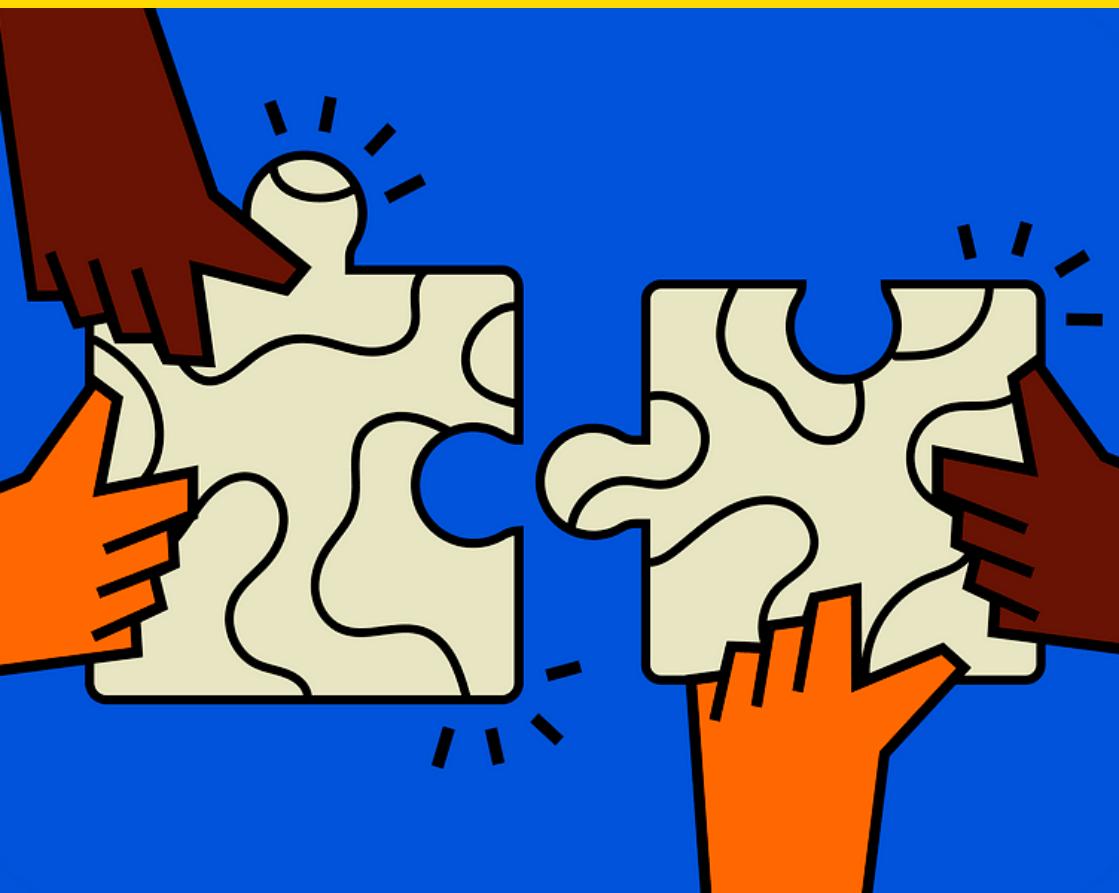


HATE
HOPE

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT



FILLING THE INFORMATION VACUUM
TO STOP THE FAR RIGHT

INTRODUCTION

Community engagement is a useful tool for tackling hate and building up community resilience because it involves people from all different walks of life in your organisation and vision. Local people are a large and powerful resource when it comes to establishing a positive, welcoming and resilient atmosphere in the community.

This resource is for local authorities and community organisations who want to know more about how to engage the community more effectively to reduce risk of far-right agitation. In this resource you will find:

- Information on community engagement and its different types
- Advice on how to make engagement sessions safe and effective
- Case studies of community engagement

WHAT IS COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

Community engagement (including public engagement, stakeholder engagement or community consultation) is a catch-all term to describe action taken to contact the community about a change that affects them. Sometimes, it is done early in the planning stage, so that input from the community can alter the plan. At other times, it's a way of informing the public of a decision and understanding their attitudes towards it.

It's important for community members to feel heard, particularly when a change might be perceived to impact local life negatively. Changes that might increase tensions and so be exploited by the far right include the arrival of asylum seekers in the local area, the construction of religious buildings, high-profile legal or criminal cases, the demolition or repurposing of a local building or the allocation of funds and resources.



WHAT'S THE AIM OF COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT?

The aim is to help people understand and feel involved in their community, as well as feel that they have the agency to shape it. When people feel heard and respected, the community will be a lot more resilient to agitation from the far right, who can exploit discontent and apathy. Some level of disagreement is natural, but timely communication and effective engagement can prevent situations from escalating.

There are broadly three different aims of community engagement, depending on the stage at which the community is being involved in a change. The aims may also depend on whether you have any agency over the change or responsibility for the community. Manage the community's expectations about what can change and what can't, and the level of power and influence you have over the situation. Promising to hear people out and then doing nothing to act upon those feelings can be equally detrimental in terms of community trust and resilience to external agitators.

Telling	Asking	Engaging
Informing about a change that has already been decided. Helping people to understand the decision and answering questions.	Getting people to explore and evaluate different options. Making alterations to your original plan based on their feedback.	Inviting people to work in collaboration with professionals to design a solution that works for as many people as possible.

Inadequate community engagement can lead to low trust, feelings of resentment and unrest in a community and lower its resilience to agitation by the far right. This vulnerability shows itself acutely when there is a “trigger incident”, but might in fact have arisen from generations of people feeling unheard and deprioritised. **Where a vacuum of information is left unfilled by community organisations or local authorities, the far right can work their way in.** Despite the extreme views of the far right, members of the community become grateful because they believe that they are finally being listened to and supported by someone who is taking action.

WHAT IS AN INFORMATION VACUUM?

An “information vacuum” is created in the short term when speculation spreads through the community due to a lack of details being made available. It often happens because communities expect authorities to be able to inform them, but they don’t always have all the information to hand, or it might not be their action to announce.

The difficulty with knowing when to address the community where an information vacuum might be forming is that two distinct problems can occur:



DEALING WITH AN INFORMATION VACUUM

Before a “trigger incident”, there might have been years of build up of mistrust in institutions, which is why proactive engagement before the crisis point is so important. In the immediate, deciding the best course of action often means deciding which problem is worse and needs to be avoided. Where information is shared too early, the main risk of losing community trust is if the information changes and steps can be taken to handle this sensitively. In the case where nothing is said and your audience seeks information elsewhere, it is difficult to quickly regain trust. For this reason, our advice is always to **speak sooner rather than later**.



It can be helpful to take the following steps to build trust and prevent encroachment from the far right:

1. Maximise the information you have via **intelligence sharing**: in your region, across local services and with experts in the sector.
2. Be **transparent about what you know**: share as much information as you can or if information has not yet been confirmed, try to provide a timeline for when you can provide more.
3. Ensure that different organisations present **unified messages** that carry the same level of detail. Try to agree on a set of core messages, or release a joint statement that outlines what you know.
4. Have a **trusted messenger** deliver the information to the community – who delivers the information can be just as important as the content.
5. Proactively **challenge rumours** in the community, and provide the facts that disprove them wherever you can.

GENUINE VS. FAR-RIGHT COMMUNITY CONCERNs

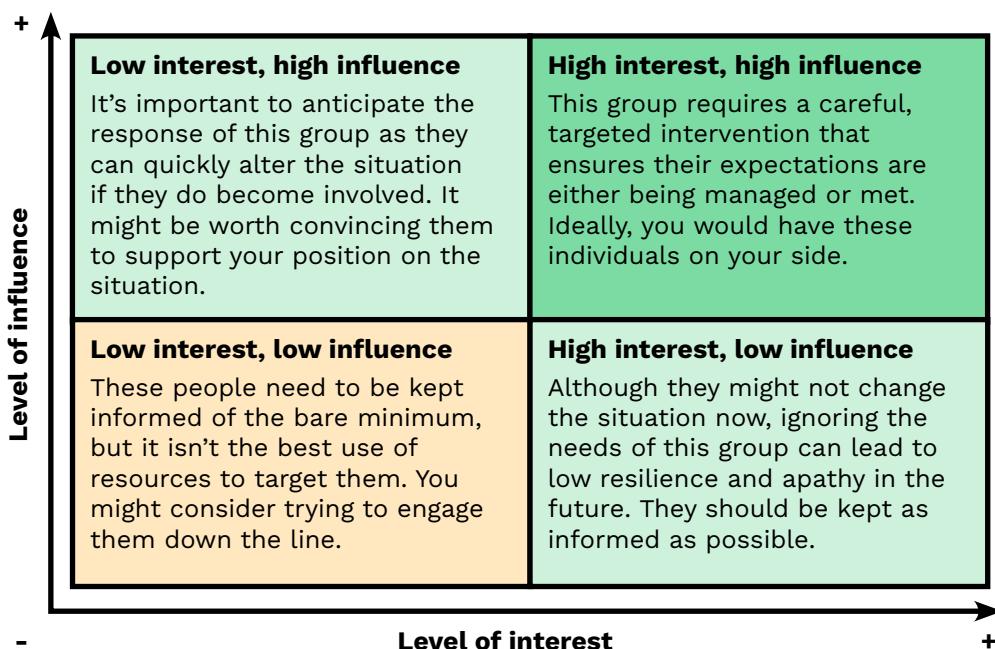
Conflating “community concerns” with those which are ideologically far-right can lead to people feeling alienated and drawn towards far-right figures. Many far-right groups will use watered down versions of extreme arguments in the community, such as “Britain won’t even be British in 50 years”, which nods to the racist and antisemitic Great Replacement conspiracy theory. When it comes to the use of hotels as accommodation for asylum seekers, concerns about wedding cancellations or the loss of jobs are clearly based in the community. However, concerns that women and children will become unsafe because asylum seekers are inherently violent are based on racist stereotypes and are not locally based concerns. The distinction isn’t always clear, but it can be helpful to consider how your treatment of local concerns could inadvertently shape community attitudes towards the far right. For more information, see the “spectrum of support” in this resource.

STAKEHOLDER MAPPING

Community engagement doesn't have to involve every single member of a community to be effective, but the circumstances of different sub-groups of the community should be considered as there is no one-size-fits-all solution. It is also important to consider the inclusion of marginalised voices in the community. Although they might not show high levels of interest or influence, they can often bear the brunt of negative local attitudes and should be made aware of the issue where helpful.

In order to understand how to create a message that will work for different groups, or to decide on priority groups to target, based on:

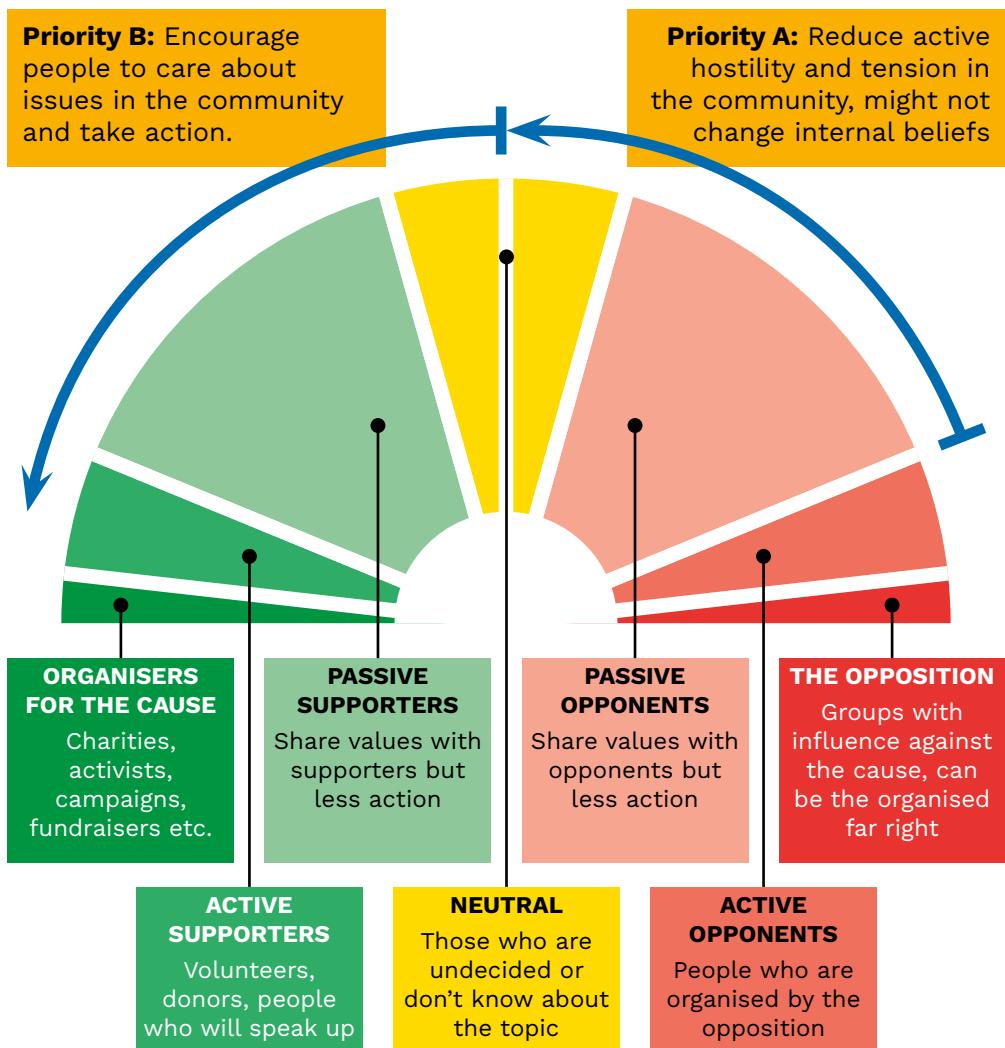
- How much **interest** they have in the issue. Are they talking about it? Is discussion likely to convert into in-person action? Will engaging them too much actually amplify focus on the issue unnecessarily? Are vulnerable groups affected by scrutiny?
- How much **influence** they have over the community. Are they a prominent and respected figure? Do they have sway in any community institutions? Does getting them to share your perspective have wider repercussions? It's worth mentioning that because of social media, people that might traditionally have seemed low influence are suddenly finding themselves with large audiences in the community.



SPECTRUM OF SUPPORT

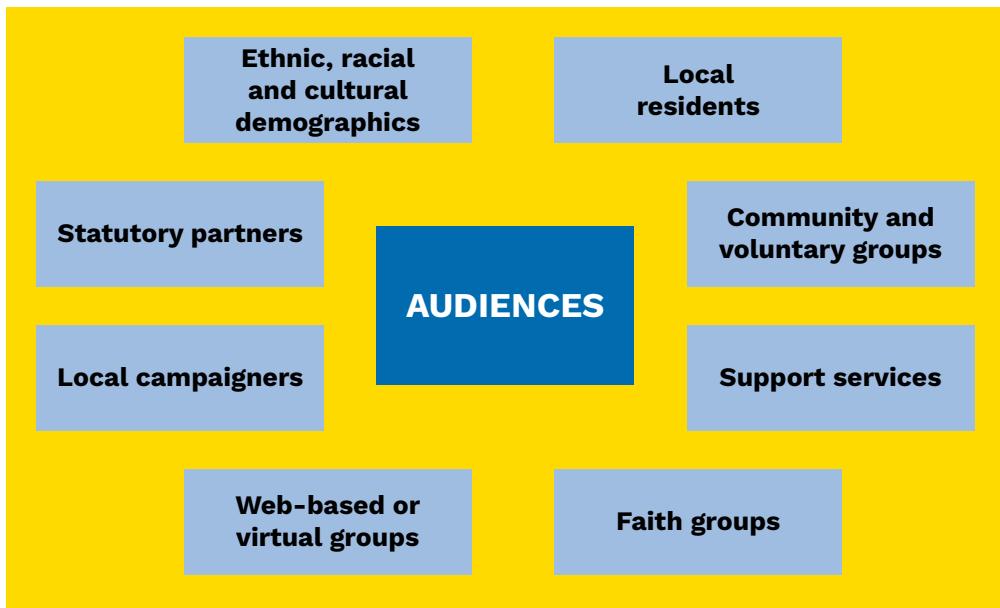
The spectrum of support is a helpful way of understanding where you are targeting your engagement. It's important to be realistic in what you are aiming to do. At times of urgency, the best outcome can be to persuade people away from actively harmful and hostile views, even if their outlook on the subject hasn't changed completely.

In urgent cases of information delivery, Priority A will be most relevant: even moving people from active to passive opposition is a win in terms of community safety and resilience. Priority B would be helpful when it comes to consultation and collaboration.



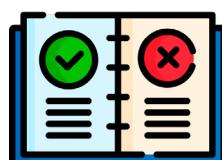
FINDING YOUR AUDIENCE

Your audience could be the whole community or a smaller subsection you think would benefit from receiving a specific message.



Things to consider:

1. Are you going to send **invitations** to individual representatives of different stakeholder groups who can give feedback to the other group members, or will anyone be able to participate?
2. Will you give each group the same amount of **influence**? If there is a group with relevant experience, will they be given the same status (time, focus, input) as a group with no expert understanding of the situation?
3. Is your engagement **accessible** to members of the community who are typically underrepresented, including community members who might be adversely affected by the change?
4. What is the **legitimacy** of people attending? Having a broad range of opinions is important, but not at the cost of the safety and integrity of your event. Having ground rules can help with managing these situations.



MESSAGING FOR DIFFERENT AUDIENCES

Different groups of the community will be concerned or supportive for different reasons, and identifying these in advance can be helpful for creating an effective engagement. If your message won't hit home with your target, you are unlikely to achieve success.

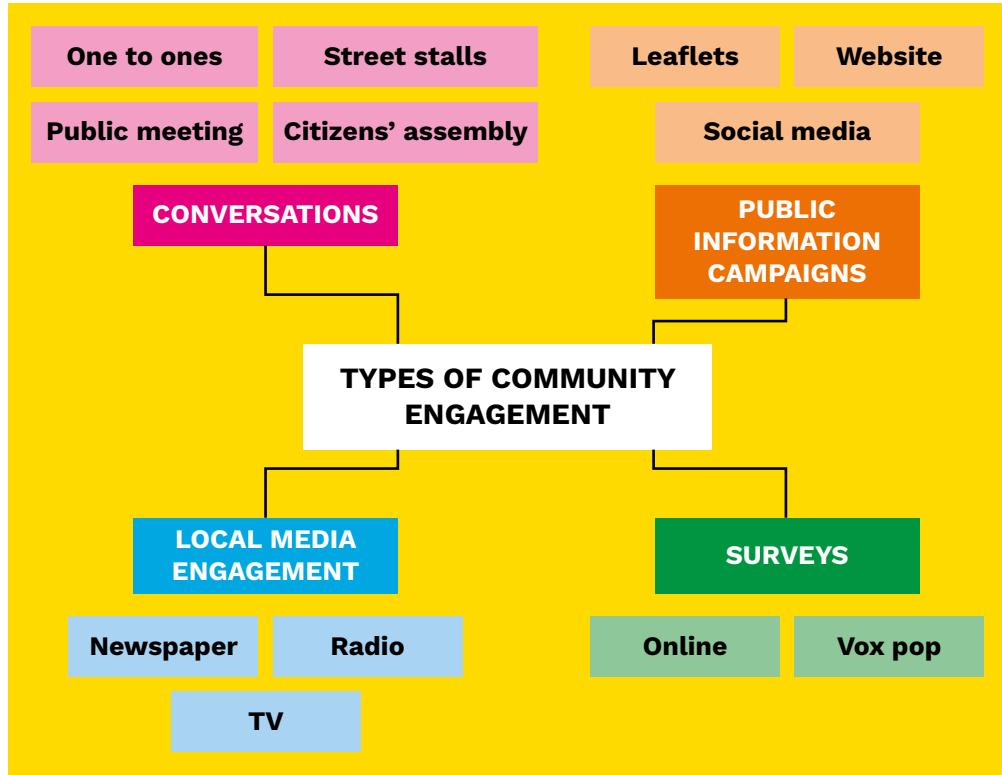
It might be worth thinking about whether those with concerns have particular insecurities, understanding that they are not mutually exclusive:

- Economic: worried about jobs, cost of living, local businesses
- Cultural: worried about national and local identity
- Political: disconnected from politics and Westminster, disenfranchised
- Social: worried about loneliness, health and social care, local decline

As well as insecurities, people will also have values that they hold dear. It can be helpful to draw on these values when constructing a persuasive message – for example in relation to immigration:

- **Equality** – as a society, we should take care of those who are fleeing extremely difficult circumstances such as war, abuse and persecution.
- **Opportunity** – our community has always welcomed people who are looking for new opportunities and seeking a better life.
- **Kindness** – rhetoric on immigration is cruel and heartless, that's not how our community is.
- **Respect** – everyone who has respect for the law, our culture and our customs will be welcome in our community, and we are confident our new arrivals will.

It's also worth considering how much trust there is in community institutions – whether that's the MP and local authority, faith organisations, schools, healthcare or the wider government. Those with very low trust are most likely to be persuaded to believe conspiratorial ideas about the community and building trust can be difficult, albeit very important. On the other hand, those with high levels of trust and low levels of insecurity might need less active intervention. If you are going to acknowledge the insecurities that your audience might be facing, it can be helpful to remind them of existing initiatives or solutions that they might be able to access. Proactive outreach work to these communities before there is a flare-up in far-right activity is always more helpful than last-minute sticking plasters.



HOW DO I KNOW WHICH TYPE OF ENGAGEMENT TO USE?

You may need to consider the following when it comes to deciding what form of community engagement you are going to use:

- 1. Cost.** This includes materials, personnel and travel. Depending on your group's status and budget, some options will be harder to fund or won't be effective use of funds. 
- 2. Time.** If you need information to get out urgently, some options will be faster to turn around than others – bear in mind that methods which are easy to release aren't always easy to follow up on (e.g. surveys or calls for open responses which have to be analysed). 
- 3. Accessibility.** Different members of the community will find it easier or harder to access different formats. For example, full-time workers, parents and carers might struggle to attend an in-person event, but online materials are harder to access for the elderly. You should also consider the languages spoken in your community and whether producing materials only in English will exclude some people from participating. 

DIFFERENT TYPES OF COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

1. Conversations

This is speaking directly to people in the community about the change or issue, and hearing what they have to say about it. Often, conversations have a less rigid form which means they can be used to address wider community concerns. When people meet someone face to face instead of online, they feel more listened to, and are more likely to hear someone out calmly. Conversations take more time than other interventions, but often yield the highest reward.



2. Public information campaigns

Quick dissemination of information to people who need it can be helpful for letting people know something that's already been decided, and knowing that a good proportion of the area will have received the update. It is less interactive, meaning you are less likely to make a lasting impression on a user, but it can yield a higher engagement rate than in-person initiatives at a much lower cost.



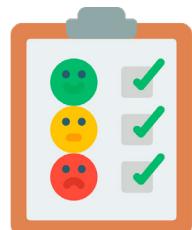
3. Local media engagement

Local media can be a great way to reach people in a place they are expecting to be informed. The same information can be relayed in multiple articles or broadcasts, giving people multiple chances to access information. However, depending on your role you might not have editorial control or a final say in the wording or presentation of the information.



4. Surveys

More formally collecting attitudes can be helpful if you want to demonstrate your findings or compare them to a later or earlier point in time. People can be more honest when surveys are anonymous, however it can be harder to know that respondents are actually local stakeholders. It is worth noting that survey data needs to be kept safely according to GDPR law, and professional survey websites or services can be costly.



COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT METHODS: EVALUATION

Type	Explanation	Positives	Negatives
CONVERSATIONS	One to ones	Individual conversations between trained speakers and members of the community. Can be drop-in or invite only.	Some people won't have time to come, some people won't be able to leave the house, time consuming.
	Street stalls	Stall set up in a public place where people can come and ask questions/find out information.	It won't reach people who are not free in the middle of the day, can be costly, you reach a small sample of people.
	Public meeting	Called in person or online to invite opinions and views on a topic, usually open invitation.	Risks being derailed, can be complaints of bias of who gets to speak, needs security.
	Citizens' assembly	Inviting a selected group from the community representing different demographics to give their views.	More time consuming to organise than an open meeting, can't be sure the message will disperse.

Type	Explanation	Positives	Negatives
PUBLIC INFORMATION CAMPAIGNS	Leaflets	Short-form information posted through letterboxes or available at key points of contact such as shops, places of worship etc.	No opportunity to understand responses or attitudes, some residents dislike leafleting.
	Website	Dedicated website set up with different pages of information that can be updated.	Need to advertise the website link, can remain hidden, can be hard to access for some communities.
	Social media	Posting on existing accounts to update followers or subscribers.	Will miss out on some audiences, can risk encouraging harmful online activity.
LOCAL MEDIA	Newspaper	Creating content for media outlets.	Might not get to choose how and when information is released. Will miss out on some audiences.
	Radio	Can also interview residents and experts to get their input.	
	TV		
SURVEYS	Online survey	An online or paper form where results can be analysed and broken down to understand attitudes.	Cost, accessibility, long surveys are often unfinished, if no plans to act on responses then can mislead.
	Vox pop	Informally interviewing people by stopping them in the street to get an idea of community attitudes.	Cannot guarantee full representation of community views, depending on where you choose to do it.

CASE STUDY: LLANTWIT MAJOR LEAFLET

This leaflet was fundraised, designed and delivered by a group in Llantwit Major, South Wales, who wanted to distribute accurate information to the community and encourage them to attend a community event. They also had conversations on the doorstep to engage with local people.

IMPORTANT INFORMATION FOR OUR COMMUNITY

Llantwit, Boerton and St Athan are being targeted by a Neo-Nazi fascist group called Patriotic Alternative.

We have become aware that they intend to hold a rally in Llantwit Major on Saturday 25th March 2023. The group is trying to exploit local issues to stir up hatred and division. You can read more about them here in this clear 'Hope Not Hate' article: <https://tinyurl.com/bdhhu8nj> or scan the QR code below.

We all have many different opinions about politics and local issues, but whatever our views, that group wishes only to divide us. Our local communities are saying "No" to hatred and division. Already there is strong community planning and action to show what a healthy and kind place Llantwit is.

On 24th and 25th March our communities will unite in a full response to show that we reject this uninvited interference from Neo-Nazi agitators.

Look out for more details from organisations in town, or join in from 11am on Saturday 25th near the Town Hall. There'll be community activity, food, celebration, and later, please support Llantwit Major FC in their 'Show Racism the Red Card' football match at 2:30pm.

Please support **Llantwit 24 - Together in Kindness** and say no to Neo-Nazi extremists. We will not let hate win.

Thank you.



MYTH-BUSTING SHEETS

Facts are less persuasive at changing attitudes than engaging people with stories and emotional connection. However, myth busters can be helpful when there is misinformation spreading within a community, and offer an opportunity to correct the narrative. Make sure to clearly emphasise the correct information to prevent accidentally reinforcing the myth. The more specific and locally phrased the myth buster sheet can be, the better. Neutral facts can be just as helpful as positive information. Jargon and academic language can be off putting, as can sources of information that members of the community could dispute.

Example of myth busting from Knowsley and Merseyside (see below):

MISCONCEPTION

We're also aware of online claims that fencing has had to be erected around schools in Kirkby and Knowsley Village due to issues with asylum seekers "looking through fences at children."

MYTH BUSTER

The local schools have all confirmed that no such measures have been introduced and Merseyside Police have not received any calls or reports regarding such concerns.

CASE STUDY: KNOWSLEY AND MERSEYSIDE MYTH BUSTING

Misinformation about asylum seekers staying in the Suites Hotel, Knowsley, had spread throughout the community following accusations that an asylum seeker had made advances towards a schoolgirl in February. In March 2023, the Knowsley News website published an article titled "For the Record" which gave the facts about the situation. The article shared information about the schoolgirl case, and challenged any further rumours and misconceptions. It also emphasised the importance of allegations being sent directly to police rather than speculating about them online without taking any action for investigation, and information on support services was shared. Consequently, they had a lot more people coming to them to report their concerns where they were able to deal with these through the proper channels.



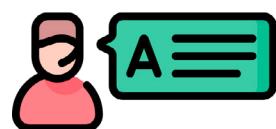
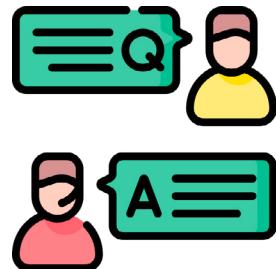
For the
record

Credit Knowsley News

HOSTING A COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT CONVERSATION

While wanting to keep barriers to access minimal, engagement events can be hijacked by outsiders who seek to disrupt and stir up tensions. Here are a few things to consider when it comes to planning a conversation:

- **Location.** Ideally, a meeting should take place somewhere neutral and accessible to the community. It's also worth considering whether participants should be sat in rows or facing each other, depending on whether the aim is informing or creating dialogue.
- **Audience.** If only local residents are welcome to attend, consider asking the audience to give their postcode on the door. It can be helpful to collect a list of people who attend for future reference.
- **Format.** You may choose for everyone to be able to air their views in turns, or invite a group of speakers who are more knowledgeable on the issue to answer audience questions. It might be helpful to ask your audience to pre-submit questions so you can group together similar questions, make sure you cover all relevant viewpoints and filter out any deliberately disruptive or inflammatory contributions. Be clear on the format before starting and make sure to uphold it consistently.
- **Chair.** Choosing a chair who can moderate neutrally is important. For some, a local MP would be a good choice, but this can politicise the discussion. Non-elected staff from the local authority could be helpful. It's important that the chair knows what to do in the event of disturbance to the session.
- **Security.** Be ready to remove people if they are consistently breaking the agreed ground rules. Have a clear stance on whether it's ok for attendees to film/live stream the meeting or whether the meeting is private. Consider being in contact with the police so that they are aware the meeting is happening and can act accordingly, however be aware that police presence can create a more hostile atmosphere.
- **Publicity.** The wider and earlier an event is advertised, the more likely that a group with one opinion can organise to flood the event with like-minded supporters. However, only sharing the details with some members of the community and leaving it to the last minute can mean that marginalised voices remain unheard. Finding a balance and making the intended audience clear is important.



CASE STUDY – DUNSTABLE PUBLIC MEETING



Credit: BBC

Following the announcement of the use of a hotel in Dunstable, Bedfordshire as temporary accommodation for asylum seekers, a public meeting was called by the local MP and the council. The aim of the event was to give the community the opportunity to ask questions about the use of the hotel, and to share any thoughts they had. The event was held in a local church, as that was the biggest available space. It was also live streamed, with those who couldn't attend in person being sent a link to watch by the organisers.

In the week preceding the meeting, the extreme fascist group Patriotic Alternative (PA) leafleted in the area, urging those who opposed the housing of migrants in the hotel to attend. Hundreds of people came to the meeting, and anti-migrant voices quickly drowned out any local questions or concerns. Most notably, the PA activist Alec Cave (AKA Wesley Russell) delivered an anti-migrant speech that was subsequently shared widely on social media and even national broadcast media.

Because of the take over of the meeting in this way, the good intentions of the engagement exercise were undermined, because community concerns were dismissed in favour of extreme arguments from outside groups. Once the security of the event had been compromised it was difficult to regain control of the conversation, despite there being a police presence.

Importantly, following the event, the organisers took steps to restore calm: they and the church condemned the actions of PA and drew a clear line between the extremists and local people. They also released the live stream publicly so that people could view the event in context, and not just anti-migrant clips which were on social media.

CONVERSATIONAL GROUND RULES

People helping to conduct engagement through conversation might be nervous about confrontation or unacceptable views being aired. It's important to support them by establishing ground rules for your conversation, and ensuring that these are agreed on by every party. It is up to you how much you tolerate in a conversation, but a balance is important: too many rules and people might question whether you truly want their input, or even feel there is an agreed agenda going into toe engagement. Too few rules and control of the conversation can be lost.

Some example themes for ground rules are:

- 1. Specificity and scope:** keep it local and on the topic. Bringing up things that have happened at different areas or at different times means the main topic gets lost.
- 2. Personal points:** No personal insults or assumptions will be made about the speakers. If someone chooses not to share personal details, respect this.
- 3. Inappropriate and hateful content:** No racism, Islamophobia or other discrimination will be tolerated. If someone uses a harmful term, it might be explained to them why not to do this. However, if this language is used deliberately, the conversation will end.
- 4. Speaking time:** Establish a time period for the conversation. If it is not finished at the end of this, both parties have to agree to continue. Once the conversation is over, you agree to calmly walk away from it.
- 5. Taking turns.** Agree how the speakers will manage responding to each other. Interruptions can be frustrating and unfair, likewise raising voices. Have clear lines, and if they are crossed then end the conversation.

MEDIATED CONVERSATIONS

Having a third party mediator can allow difficult conversations to take place in a fair and balanced way that allows for all parties involved to air their grievances, and also structured conversation that might help to resolve differences. Agreement on who the mediator is and how they will conduct the session is necessary.



CASE STUDY: CUMBRIA COMMUNITY MEDIATION

Demonstrations were held in Carlisle, Cumbria in early 2023 protesting against a perceived (although untrue) increase in gender-based violence which was focused on a particular case of a man reported as having “no fixed address” being charged with rape. Following claims that he was an asylum seeker, rumours and suspicion about the criminality of asylum seekers flooded the community online, leading to demonstrations and counter- demonstrations being held. Tensions remained high in the community, online and offline.

Following this, a coalition of anti-racist and migration sector groups raised funding from the local council to pay for a professional mediation between representatives of both the demonstration and the counter-demonstration. The groups worked with the police and local venues to find a space and method of communicating that achieves the following aims: showing that there is a willingness to understand local concerns; protecting vulnerable minoritised people in Carlisle, who have felt unsafe and targeted; separating local concerns from far-right agitation and maintaining a relationship that allows concerns to be addressed within the community through discussion and collaboration, using demonstrations as a last resort.

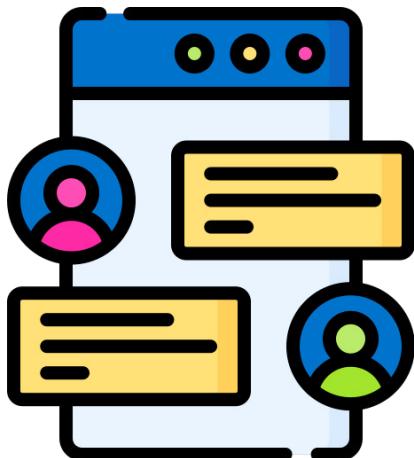
The mediation has since been shelved as some representatives pulled out for personal reasons, however the steps taken by the council and all organisations involved indicate a willingness to give participants across a thorny issue an allotted time to say their piece.



ONLINE COMMUNITY GROUPS

Misinformation and disinformation (false information on a topic, shared either unintentionally or on purpose) can spread quickly online, and sometimes rumours remain contained away from wider awareness because they are spread in private groups where admins control what can be posted and who can be included. It can be helpful for action to be taken to tackle the spread of false information online, for example by getting supporters online to challenge misconceptions or share links to accurate information, but you should first consider the following:

- **Safety online.** If you are concerned about abuse and scrutiny from other members of the group, it might not be safe to join.
- **Safety in person.** If you are known and recognisable within the wider community, anything you say online could also compromise your safety in person.
- **Access.** If you try to join a group from an organisation account or personal account when you are a known public figure, you are unlikely to be allowed to join.
- **Anonymity.** Generally it is not appropriate or required to go “undercover” in a social media group. If you are unable to access a group whose content you are concerned about, contact HOPE not hate.



WHAT TYPE OF SOCIAL MEDIA RELEASE IS BEST?

Different social media accounts and formats offer different benefits and drawbacks. For example, any form of social media that allows anyone to post their own content (for example, a Facebook group) can be time consuming to moderate, even though posts can be rejected or deleted if they don't meet the guidelines. Facebook pages and Twitter and Instagram accounts offer the ability to

limit who can comment on what you post, including removing the ability to comment altogether. Comments can be deleted, but only after they've been posted publicly. It's worth noting that some people will take issue with a form of social media engagement which they feel does not allow them the opportunity to actually “engage”, such as limiting their ability to post or comment, but having restrictions on how the community conversation can take place can often be more helpful in the long term.

COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS DOS AND DON'TS

Community engagement is most effective when people are able to feel listened to and feel like they are getting all the information. When people feel like they aren't being given the full story and information is being withheld, this can create mistrust. Openness, honesty and good faith are crucial to the success of community engagement.

Do:

- ✓ Come prepared with the facts about the situation, and your sources.
- ✓ Explain as many details as you can, and don't sugarcoat the situation.
- ✓ Listen actively, and remain focused on the conversation.
- ✓ Acknowledge the other person's feelings.
- ✓ Remain calm and speak clearly.
- ✓ Take turns and allow time for your partner to respond to each point you make.
- ✓ Remember that any anger is not directed at you, but at the current situation and the position you are representing.

Don't:

- ✗ Don't dispute the facts, encourage your partner to look this up afterwards.
- ✗ Don't make up information or make promises or predictions you aren't sure of.
- ✗ Don't question people's feelings – criticising them won't change them.
- ✗ Don't raise your voice, mock or laugh at your conversation partner.
- ✗ Don't expect everyone to know terminology and abbreviations, explain them.
- ✗ Don't assume a political stance or worldview, listen to what is being said.
- ✗ Don't allow distractions to be used during the conversation, such as phones.

EVALUATION OF COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

It's always valuable to think about whether your method of engagement had its desired impact, and what if any follow up might be helpful for the situation. Community concerns are usually rooted in more than one underlying issue – if you've noticed that the same problems are being raised by local people (for example, the cost of living crisis or disappointment over the state of the town centre) you might want to consider passing this information on to a relevant authority or thinking about how you could reach out to this group with details of support organisations or initiatives that already exist. Although community engagement can often be highly reactive, people in the community will appreciate you seeing the situation holistically and anticipating their needs.

Credit: HuffPost



SHARE YOUR STRENGTH AND RESILIENCE WITH US!

HOPE not hate are always looking to champion communities who put up a fight against harmful far-right narratives. If you would like to share news about acts of solidarity happening in your community and be the hope for someone else, email us at towns@hopenothate.org.uk



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