

A Guide to Community Consultation



Good community consultation can be the key to success in any project, small or large. It can highlight ideas and opportunities not previously considered, encourage new volunteers, raise the profile of your church, attract funding and garner support for your church in the longer term.

What is Community Consultation?

Consultations do just as they suggest, they consult the public ahead of plans. They give communities a voice and help to develop local democracy instead of inspiring simmering negativity. A good consultation asks people how they feel and garners their support, and this process is essential for getting support for any local project.

Community consultation is not:

- simply 'announcing' plans to the public (one of the biggest mistakes is to just tell people what's happening and when, and this is not a consultation)
- a ticking box exercise in order to satisfy the criteria of grant giving organisations or planning authorities.

Take care to avoid the 'Decide – Announce – Defend' approach i.e. make a fixed plan behind closed doors, tell a few people about it or go through the process of a consultation, but then stick with the initial plan rigidly. This approach can actually erode relationships by raising interest, encouraging ideas and building support but then failing to act on anything.

Benefits of Engaging and Consulting with the Wider Community

Mission

“Buildings are vehicles to engage with God’s work within the world.”

The Archdeacon of Lindisfarne, *Inspired Futures Conference 2019*:

The mission of the church is much wider than just Sunday services. Many communities, particularly rural ones suffer from a lack of services and investment; church buildings can be used for activities, projects and services that help to address issues such as loneliness, isolation, access to health

services and education. Churches, through mission **and** in buildings, can fill these gaps - but you need to consult and engage with the wider community to identify these gaps/areas of need.

There is also evidence that people want to be more proactive in their faith. Younger generations, in particular, don't want to merely be consumers of a church sitting in a pew, they want to be contributors engaged in the mission in some meaningful way. Community engagement is a key part of this and church buildings still have an important role to play in providing a space where everybody (regardless of their background) can come together and feel welcome – a social, cultural and missional hub as they were generations ago.

Public Buildings



St Peter's Church, Wentworth

Church buildings are held in Trust for generations to come; they are for everyone to enjoy for a range of reasons. We are guardians of local, national and regional heritage:

- National Trust – cares for 500 listed buildings
- CCT – cares for 350 listed buildings
- Church of England – cares for 12,500 listed buildings

The Church is a heritage organisation and so should be working to make the history and heritage of these buildings available to all – that should be part of our mission not separate to it. To do this effectively you have to understand your audience and create engaging

interpretation. See the '**Church Buildings for Everyone: A Visitor Welcome Toolkit**' for advice and suggestions.

There is lots of evidence to indicate that people of all faiths and of no faith value historic church buildings. Visits to heritage sites, including churches, make up the biggest part of the tourist industry and faith tourism is on the increase.

Funding

Securing grants is getting increasingly difficult, and you do have to tailor your project to the grant criteria. Most grant giving organisations will only support projects that offer some form of benefit to the wider community, thus they expect to see evidence of community consultation and support. For major projects, funders may require evidence of more detailed consultations and audience development work. Whilst it is important to understand the specific criteria of each grant giving organisation, do resist the temptation to design a project solely based on this. The most successful projects are those with clear proof that they are needed, widely supported, deliverable, sustainable and will make a positive difference.

Wider Support

Church buildings have a great deal of power to inspire, they are one of the few buildings which can produce an audible sigh of awe and wonder in people. And yet, many churchgoers see them as a

burden, while society as a whole seems to have forgotten that churches don't just belong to people who regularly attend services, they belong to us all. Community consultation can help to remind people of the value and shared responsibility of these local heritage assets.

There are all manner of misconceptions out there about church buildings – who owns and manages them, where the money comes - particularly in rural areas where people don't realise just how much responsibility and work is placed on a small groups of predominantly elderly volunteers. To build support you need to challenge these beliefs and build understanding, appreciation and support.

“...if nobody loves them and nobody understands them, then there is no future for them...”

Peter Aires Chief, Executive the CCT - Christian Today 2019

People do care and public support can be powerful.

What if there's No Community to Engage with?



All Saints' Church, Morborne

It's true that in some parishes there might not be enough of a community to sustain a church building, but it's rare that there will simply be *no community to engage with*.

It depends very much on your definition of community. If you limit it to the worshippers; your existing networks and people you are familiar with; and people living in the immediate area around the church, then there may well be few 'new' people to engage with. But if you widen the definition to include everyone living and/or working in the parish, neighbouring parishes, local schools, special

interest groups and tourists, you will find that there is always some form of community to engage with. For instance, All Saint's (pictured) is located in the tiny village of Morborne. Despite being about 5 miles south-west of Peterborough it feels very rural and consists of just 14 households, 23 residents. The PCC are actively engaged with the community running many events, but they want to do more. They are keen to encourage more visitors through initiatives such as 'Champing' and to explore tourism through the church's link to some of the first settlers of America.

How to Engage with the Community?

“...if you build it they will come...”

Above is the often-misquoted line from the film *Field of Dreams* – the actual line is “if you build it he will come”, but it sums up a common approach to community engagement. People who don't already engage with your church are unlikely to suddenly turn up if you just hold a public meeting or open day to explore the future of the building (unless you have arranged for a major celebrity or international act to make an appearance). Before doing anything, you must first understand your audience and what you want to achieve, so you can identify the best ways to connect with people.

Key Questions

- Is the local population one of young families, older people, or mature couples?

- Is it an area of high unemployment? Or is it a mix of professionals and people working in low-skilled local jobs?
- Is it situated in the commuter belt?
- Who is around during the daytime?
- What type of housing is there and is there enough affordable housing?
- What does the community already have?
- What services are currently provided?
- What services are missing?
- What local development plans are there?
- What community groups and organisation already exist in the area?
- Where do people go to access things that are missing?
- What established organisations and groups are there?
- What activities are provided and where?
- Where are the gaps?

Remember to explore the potential for heritage learning opportunities:

- Is there a local history group or interested people?
- Are documentary records kept locally?
- Are there any arts, drama, wildlife groups or interested people?
- What do you currently do to tell the history of the Church and its community?
- What potential is there to involve schools?

The Congregation

You need to build up a picture of your local community, in particular to identify who you are not talking to and who isn't currently being reached by your work. It is often a good idea to start with the church community by carrying out an **audit of the local congregation** – a questionnaire for church members. Carried out over two or three consecutive Sundays over coffee after the main act of worship, it seeks to encourage a positive vision and energy from members of the congregation to the challenge of ministry and mission in that parish church. This can also help to gather a core group of people to undertake the wider community consultation, as it should not be the responsibility of just one person.

Questions to the congregation should be framed to encourage a positive response:

- What's the most exciting thing that's happened here in the last five years?
- Looking ahead five years, what would you most like to happen here?
- How could you help to achieve that dream?
- What changes in the community bring fresh opportunity for ministry?
- How can the church be helpful in giving greater voice and security to people on the margins of the local community?
- Which groups are particular priorities for this church to serve?
- Is the church building welcoming and easily accessible?
- How can our church building be enhanced to become an asset in serving our community ministry objectives?
- What great new opportunities come brilliantly disguised as unsolvable problems?

Ideally the audit/questionnaire will be tied into some teaching/sermon that looks appreciatively at what already works and invites everyone's dreams and aspirations for the future. If there is a particular opportunity to improve the physical facilities through reordering or redevelopment, then appropriate questions relating to this can be added.

Research

Background information which will highlight how the area has changed and might be set to change can be obtained from the following:

- Parish Council
- Parish or Neighbourhood Plan – published or under development?
- Local District Council strategic reports
- Local Council of voluntary service
- Office of National Statistics
- The Diocese can also provide parishes with some census material, including their ‘deprivation score’ from the Index of Multiple Deprivation – measuring issues such as unemployment, access to health care, education etc...
- Community-led plan (Parish Plan)
- Getting involved with the development of a local plan can be a useful tool in addressing the wider strategy for community ministry. If you are involved, then the church will be included.
- Church records, including visitor books and records of past events will also identify changes in visitors, use of the church and perhaps even volunteer numbers.

Liaise with Local Groups and Organisations

As early as possible make contact with groups and organisations already operating in the area such as:

- Your own Parish Council/Town Council
- Local Authority and Primary Care Trusts
- Current community users of your church
- Other local groups and organisations, for example the local Women’s Institute, the Scouts and Guides, the Young Farmers, youth groups, pensioners clubs, parent and toddler groups, U3A, environmental groups and amenity and other civic groups, local schools
- Local services such as hospitals, the job centre, the police, schools and Age UK
- Make contact with community leaders and the organisations in your area that work with key groups such as children, the elderly, the disabled, their carers and other disadvantaged vulnerable groups
- Organisations that own the other community buildings
- Other faith groups, local businesses e.g. shops, tea shops, pubs, potteries, craft shops. Talk to other heritage attractions or sites?

Don’t duplicate and don’t try to compete with existing activities – that’s a waste of resources. Reach out and work with other groups, rather than working in isolation.

Methods of Consultation

There are a variety of ways in which you can engage and consult with people. The most successful campaigns will use more than one method depending upon the audience. Methods include:

- Go to meetings of community groups, Parish Council etc...
- Invite groups and organisations to a working lunch, at which you outline your ongoing commitment to the local community. It will be important to listen to their expertise regarding local need and gaps in the current provision. It may be that this exercise leads into new working partnerships and potential income for the parish. At the very least it will have heightened the profile of the local church as a confident and serious potential partner for other agencies sharing similar concerns

- Have a stall at community events
- Talk to people where they gather (informally)
- Surveys or questionnaires by post, door to door or online Are there any other planned consultations available to join?
- Find ways to connect with people at existing village events, groups meetings, pub quiz, etc...
- Place suggestion boxes, beans in the jar or free form post-it note boards on a specific question at key locations such as in the pub, school reception, village hall etc...
- Hold an open day at the church and/or exhibition of plans with additional activities such as concerts, games, story-telling, poetry etc...
- Local media campaign – newspapers, TV, radio
- Leaflets, flyers, posters
- Website, newsletters, email updates
- Competitions e.g. for project ideas/designs
- Hold a seminar, conference or workshop
- Public meetings
- Customer Comment Cards
- Focus Groups/User Panels

Surveys and Questionnaires

These tend to be the most favoured approach to consultations, but they need careful consideration as they can be time consuming and response rates low. Remember to frame the questions in a positive, appreciative way, otherwise the whole exercise will quickly become deficit/problem centred.

Think carefully about when, i.e. the depth of winter is not the best time of the year to be embarking on this exercise. Are you going to cover every street in the parish, knocking on every door? If you hand out questionnaires it's hard work getting them back, so do you just have a table outside the church for one week, or are there other key sites such as the church school, health centre, shopping centre, library etc..? Is there a church or village festival where church members could have a stall to publicise parish activities and get people to fill in the questionnaires?

Analyse the Results and Keep in Touch

It is important to properly analyse the results of your consultation and make them available to people.

- Write a report and assess the feasibility of suggestions
- As plans become firmed up, ensure people have a further chance to comment
- Let people know where changes have been made to reflect their views
- Continue communication and develop opportunities for community participation wherever possible, especially if you are applying for a grant from the National Lottery Heritage Fund.

General Tips

- Be careful with the language you use in communications and avoid words like 'outsiders' when describing non-churchgoers
- Be honest but try to focus on the positives and try to introduce your project in a way that is inspiring and engaging. For example, "we have a massive problem to fix and need to raise £££ so we want to know how you want to use the church" or "we want to put in a toilet so more people can use the building" doesn't set the right tone for getting responses

- Be open to new ideas and uses
- Embrace new volunteers even those who would prefer not to attend services and use support wisely - there will be parishioners who hate the thought of face to face encounters but are brilliant at researching facts and figures about the locality
- Be clear in your reasons for consulting - is it to learn more about potential gaps you can fill, whatever they may turn out to be from the consultation, (e.g. loneliness/wellbeing, a pop up shop or post office etc...) that you then need to look into viability/capacity to deliver or is it to test people's receptiveness to something you already want to implement? The questions for the two should look rather different
- Ask questions that inspire a dialogue e.g. rather than asking "if we put in a toilet would you use the building?" ask questions like "what do you feel is the biggest challenge for our local community", "do you consider the church building to be part of community life, please explain your answer" "are there events and activities you would like to participate in, or do participate in, but need to travel further than you would like to access them"?
- Think carefully about what you will do with the information gathered; how will you thank participants and share/act on responses?

Finally, getting people to engage with your project might be challenging at times so do remember to enjoy it when you can!



St Andrew's, Soham



Wiggenhall St Mary Magdalene

Further Reading

Community Planning Toolkit – Community Engagement <https://www.communityplanningtoolkit.org/>

Crossing the Threshold - Chapter 2 - Undertaking a Community Audit and Consulting with the Community

<https://www.hereford.anglican.org/Crossingthethresholdtoolkit/>