

National Standards for Community Engagement

User's Guide



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INTRODUCTION

This users' guide has been designed to support the implementation of the National Standards for Community Engagement and should be used alongside the standards booklet.

This guide sets out what the standards are for, who can use them and the different ways they can be used with some helpful tips on getting started. The guide aims to help everyone who wants to use the standards in a practical way and maximise their impact.

WHAT ARE THE STANDARDS FOR COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT?

The standards for community engagement set out 10 statements of commitment that can be used to develop and support better working relationships between communities and agencies delivering public services. They are underpinned by principles of good practice that have been highlighted by community and agency representatives across Scotland to promote equality and fairness.

Each standard has a series of indicators that can be collected in order to assess performance. The standards can be used to ensure good practice and hold communities and partners to account.



WHAT ARE THEY FOR?

The standards aim to transform the quality of community engagement by providing measurable performance statements that can be used by everyone involved to achieve highest quality process and results.

The goal is community engagement that is:

- effective in achievement of the shared purposes of the participants;
- efficient by being well-informed, rational, considered and focused on purpose; and
- equitable by giving a fair voice to all communities and tackling any barriers that may exclude them.

AND WHAT ARE THEY NOT FOR?

There is scepticism about standards because they are frequently misused. The standards for community engagement are not about:

- Public relations – giving an impression of performance that is not reflected in practice
- Standardisation – making the same response irrespective of the circumstances
- Lowest common denominators – accepting the minimum acceptable performance
- Unachievable ambition – suspending reality and promising what cannot be delivered
- Compulsion or punishment – using power to require others to behave in ways that we do not demonstrate ourselves

WHOSE STANDARDS ARE THEY?

The standards were developed with the involvement of over 500 community and agency representatives across Scotland – ownership belonged to them all. The standards are for people, agencies and communities who are committed to improving practice in community engagement.

This project was undertaken by the Scottish Community Development Centre on behalf of Communities Scotland and the Scottish Executive, however, these organisations did not create the standards nor are they imposing them.

The Minister for Communities commissioned the standards project following a recommendation of a working group of the Scottish Social Inclusion Network.

ARE THE STANDARDS FOR YOU?

The standards are for practical use by anyone who is committed to improving community engagement. Based on the experience of agencies and communities across Scotland, the standards describe what is involved in achieving good practice.

So, if you are involved in community engagement that is committed to improving local services and building stronger communities, the standards are for you and your community and agency partners.

ARE YOU INVOLVED IN COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT?

Community engagement can take many forms, however, it is always a process that involves purposeful dialogue between public agencies and communities aimed at improving understanding between them and taking more effective action to achieve beneficial change.

Communities Scotland defines community engagement as follows¹:

“Community engagement is the process of involving communities in the development and management of services such as health, education and housing. It may also involve other issues which concern us all, or it may be about tackling the problems of a neighbourhood, such as crime, drug misuse or lack of play facilities for children. Community engagement takes many shapes and forms. It can involve simple exercises in consultation through to the formation of multi-agency partnerships with community representation at the centre. Underlying effective community engagement is the commitment of service providers and planners to listen to those for whom services are being planned.”

¹ Definition from the Community Engagement How to Guide:
http://www.communitiesscotland.gov.uk/Web/Site/Engagement/community_engagement.asp

HOW CAN YOU USE THE STANDARDS?

Through testing of the standards in six pilot projects across Scotland, five types of use of have been identified:

- PLANNING
- ASSESSMENT
- MONITORING
- EVALUATION
- GROUND RULES

PLANNING

Before any engagement begins the standards provide a clear guide to the characteristics of good practice. They provide a powerful tool to achieve fair, efficient and effective community engagement.

For example, by considering the involvement and support standards and associated indicators, it is possible to ensure that all the relevant interested people and groups are identified and barriers to their involvement overcome.

Once the engagement process has started there will be particular aspects of it that need to be carefully planned, for example, identifying appropriate methods, thinking about what will help the participants to work together or ensuring effective feedback. Using the relevant standards and indicators can assist the planning of each.

ASSESSMENT

At any time, the standards enable the participants to work together to gauge how well they think the engagement that they are involved in is working. The standards can be used to score performance. This highlights views of strengths and weaknesses and differences of opinion between participants about what these are. This enables thinking and discussion about what is working, what is not, why this might be and how improvement could be achieved.

Such assessment can be done in relation to all of the standards or in relation to particular standards that are currently of most relevance. It is sometimes even useful to take single indicators to look in depth at particular features of the engagement. A simple and specific question can be used to focus assessment, for example: do the participants want to be involved?²

² Involvement standard indicator 4, first bullet point.

MONITORING

Periodic assessment of performance leads naturally into monitoring of progress. Using the standards indicators, areas for improvement can be specified. In turn, this can lead to identification of specific actions by particular people or groups that will achieve improvement. For example, weaknesses such as use of jargon or unequal access may have been identified in relation to the sharing information standard. Responsibility for action must be carried through for progress to be made.

The task of monitoring focuses on evidence that agreed action has been taken. Responsibility for this can be allocated to individuals or sub-groups but ultimately all the participants must have confidence that, as mutually agreed, action is being taken to achieve the standards.

EVALUATION

Planning, assessment and monitoring can all be seen as essential contributions to evaluation. However using the standards for evaluation requires a systematic approach that integrates these into the ongoing work of the engagement.

From the planning stage indicators of performance and associated evidence gathering procedures are put in place that lead into a continuous evaluation cycle of planning, monitoring, review and assessment. The standards indicators provide an excellent tool for designing evaluation of community engagement and can be built into the use of established planning and evaluation tools such as LEAP³.

GROUND RULES

The standards for community engagement set out 10 commitments that can be mutually agreed between the participants. They should guide the conduct of the engagement at all stages. Any participant should be able to use them as an active tool to support their own involvement.

If a participant feels that the standards are not being met they should be able to draw attention to this. Simple mechanisms can be used to enable concerns to be explored, for example, during meetings holding up a red card if you feel that a problem is arising. Alternatively at the end of each meeting participants can be invited to identify any perceived breaches of the standards. Similarly a performance can be reviewed between meetings and any concerns reported at the next meeting

³ LEAP – Learning Evaluation and Planning is a framework that has been adapted particularly for use in community learning and development, community health, volunteering and published in appropriate formats. For more information see www.scdc.org.uk

The kinds of problems that might be identified are wide but could include use of jargon, referring to information to which other participants have not had access, lack of representation from appropriate agencies, lack of time to consult with interested parties and so on. By identifying problems quickly, issues can be much more readily resolved than would be the case if they remain hidden but festering. There will always be frustrations and conflicts in any engagement process – by using the standards as ground rules everyone is aware of their mutual responsibilities and there is an agreed framework for resolving conflicts.

CAN THE STANDARDS BE USED FOR DIFFERENT SORTS OF ENGAGEMENT?

In short, yes.

When the standards were being drafted it was felt that it would be beneficial to have a common definition in mind of formal and structured community engagement. This was:

Developing and sustaining a working relationship between one or more public body and one or more community group, to help them both to understand and act on the needs or issues that the community experiences.

This is a definition of the kind of community engagement that would be common, for example, in community planning partnerships. Several of the pilot projects were of this kind and it was found that all of the standards and indicators were relevant.

However, other pilots focused on much more informal and extensive types of engagement such as a shop front information and opinion centre or participatory action research. The standards were found to be just as useable and helpful though some were not necessarily relevant.

The message from this is:

- look at the standards;
- think about the type of engagement that you are involved in; and
- agree with the participants what is relevant for your purposes.

THE COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT 'HOW TO' GUIDE

Communities Scotland has published a 'how to' guide on community engagement on the Scottish Centre for Regeneration's 'how to' guide page of their website at www.communitiesscotland.gov.uk

It sets out a range of techniques for community engagement, highlights other helpful publications and provides case examples. It also contains tools to support use of the standards.

HOW CAN YOU GET STARTED?

These are the top 10 tips for getting started:

1. Keep it as simple as possible
2. Nominate someone to lead on the use of the standards who
 - a. knows what they say
 - b. can see how they might apply to what is being developed
 - c. will introduce other participants to them
3. Seek agreement to use the standards from all those that will be involved in the engagement – participants should not feel that the standards are being imposed on them
4. Build use of the standards into the process of the engagement
5. Make the use of the standards an explicit and shared activity between the participants so that they can all see how using them is in their interests
6. Don't try to implement all 10 standards at once, focus on two or three initially – trying to address everything at once may simply put people off
7. Select the standards you will start with by identifying those that the participants see as most important for the type of engagement they are involved in
8. When introducing the standards to a community engagement process that is already underway, time this to fit in with what is happening:
 - a. introduce the standards at a point when participants are focusing on assessing or reviewing performance and progress
 - b. introduce the standards as a new phase of activity needs to be planned
9. Always focus on those parts of the standards that are seen by the participants as most relevant to the stage of development of the engagement
10. When introducing the standards explain that they are a product of the work of community and agency representatives like themselves who have set out to create a tool to improve the quality of community engagement



ARE THERE ANY SUPPORT TOOLS?

Yes there are. During the pilot projects some simple tools that can be used to apply the standards in practice were tried out. These tools are available on the Communities Scotland website at www.communitiesscotland.gov.uk and are linked to the community engagement 'how to' guide.

In addition a Standards for Community Engagement reference manual has been prepared and case studies from the pilots are also available at the Communities Scotland website.

The manual considers issues that may need to be addressed in applying each standard and its associated indicators. The case studies provide practical illumination of the real experience of using the standards.

WHERE CAN YOU GET FURTHER HELP?

The Scottish Executive has agreed to provide a support package to ensure the successful implementation of the standards across Scotland. Details of the support package will be made available on the Communities Scotland website at www.communitiesscotland.gov.uk.

Or you can find out more by contacting the Community Engagement Team:

Communities Scotland
Thistle House
91 Haymarket Terrace
Edinburgh
EH12 5HE

telephone 0131 479 5319

email tracey.bibb@communitiesscotland.gsi.gov.uk

WHY WERE THE STANDARDS CREATED?

The standards were developed to improve community engagement because practice has not lived up to people's expectations.

Research evidence and the testimony of community representatives indicate that the realities have not matched the rhetoric. Reports have variously described community engagement as:

- Having 'modest impact'
- Being 'tokenistic'
- Prioritising 'official views'
- Focusing on 'peripheral decisions'

As one report concluded⁴:

"Citizens need to be convinced that their views will be taken into account and that local authorities and other public agencies are willing to change their ways of working."


In Scotland, the following deficiencies in community engagement have been highlighted:

- Short time scales for community consultation
- Limited community influence on agenda setting
- Lack of access to relevant information
- Over formalised participation procedures
- Lack of investment in developing skills of agency staff
- Lack of investment in developing skills and providing support for community representatives
- Lack of clear constitutions for partnerships that clarify and regulate the powers, roles and remits of partners

The National Standards for Community Engagement are designed to tackle these concerns.

The standards were also created because policies in health, housing, education, planning, community learning, environmental improvement, social care and other areas have all recognised the importance of engagement with communities and service users. The commitment to public participation is brought together in community planning. If community planning and other participatory policies are to be delivered effectively, attention to the quality of community engagement is essential.

⁴ Paul Burgess, Stephen Hall, John Mawson and Graham Pearce (2001), 'Devolved approaches to local governance: Policy and practice in neighbourhood management', York Publishing Services for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation



Community planning:

The Local Government in Scotland Act 2003 part 2 section 15(1) requires local authorities to: 'initiate... maintain and facilitate' Community Planning so that:

"public services... are provided and the planning of that provision takes place (a) after consultation –

- i) among all the public bodies (including the local authority) responsible for providing those services; and*
 - ii) with such community bodies and other bodies or persons as is appropriate; and*
- (b) after and by way of such co-operation among those bodies and persons as is appropriate."*

HOW WERE THE STANDARDS CREATED?

The standards project was conducted in partnership between Communities Scotland and the Scottish Community Development Centre with the assistance of an advisory group representing communities and a wide range of agencies.

There were two stages.

Stage 1:

- Focus groups were conducted across Scotland to identify the community engagement issues and priorities of experienced community and agency representatives⁵.
- Six working groups of community and agency representatives from across Scotland specified the key themes and drew up draft standards.
- Three national conferences reviewed the draft standards and recommended changes.

During stage 1 more than 500 representatives of communities and agencies were involved in developing the draft standards.

Stage 2:

- Six pilot projects⁶ tested the clarity and relevance of the standards and helped the project to understand how to build them into practice⁷.
- The standards were revised in the light of the experience of the pilots.
- Guidance and support materials were prepared.
- The standards were endorsed by relevant national bodies.

The way in which the standards and indicators were developed reflected best practice in community engagement. The standards are the result of extensive community and agency participation. Participants have supported them because they are recognised as setting out necessary and appropriate guidance for the conduct of good quality community engagement.

⁵ The focus groups included rural and urban areas, black and minority ethnic groups, disabled, younger and older people.

⁶ A separate report reviewing the experience of the pilots is available

⁷ The pilots focused on different types of engagement with different levels of formality. They included community regeneration, community health, early years and neighbourhood development initiatives conducted in the context of Community Planning and Social Inclusion Partnerships



SCOTTISH EXECUTIVE