

### 3 key steps to effective pre-engagement

Pre-engagement was a big topic of conversation during our inclusive practice share last year. This is “the preparation needed to develop a community engagement plan and strategies that inspire community participation and connect with residents in an authentic way.”



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In March 2020, Tamarack Institute held a great webinar on community engagement which highlighted a great document from Vitalyst Spark containing 3 key steps to effective pre-engagement.

This document brings together the learning from each of these three steps. This provides more detail and additional insights into what has been shared on the LinkedIn ‘Inclusive engagement practice’ group as it is not restricted by character limits.

Please do continue to share your stories and experiences to improve our practice in these uncertain times and beyond.

*“Community engagement is not just a set of activities and methods confined to a particular project, policy or process. Rather, it is a way of communication, decision making and governance that gives community members the power to own the change they want to see, leading to equitable outcomes.”*

## 1. Understand the layers within a group or community

- Do not assume that the group as a whole is united – there will be sub-groups within groups. This may be particularly relevant when considering intersectionality
- Start the engagement process with the existing relationships you have with the group of interest. These can (a) help build trust with other members of the group and (b) often lead to more honest and nuanced perspectives being shared
- Within groups and communities exist intricate networks between different members, whether they are individuals, other groups or support services. Collaborating with group leaders or (long-term) active members can improve understanding of how these networks operate
- Before starting engagement with a group, it is important to understand the historical context of the group. Many groups have complex histories (often involving stigma) which can influence the perception of group members and their willingness to get involved in engagement activities. This can be done by researching existing literature, but also speaking to those involved to understand their experiences and perspectives
- Find out whether the group have been involved in previous engagement activities. Knowing what went well, what didn’t and whether the group have ‘engagement fatigue’ (being over studied or engaged) is essential to designing a successful engagement process



## 2. Understand the range of group member perspectives

Now that the layers within the group or community are understood, the next step is to build on existing relationships and develop new relationships with different group members to understand their different perspectives. To do this, ask questions such as:

- What barriers prevent engagement?
- How do you prefer to communicate?
- Where does the group congregate (this could be online as well as offline)?

Seeking the answers to these questions from the group members means that the engagement strategies created will respond directly to their needs and help overcome barriers to participation.

As well as understanding perspectives of the group/community, this initial pre-engagement builds trust with the group by validating the expertise and lived experience of the group. This process is as equally important as outcomes in engagement.

## 3. Identify engagement strategies that support the preferences of the group

The final step is to address the challenges and barriers identified by group members. This could be done by exploring existing approaches or getting creative and developing a new type of engagement strategy!

To ensure engagement is authentic, it needs to be driven by values. The 7 underlying values to pre-community engagement are:

1. **Valuing lived experience:** Lived experience is as important as formal expertise
2. **Recognising history of place:** Each group and community has its own history that can influence how members engage with others
3. **Promoting power to influence:** Allowing group members to influence how a project develops, not just providing feedback
4. **Operating with transparency:** Being open and transparent about the process, how group members will influence it and feeding back on the results will build trust in the engagement process
5. **Approach with humility:** Like value 1, this is about valuing lived experiences and the resulting expertise of group members. Engagement practitioners should not be directive but serve as facilitators of information
6. **Centring authenticity:** Conducting the engagement not as a transaction, but as a process that involves building relationships so members can influence what happens
7. **Valuing people's time:** Support groups to engage by providing incentives, food and/or childcare, so that as many people as possible can participate and have their voices heard