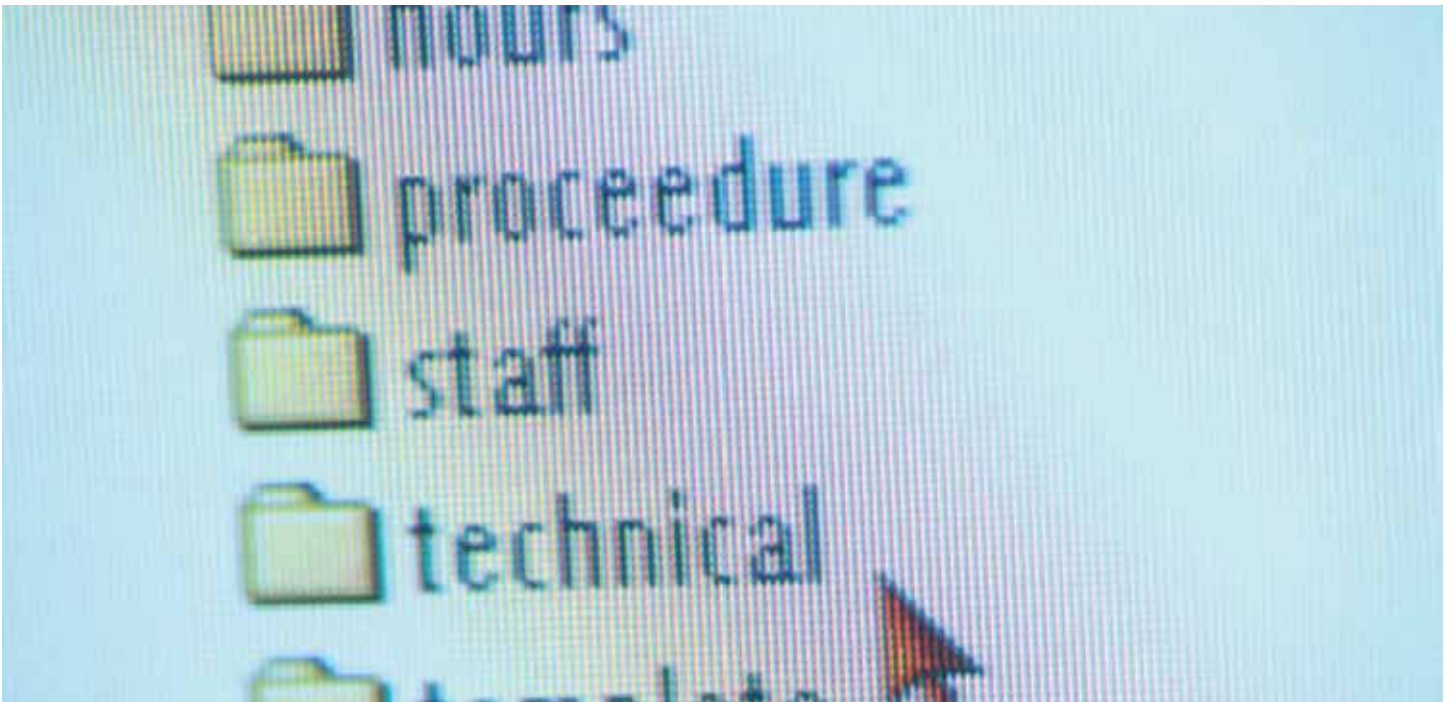


How are engagement activities and initiatives evaluated and assessed?

Key Questions to Ask about How to Engage the Public **QUESTION 12 OF 14**



Most cities have not thought through how they should track and evaluate their public engagement activities. This is also true of many other organizations – school systems, nonprofit organizations, local foundations, community organizing groups – that work to involve citizens. Even some of the most basic measures – such as how many people turned out for a public meeting – often go unrecorded. Outcomes of meetings, such as the decisions reached, recommendations made or actions taken by citizens or government, are seldom examined carefully or publicized widely.

Evaluation is also an area where citizens can play a role. As participants in (and sometimes the organizers of) various engagement activities, citizens are well-placed to gather and report information about levels and rates of participation. Online tools can make it easier for citizens to contribute some of this data, and help analyze it. (What factors affect overall turnout? How well are different populations represented? How satisfied are public managers, or citizens, with the process? What commitments were made?) Compiling a running record of the processes and outcomes of engagement can help answer some of the key questions asked by officials (for example, “How broad is the support for the recommendations I am hearing?”) and give everyone the chance to assess and improve the way engagement works.

What Counts as ‘Quality’ in Engagement?

The most successful engagement efforts have several characteristics in common. When evaluating democratic governance work, consider these four benchmarks:

- Scale and diversity of participation. How many people are taking part? How diverse are they? Are the people most affected by the issue or decision part of the process? Is it convenient for people to participate?
- Structured, informed discussions. How is information being provided? How are the meetings/interactions being facilitated? Are they truly participatory? Do people have a chance to consider a range of options or solutions? Are they being given a chance to make up their own minds?
- Valuing citizen experiences and goals. Does the process allow people to talk about why they care about the issue? Does it allow them to address issues of difference and equity? Does the project fit with their goals for being involved?
- Tangible actions and outcomes. How will local government and other decision-makers respond to the input received? How will the effort keep people connected to the policy-making process? Does the project encourage and support action by other organizations, by small teams of people, and/or by individual volunteers?

MORE SPECIFIC QUESTIONS TO ASK ABOUT EVALUATION AND ASSESSMENT:

- How does the city currently evaluate and assess its public engagement work?
- How do other organizations in the community evaluate and assess their engagement work?
- Have there been any independent evaluations carried out, by academics or other researchers, on either the general level of engagement in the community or on particular engagement initiatives?

POTENTIAL NEXT STEPS:

- Reach out to local academic researchers or other independent evaluators to explore possibilities for more and better evaluation of public engagement.
- Create tools that allow citizens to gather and assess information about public engagement processes.

