



A short guide to Community Engagement

What is it?

Community Engagement is the process of getting communities involved in decisions that affect them. This includes the planning, development and management of services as well as activities which are designed to promote community cohesion and safer and healthier neighbourhoods.

It is a process of working collaboratively with groups of people affiliated by geographic proximity, special interest, or similar situations to address issues affecting the well being of those people. Two key outcomes of Community Engagement are:

- 1) *More people actively involved in their neighbourhoods*
- 2) *Local people able to influence decisions about their own neighbourhoods and public services*¹

What's the wider agenda?

Increasingly government policy is recognising that local people have a large role to play when it comes to creating safe neighbourhoods and communities 'at ease'. As a consequence resources to encourage more decision-making to happen locally are being put in place. One example of this is Local Area Agreements which are documents that set the priorities for each area as agreed by local partners. Research and best practice in the arts also tells us that engaging with local people is key to actively creating accessible arts venues and opportunities that are relevant to local audiences and can sustain their interest and support.

How does it relate to the cultural sector?

Community engagement approaches in the cultural sector have been identified as having particular success at providing an entry point for further engagement. In other words if a person engages with the arts it is likely they will go on to access further services. The arts also offer many opportunities for people to develop their own skills, interests and experiences and have a unique ability to inspire people both at a group and individual level. These attributes can support the level of participation needed for successful community engagement. The personal and social impacts have the potential to transform individual lives, while at the same time building community cohesion and creating a sense of pride and identity².

¹ Citizen Engagement & Public Services: Why Neighbourhoods Matter, (2005) ODPM/ Home Office

² Arts Council England, 2005.

Audiences London believe cultural organisations can play a vital role in their local communities, providing inspiring opportunities for community cohesion, empowerment, learning and skills development, employment and regeneration. Arts organisations that are able to do this are better positioned to attract more supportive audiences, richer partnerships, and more resources - making them more sustainable in the long term. Arts organisations and artists that work in this way also report that they are rewarded by insight and creative inspiration.

What does it mean in practice?

Community Engagement is a long term approach to listening to and working with communities. Key to a Community Engagement approach is factoring in space, time and support for people to shape the outcomes of a project or experience, rather than simply providing a pre-designed opportunity for participation in a workshop or performance.

Community Engagement in the arts involves professional artists and professionals in arts organisations working with communities, to generate outcomes that are based on the interests, views and circumstances of the group.

The word 'Community' describes a variety of situations. Communities are formed by individuals coming together because they share a common experience, interest or belief. Examples of these would include people living in the same street (location), people who support Arsenal football club (interest) and members of the Brent Friends of the Earth Group (belief).

As an arts organisation - what's in it for us?

- New audiences , particularly non-attenders
- New partners, in new sectors
- New supporters
- New creative inspiration
- New funding opportunities

Cultural organisations that have strong relationships with their local communities are more sustainable; attracting more audiences and visitors, more partners and more resources.

How do I know if it's the right approach at the right time?

It's important to identify whether community engagement is right for your organisation and your priorities. We've written the box on the next page to help you reflect and decide if the community engagement approach is right for your work at this time. If you'd like to discuss this with us we're very happy to have an informal chat. You'll find contact details on the next page.

The Community Engagement approach is right for your organisation if...

You're committed to

Communities having some influence on your work and organisation
Seeing your organisation as part of a wider local community or neighbourhood
Working in multi-agency partnerships
Community capacity-building
Making links with local decision making structures and processes

You want your organisation to be

Accessible
Attractive to new audiences
Seen as of value to the community
Responsive to local need and issues
In dialogue with local partners

Audiences London provide a specialist service supporting community engagement. To find out how we can help you contact:

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