



AMERICAN PUBLIC LEADERSHIP FOUNDATION

Free Civic Engagement Toolkit for Local Governments

Six practical resources for building continuous, transparent resident engagement

LISTEN > EVALUATE > MEASURE > IMPROVE > LISTEN AGAIN

How to use this toolkit

Start with the 30-Day Plan. Use the Question Guide to design input, the Outreach Checklist to broaden participation, the Metrics Worksheet to measure the effort, the Civic Engagement Checklist for quality control, and the You Said / We Did / Why template to close the loop.

The APLF Civic Engagement Cycle

LISTEN -> EVALUATE -> MEASURE -> IMPROVE -> LISTEN AGAIN

The goal is not simply to collect comments. The goal is to create a repeatable process in which residents can provide meaningful input, government can understand what it heard, decisions and constraints are explained, and each engagement cycle improves the next.

Toolkit Contents

Resource	Use it for
1. 30-Day Civic Engagement Plan	Launching a complete feedback cycle in one month
2. Community Question Guide	Writing neutral, useful public questions
3. You Said / We Did / Why Template	Reporting back to residents
4. Civic Engagement Checklist	Quality control from planning through follow-up
5. Engagement Metrics Worksheet	Tracking participation, reach and improvement
6. Community Outreach Checklist	Reaching residents through multiple channels

30-Day Civic Engagement Plan

A practical month-long framework for building a repeatable resident feedback cycle

LISTEN > EVALUATE > MEASURE > IMPROVE > LISTEN AGAIN

Purpose

Use this plan to establish a baseline, ask focused questions, broaden participation, report what was heard, and define what happens next.

Before Day 1: Choose the Focus

- Select one decision, service, plan, or community issue where resident input can genuinely inform the work.
- Name one staff owner and one executive sponsor.
- Define the population you want to hear from and the decision timeline.
- Decide in advance how results will be shared publicly.

Week 1 - LISTEN: Establish the baseline

Understand who currently participates, where engagement happens, and what is missing.

Actions

- ☐ Inventory current channels: meetings, email lists, website, social media, surveys, boards/commissions, neighborhood groups.
- ☐ Review the previous 6-12 months of participation. Note attendance, survey responses, recurring commenters, and gaps.
- ☐ Identify 3-5 resident groups that are likely underrepresented.
- ☐ Choose 3-5 short, neutral questions for the month's engagement topic.
- ☐ Publish a simple participation notice explaining the topic, deadline, privacy approach, and how input will be used.

Week deliverable

A one-page baseline, target audiences, 3-5 questions, and outreach schedule.

Week 2 - LISTEN: Launch and promote

Make participation easy and reach beyond the people who already show up.

Actions

- ☐ Launch the questions online and provide at least one offline participation option.
- ☐ Promote through the municipal website, email, social channels, QR codes, public facilities, and partner organizations.
- ☐ Ask department heads and frontline staff to share the opportunity with residents they serve.
- ☐ Keep the participation window short enough to create urgency but long enough to reach different schedules.
- ☐ Track daily response counts by channel; do not publish individual responses.

Week deliverable

A live engagement effort with multiple access points and basic participation tracking.

Week 3 - MEASURE: Review reach and representation

Determine whether the feedback is broad enough to be useful and where outreach needs adjustment.

Actions

- ☐ Compare responses with the community population using appropriate, voluntary demographic or geographic indicators.
- ☐ Identify neighborhoods or groups with low participation.
- ☐ Conduct targeted outreach to fill major gaps without pressuring residents to answer a particular way.
- ☐ Group open-ended feedback into themes; preserve minority viewpoints instead of reporting only the majority.
- ☐ Document limitations, including low response counts or populations not reached.

Week deliverable

A participation snapshot, theme summary, and list of important limitations.

Week 4 - IMPROVE: Close the loop

Show residents that participation led to a visible response, even when government cannot act on every request.



Actions

- ☐ Publish a 'You Said / We Did / Why' summary.
- ☐ Separate what can be acted on now, what requires further study, and what is outside the government's authority.
- ☐ Explain any tradeoffs, legal limits, budget constraints, or competing priorities.
- ☐ Thank participants and tell them when the next update will occur.
- ☐ Hold a short internal debrief: What worked? Who was missed? What should change next month?

Week deliverable

A public feedback report, next steps, and an internal improvement note.

Day 30 Review

Question	Record
How many people participated?	_____
Which channels produced the most participation?	_____
Who was underrepresented?	_____
What did we change because of resident input?	_____
What will we do differently next cycle?	_____

Community Question Guide

How to ask neutral questions that produce useful public input

LISTEN > EVALUATE > MEASURE > IMPROVE > LISTEN AGAIN

Core rule

Ask questions to learn, not to validate a preferred answer. Residents should be able to understand the question without needing policy expertise.

Seven Rules for Better Questions

Rule	How to apply it
One idea at a time	Avoid combining two policies in one question.
Use neutral language	Do not describe one option with positive language and another with negative language.
Provide necessary context	If cost, authority, timing, or tradeoffs matter, state them briefly and factually.
Offer balanced choices	Include realistic alternatives and an 'other' option when appropriate.
Make uncertainty visible	Use 'not sure / need more information' when residents may reasonably lack enough information.
Separate preference from priority	Ask both what residents prefer and how important the issue is when that distinction matters.
Use open text selectively	One focused open-ended prompt can reveal reasons and ideas that fixed choices miss.

Question Patterns

Use	Template
Priority	How important is [issue/service] to you? Very important / Important / Neutral / Not very important / Not important
Preference	Which of the following approaches would you prefer for [issue]? [A] / [B] / [C] / Other / Not sure
Tradeoff	If improving [service] required [specific cost/tradeoff], which option would you prefer?
Experience	In the past 12 months, how would you rate your experience with [service]?
Access	What, if anything, makes it difficult for you to use [service/program]?
Open response	What is one thing local government should understand about [topic]?

Avoid Leading or Loaded Wording

Avoid	Better
Do you support the much-needed expansion of the park?	Do you support, oppose, or have no opinion on the proposed park expansion?
Should the city waste money on...	How should the city prioritize funding for...?
Wouldn't you agree that...	Which statement is closest to your view?
Do you support safer streets through...	What approach, if any, should the city use to address...?

Pre-Publication Review

- ☐ Can a resident understand every term?
- ☐ Does the question contain only one main idea?
- ☐ Is important context factual and concise?
- ☐ Could a reasonable person disagree without feeling judged?
- ☐ Are response options balanced and complete?
- ☐ Have we explained how the answer will be used?
- ☐ Have we avoided collecting information we do not need?

Question Planning Worksheet

Field	Notes
Decision or topic	
What government needs to learn	
Who should be heard	
Draft question	
Response options	
Context residents need	
How results will inform the work	



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You Said / We Did / Why Template

A public-facing format for closing the feedback loop

LISTEN > EVALUATE > MEASURE > IMPROVE > LISTEN AGAIN

Why this matters

Participation declines when residents believe input disappears into a process. Use this template after an engagement effort to show what was heard, what changed, what did not change, and why.

[PROJECT / ISSUE NAME]

Engagement period: _____ | Published: _____

What We Asked

Briefly explain the question, decision, or issue residents were asked to consider.

Who Participated

Measure	Result
Total participants	
Participation period	
Primary channels used	
Areas/groups reached	
Important participation limitations	

What We Heard

Theme / finding	What residents told us	Evidence / context
1.		
2.		
3.		
Other important viewpoints		

What We Did

Action	Status	Timing

What We Did Not Do - and Why

Request / idea	Decision	Reason / constraint

What Happens Next

Next milestone: _____

Next public update: _____

How residents can continue participating: _____

Suggested public language

We asked. You answered. Here is what we heard. Here is what we did. Here is why. Thank you for helping us make better-informed decisions.

Civic Engagement Checklist

Plan, run, and review a public engagement effort

LISTEN > EVALUATE > MEASURE > IMPROVE > LISTEN AGAIN

1. Define the Purpose

- ☐ We can state the decision or issue in one sentence.
- ☐ There is a genuine opportunity for public input to inform the work.
- ☐ We know what is already decided and what remains open.
- ☐ We have a staff owner and decision timeline.

2. Identify the Public

- ☐ We identified who is affected, not just who usually participates.
- ☐ We considered neighborhoods, age groups, language needs, disability access, work schedules, transportation, and digital access.
- ☐ We identified community partners that can help reach underrepresented residents.

3. Design the Engagement

- ☐ Questions are neutral and understandable.
- ☐ Participation can be completed quickly unless depth requires otherwise.
- ☐ We offer appropriate online and offline access.
- ☐ Privacy and data-use expectations are clear.
- ☐ We have a plan for open-ended feedback.

4. Communicate

- ☐ The invitation explains why input is being requested.
- ☐ Residents know the deadline and how results will be used.
- ☐ Outreach uses multiple channels.



- ☐ Materials use plain language and accessible formats.

5. Measure

- ☐ We track participation by channel.
- ☐ We assess reach and representation using appropriate aggregate measures.
- ☐ We document limitations rather than overstating representativeness.
- ☐ We summarize themes without erasing minority views.

6. Close the Loop

- ☐ We publish what we heard.
- ☐ We explain what action was taken or planned.
- ☐ We explain why some ideas were not adopted.
- ☐ We give a date or trigger for the next update.
- ☐ We record lessons for the next engagement cycle.

Final Quality Check

Question	Yes / No / Notes
Was the process accessible?	
Was the wording neutral?	
Did we reach beyond usual participants?	
Did decision-makers receive the findings?	
Did residents receive a visible response?	
What will improve next time?	

Engagement Metrics Worksheet

Measure participation, reach, representation, responsiveness, and improvement

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Use metrics carefully

Participation metrics describe the engagement effort; they do not automatically make a sample representative of the entire community. Publish important limitations with results.

Engagement Overview

Field	Entry
Project / topic	
Engagement period	
Target population	
Decision owner	
Channels used	
Total participants	

Core Metrics

Metric	How to calculate / interpret	Current	Target
Participation count	Unique participants when feasible		
Participation rate	Participants / eligible or target population, when denominator is meaningful		
Channel reach	Responses or interactions by channel		
Completion rate	Completed submissions / started submissions		
Repeat participation	Returning participants across engagement cycles, where privacy design allows		
Geographic reach	Number/percent of relevant areas represented		
Representation gap	Difference between participant mix and community mix for		

	appropriate aggregate characteristics		
Response time	Time from engagement close to public feedback report		
Action transparency	Percent of major findings with an action, next step, or explanation		

Channel Tracking

Channel	Invitations / reach	Responses	Notes
Website			
Email			
Social media			
Public meeting/event			
QR / print			
Partner organizations			
Other			

Representation Review

Population / area	Community benchmark (if appropriate)	Participant share	Gap / observation	Outreach adjustment

Learning and Improvement

Prompt	Notes
What worked best?	
Who did we miss?	
Which channel was most effective?	
What created friction?	
What will change next cycle?	

Community Outreach Checklist

A multi-channel checklist for reaching residents where they already are

LISTEN > EVALUATE > MEASURE > IMPROVE > LISTEN AGAIN

Outreach principle

Do not rely on a single channel. A municipal website may be authoritative, but residents discover opportunities through many different places and people.

Municipal Channels

- ☐ Website homepage/news page
- ☐ Email newsletter / alerts
- ☐ Official social media
- ☐ Utility bill or service communication, when appropriate
- ☐ Public-access television / digital signage
- ☐ Boards, commissions, and department communications

Physical Community Channels

- ☐ Libraries
- ☐ Community centers
- ☐ Senior centers
- ☐ Parks and recreation facilities
- ☐ Transit locations
- ☐ Municipal buildings
- ☐ QR-code posters / handouts

Community Partners

- ☐ Neighborhood and homeowner associations



- ☐ Schools / parent organizations
- ☐ Faith and community organizations
- ☐ Business associations / chambers
- ☐ Service nonprofits
- ☐ Cultural and language-serving organizations

Direct Outreach

- ☐ Frontline staff mention the opportunity during resident interactions
- ☐ Targeted email to affected stakeholders
- ☐ Pop-up engagement at existing community events
- ☐ Short listening sessions at varied times
- ☐ Phone / paper option when digital participation creates a barrier

Accessibility and Inclusion

- ☐ Plain-language invitation
- ☐ Mobile-friendly participation
- ☐ Language access appropriate to the community
- ☐ Accessible digital documents/forms
- ☐ Alternative participation method
- ☐ Clear privacy/data-use notice
- ☐ Schedule considers evenings, weekends, caregivers, and shift workers

Outreach Message Builder

Element	Write it here
What are we asking about?	
Why does it matter now?	
Who should participate?	
How long will it take?	
Deadline	
How will input be used?	
Where can residents see results?	



Post-Engagement Outreach

- ☐ Thank participants.
- ☐ Publish a concise results summary.
- ☐ Share the You Said / We Did / Why update through the same channels used for recruitment.
- ☐ Tell residents what happens next and when to expect another update.
- ☐ Invite participation in the next cycle.