

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	