engagement is inclusive and accessible, addressing systemic and individual barriers to enable equitable and safer participation for all’.

INFORMATION AND NEXT STEPS

Engagement Institute worked with members and other stakeholders to produce an Inclusive Accessible Engagement Policy that launched in 2025. Visit engagementinstitute.org.au to download the policy.



SCENARIOS

Inclusive engagement is essential for ensuring everyone has the opportunity to participate meaningfully, regardless of their individual needs or circumstances. What does that look like in practice? Consider the following scenarios where different approaches are taken to ensure broad participation and accessibility.

Scenario 1

Marium is a leader of a community group. She is a migrant and a mother. At times, she finds English challenging and prefers discussions with women due to cultural norms. Inclusive engagement for Marium means attending community meetings or having one-on-one conversations with female facilitators, with interpreters who speak her native language. Providing translators and holding separate women-only sessions help her feel comfortable participating and sharing views. Additionally, offering childcare at community meetings allows Marium to have her children cared for without worrying about the cost. Ensuring written materials are also available in her language helps her to keep informed and up to date with updates on decision-making.

Scenario 2

Alex, a Council Officer, is leading a project that is seeking community input. Aware that many community members may lack digital access, Alex ensures inclusive engagement by providing multiple options for participation. Instead of relying on the online project website, printed copies are made available at community centres and libraries. Alex also sets up a phone line where community members can discuss the project and complete surveys verbally. Additionally, drop-in sessions are available for in-person engagement with Council Officers. All information about these options, are included in the Council-wide letterbox drops to ensure everyone in the community has the opportunity to participate.

Scenario 3

Ellen, a facilitator, is organising a series of community workshops on a project. To accommodate the varying needs, she selects multiple venues with wheelchair access and ensures they are equipped with necessary amenities. Workshops are held at different locations and times to provide flexibility for participants with different schedules. Ellen designs activities that minimise physical strain and incorporate various participation methods. Printed slides and materials are available. Her team is briefed to assist with wayfinding or other specific requirements before the workshops commence. These measures ensure that all participants, regardless of their needs, can engage fully and meaningfully in the workshops.



DEFINITIONS

Accessible: Accessible engagement means ensuring that all community members, regardless of their physical sensory, or cognitive abilities, can participate fully in engagement processes. This includes removing barriers to access and providing necessary accommodations such as offering language assistance, and ensuring that venues are physically accessible for everyone.

Engagement: Engagement is an intentional process with the specific purpose of working across organisations, stakeholders, and communities to shape the decisions or actions of members of the community, stakeholders, or organisation in relation to a problem, opportunity, or outcome.

Equitable: Equitable engagement ensures that all community members, regardless of their background or circumstances, have fair access to participation opportunities. It aims to recognise and address the systemic inequalities that may prevent certain groups from engaging fully.

Inclusive: Inclusive engagement is about involving all stakeholders in the decision-making process, making them feel welcome and included, and ensuring that diverse perspectives are heard and considered. This involves seeking out and encouraging participation from underrepresented groups to ensure their voices are heard and included.



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