

Building a Culture of Engagement: A Practical Handbook

PART 1

Securing the leadership support





Go Vocal is a digital community engagement platform that enables local governments and organisations to consult their communities with one central tool, thereby making public decision-making more inclusive, participatory, and responsive.



Wietse Van Ransbeeck,
CEO and co-founder of Go Vocal

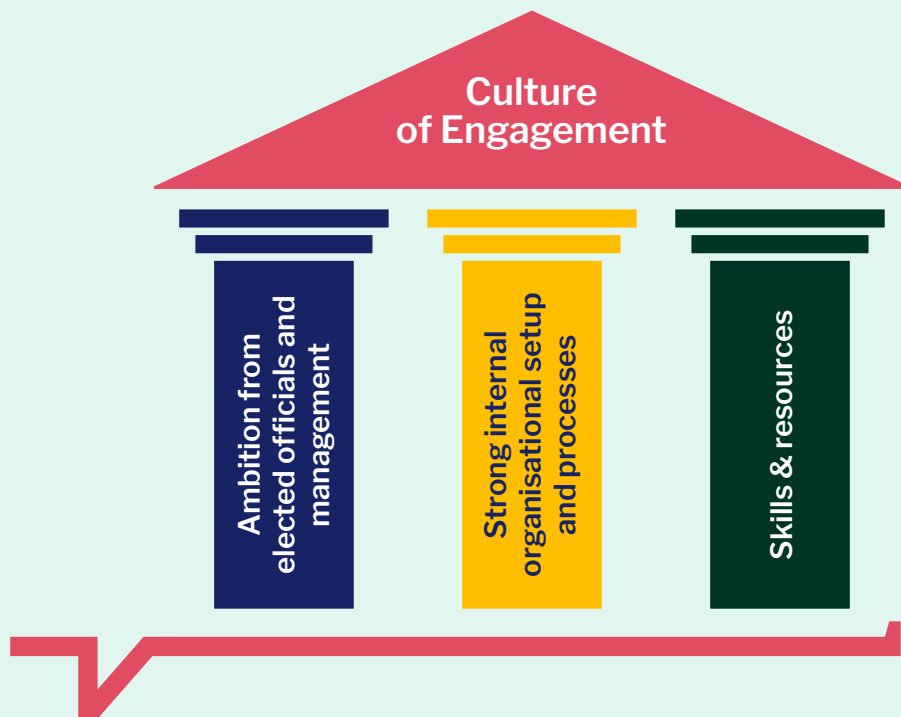
Strong foundations for impactful community engagement

While individual community engagement initiatives or ad hoc efforts can sometimes yield satisfactory results, **a culture of engagement is essential for building strong and effective engagement efforts.**

At Go Vocal, we define a culture of engagement as “*a state where community engagement is deeply embedded in the local government’s policies, way of working, and where there is a shared commitment to engaging with the community across all levels of the organisation.*”

Since 2015, we have had the pleasure of working with 400+ local governments to develop that culture of engagement. We have been inspired by their commitment to engaging with their communities and by the progress that they have made in building more inclusive, responsive, and participatory decision-making.

During this time, we have also learned that **a good culture of engagement can only be developed when the three crucial pillars to support it are in place:** the ambition from elected officials and management, the right internal organisation, and the presence of skills and resources in-house. Without these, engagement efforts may fall short of their potential.



In our work with teams across the globe, we have seen the direct impact these pillars can have. Local governments with a solid political and management commitment to engagement, combined with the right internal structures and in-house resources to support participation initiatives, have achieved impressive results. These towns and cities have been able to engage with their communities more meaningfully, make better decisions, and build trust and confidence in government.

We are excited to share learnings from our experience working with the Go Vocal community.

We will start with what is perhaps the catalyst that will be the driving force behind developing this culture of engagement, which can also often be a bit harder to influence: the leadership support for engagement efforts.

We hope the strategies and best practices outlined in this guide will help you improve your engagement efforts, build more inclusive, responsive, and effective decision-making, and ultimately better serve your community. Whether you are at the beginning of your engagement journey and want to get it right from the start, or you have been running projects for a while now and want to raise the bar.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading 'Van Ransbeek'.

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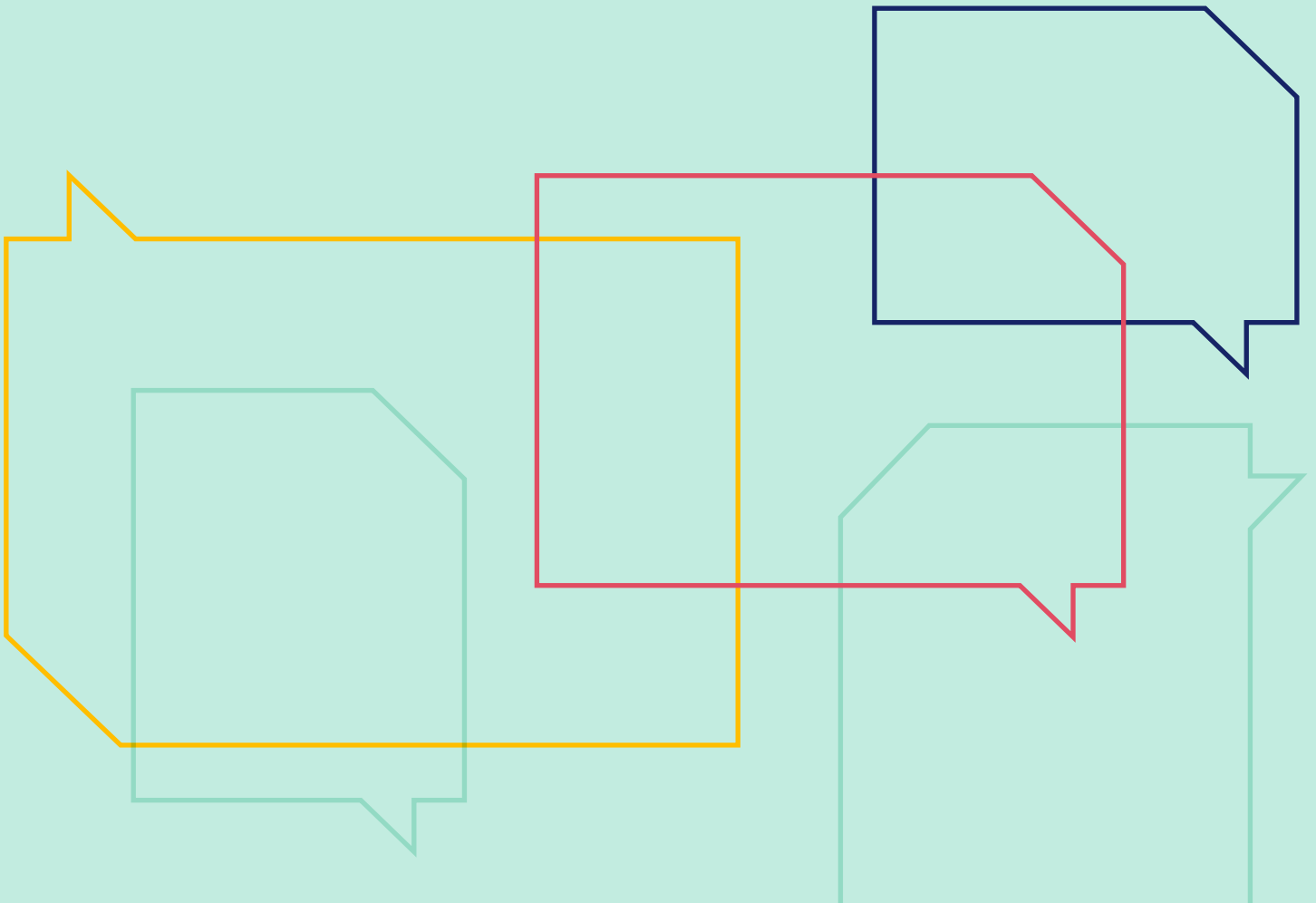
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Why the need for a culture of engagement?



Several dynamics can underpin the need for a real culture of engagement:

Legal requirements regarding community engagement

Higher-level governments are making it increasingly mandatory for the local level to engage their communities when developing new plans and policies.

When developing or updating a Local Plan, for example, councils are required to consult their residents at various stages of the planning process. You can read more on this specific topic in our guide: [**“Leveraging digital engagement in the Local Planning Process”**](#).

This move to make community engagement compulsory in certain cases is, of course, driven by the fact that governments at all levels seeing the many benefits community engagement has but also feel the demand from their communities to be more involved in decision-making processes.

More meaningful engagement

Beyond legal requirements, community engagement is also becoming a norm in developing more inclusive and participatory governance.

When local governments have a true culture of engagement, residents are more likely to feel that their input is valued and being considered in the decision-making process. This will lead to higher participation rates and higher-quality feedback.

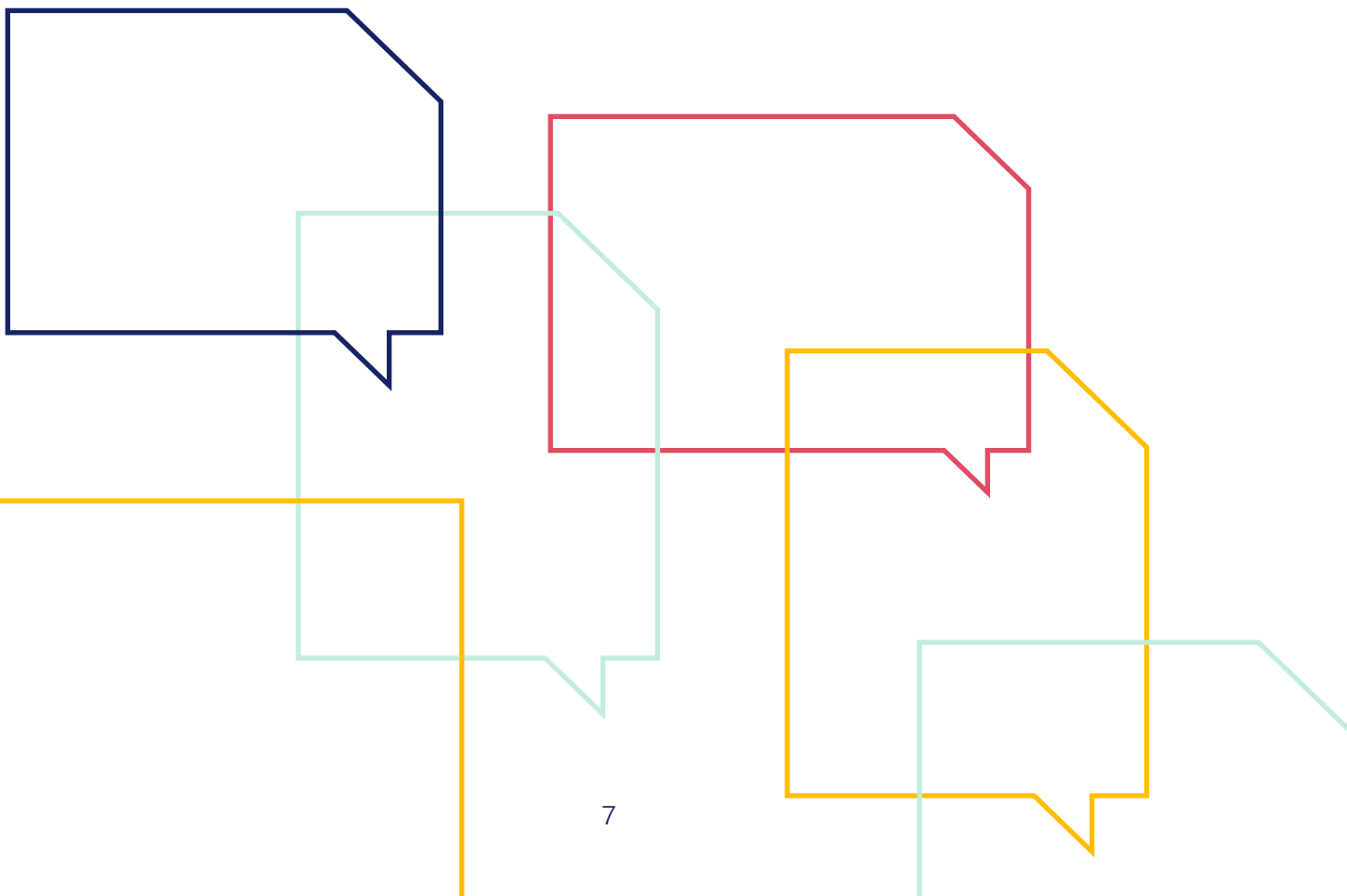
Greater trust

A culture of engagement has a positive effect on the trust level of residents. When local governments are transparent and open to feedback, residents are more likely to trust that their elected officials are working in their best interest. This can result in increased buy-in and support for decisions.

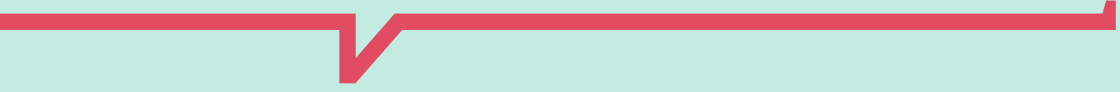
Better results

More residents getting involved, trusting your local government more, and providing you with more input will undoubtedly lead to better outcomes. You will better understand what your community needs and can better respond to that. This will, in turn, positively impact their trust in and general satisfaction with how you tackle issues.

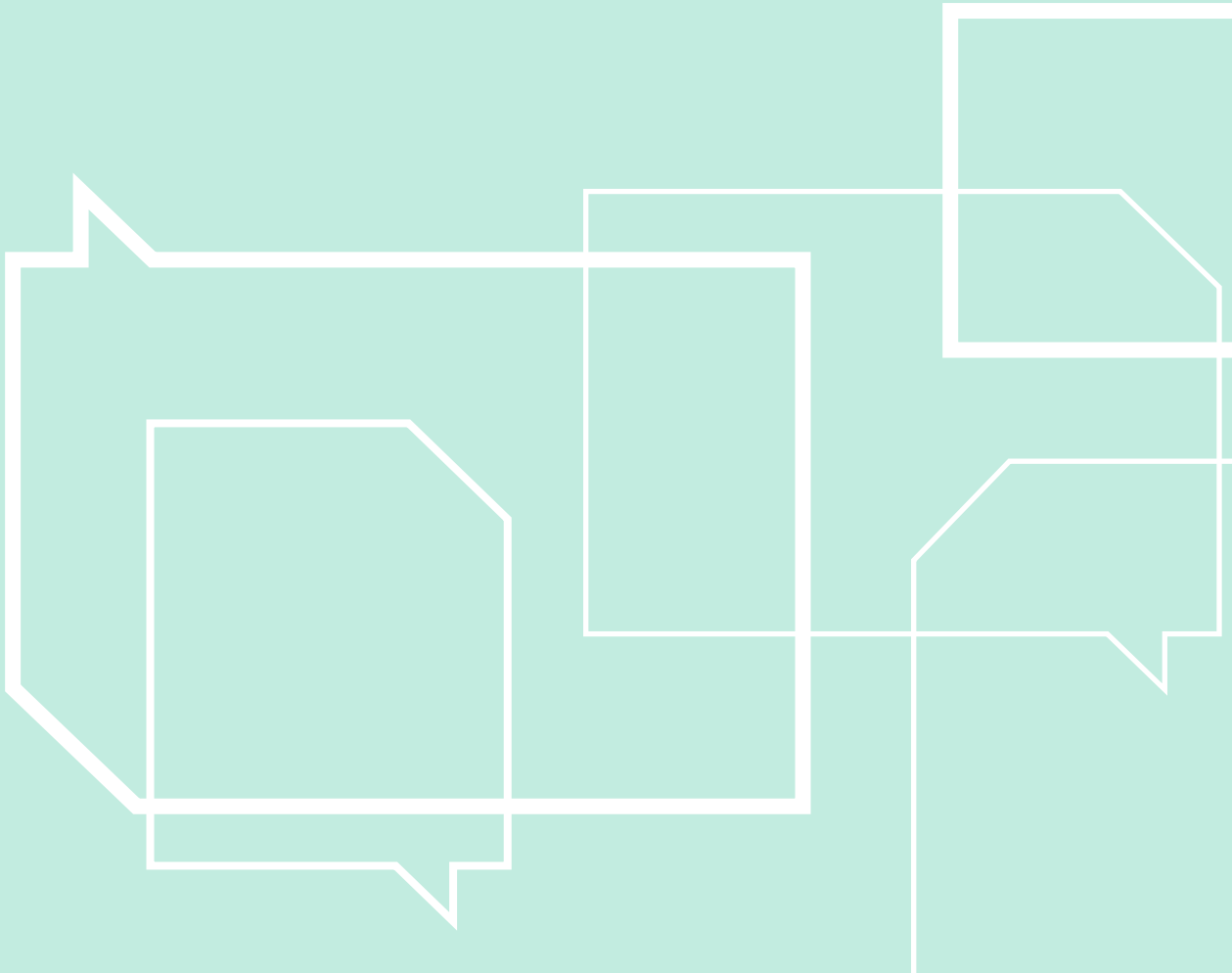
More trust will lead to more people participating, more and better input, and ... see a pattern yet? Results, trust, engagement rates, and the amount and quality of the input you get - all these elements reinforce each other. Once you get the ball rolling and continue to play your A-game, your investment in community engagement will increasingly pay off.



Ambition from elected officials and management

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The importance of leadership in driving successful engagement efforts and adopting a culture of engagement is huge. When elected officials prioritise engagement with their communities, they can inspire the administration and set the scene - such as allocating enough resources - that supports ongoing and meaningful dialogue with the community.

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Similarly, the administration's management level needs to show this same ambition. Often when the elected officials are already convinced, the public servants responsible for executing the strategy are often convinced as well, but that is not always the case.

So it is crucial to also get their support for several reasons:

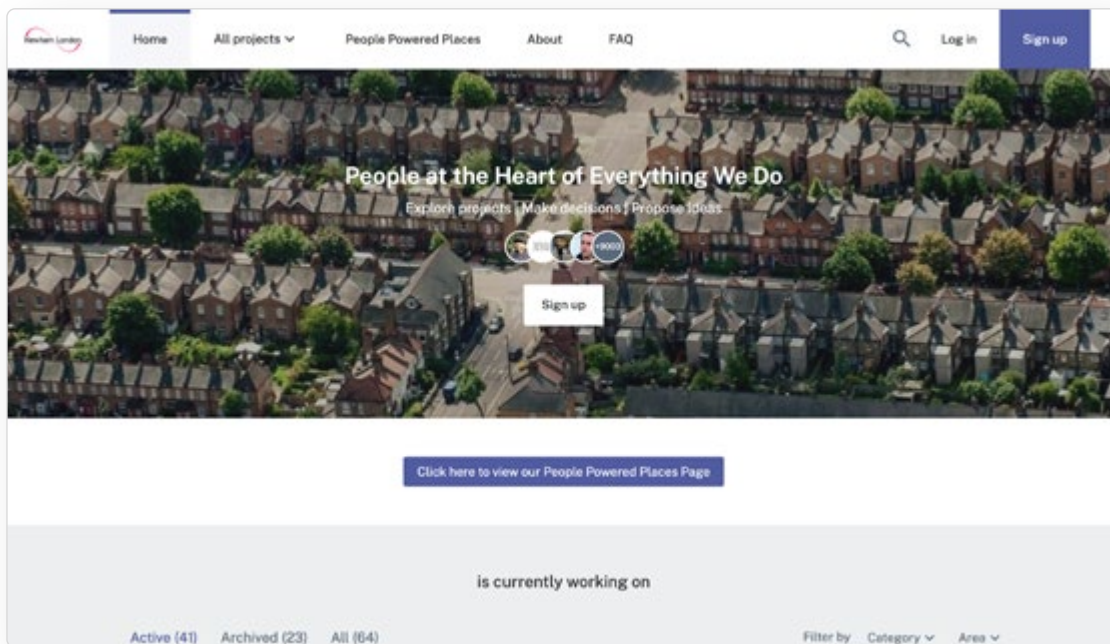
- In cases where you are struggling with critical voices at the political level, you will need the buy-in from the management level to convince elected officials.
- As you will discover further in this guide - and perhaps already experienced - how you are set up internally will greatly impact the workload and results of engagement initiatives. To change how you work inside your organisation, the management must also be on board.

When looking at our Go Vocal community, we are excited to see strong leadership with several clients. Let's spotlight the case of the London Borough of Newham, in the UK, for a deeper dive into what this looks like in practice.

With around 300,000 residents, Newham is one of the biggest and most diverse boroughs in London, so it should be no surprise that it's not new to community engagement. In fact, Newham's leadership has prioritised involving residents and creating a more participatory democracy, including via a dedicated Resident Engagement and Participation team.

Over the last several years, Newham has launched several impressive community engagement initiatives, including **the Queen's Market Good Growth Programme – a £4.1 million project aimed at including residents in urban planning decisions**, and more recently, citizens' assemblies.

How can we measure political ambition? While there may not be a scientific way to do so, looking at the vision document and counting the times the word "community engagement" is mentioned could give you a good indicator. Alternatively, also the budget that is put aside for engagement efforts can tell you a lot about the elected team's ambitions. Of course, actions speak louder than words, so it will be up to you and your team to hold the elected officials up to their plans and promises.



Case study

How the London Borough of Newham used community assemblies to identify local priorities

In 2021, Newham started setting up community assemblies to identify priorities to address through neighbourhood projects. They bridged the gap between offline and online by opening the consultation to all residents on their Go Vocal platform by inviting them to vote on the key priorities they believed the council should work on for their respective neighbourhoods.

Once each neighbourhood identified its top three priorities, residents were asked to share project ideas per category and did a participatory budgeting exercise to propose how to fund their ideas. When the allocation phase ended, Newham's team announced the budget decisions and shared information on upcoming action steps with clear feedback.



Seeing the real impact in their local area makes people take notice and realise they can make a difference."

Amy Rosa

Newham's Participatory Democracy Coordinator

[Read the full case study](#)

Leading the charge: Driving leadership buy-in for community engagement

So, can you start without the buy-in? It will be harder but not impossible.

As one of Go Vocal's co-founders, current **Commercial Director, and previous Head of Government Success, Aline Muylaert** has extensive experience working with local governments to develop and implement successful community engagement initiatives. We sat down for an interview with Aline to discuss the importance of leadership buy-in and ambition in building a culture of engagement.

Drawing on her years of experience working with government officials, Aline provides insights and advice to effectively build support for engagement efforts at the leadership level, no matter where you are in your community engagement journey.



Q: Why is it that some politicians are still hesitant when it comes to community engagement?

Aline Muylaert: “The two main objections we often encounter from politicians revolve around resources and the pressure to implement ideas.

In terms of resources, they are concerned about the workload and how everything should be organised. This is also one of the biggest concerns for the management level. They ask questions like: won't this cause a lot of extra work? Who is going to take it up? How will we get everyone on board for yet another change?

As for the pressure, politicians fear losing control of what will be implemented if

they give residents a voice in the decision-making process.

Many of the misconceptions about community engagement stem from the days when engaging with residents was limited to in-person participation. However, community engagement has become more accessible, efficient, and valuable than ever, thanks to the rise of digital participation platforms and more experience with offline and online methods.”

Q: How can public servants who want to take community engagement to the next level in their cities address these concerns and build support for community engagement initiatives?



Aline Muylaert: “To tackle these objections, there are a couple of arguments.

The first is ensuring you will start small, improve, and grow. Your first project, perhaps even the first few, will not be perfect, so it is best to begin with a modest project and learn from it. As your community engagement initiatives gain traction and internally, get used to the new ways of working, you can refine and scale up.

Sharing examples of cities or towns similar to your community that have reached good results is also a good idea. With real-world examples, you bring participation to life in an understandable way, from the potential number of residents you could reach to the direct impact that participation can have on the community.

Regarding the change process, it is key to communicate well internally. Sit down with all stakeholders, understand their concerns, and work together to find solutions. It will also help if you develop a proposal for the workflows and collaboration - the better colleagues can visualise the new situation, the better they will understand it, and the more open they will be.

Lastly, managing expectations is crucial if you want to eliminate the fear of losing control over the priorities that will

be tackled. By communicating clearly to residents about their influence on the decision-making process, and for instance, which ideas you may implement, when inviting them to share their input, they are more likely to support the decisions made. Even when their idea didn't make the cut.”

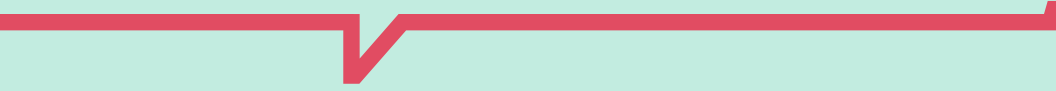
Q: How can public servants leverage a digital engagement platform like Go Vocal to secure buy-in from politicians and city management?

Aline Muylaert: “A digital community engagement platform like Go Vocal offers numerous benefits that can help convince elected officials and the management level.

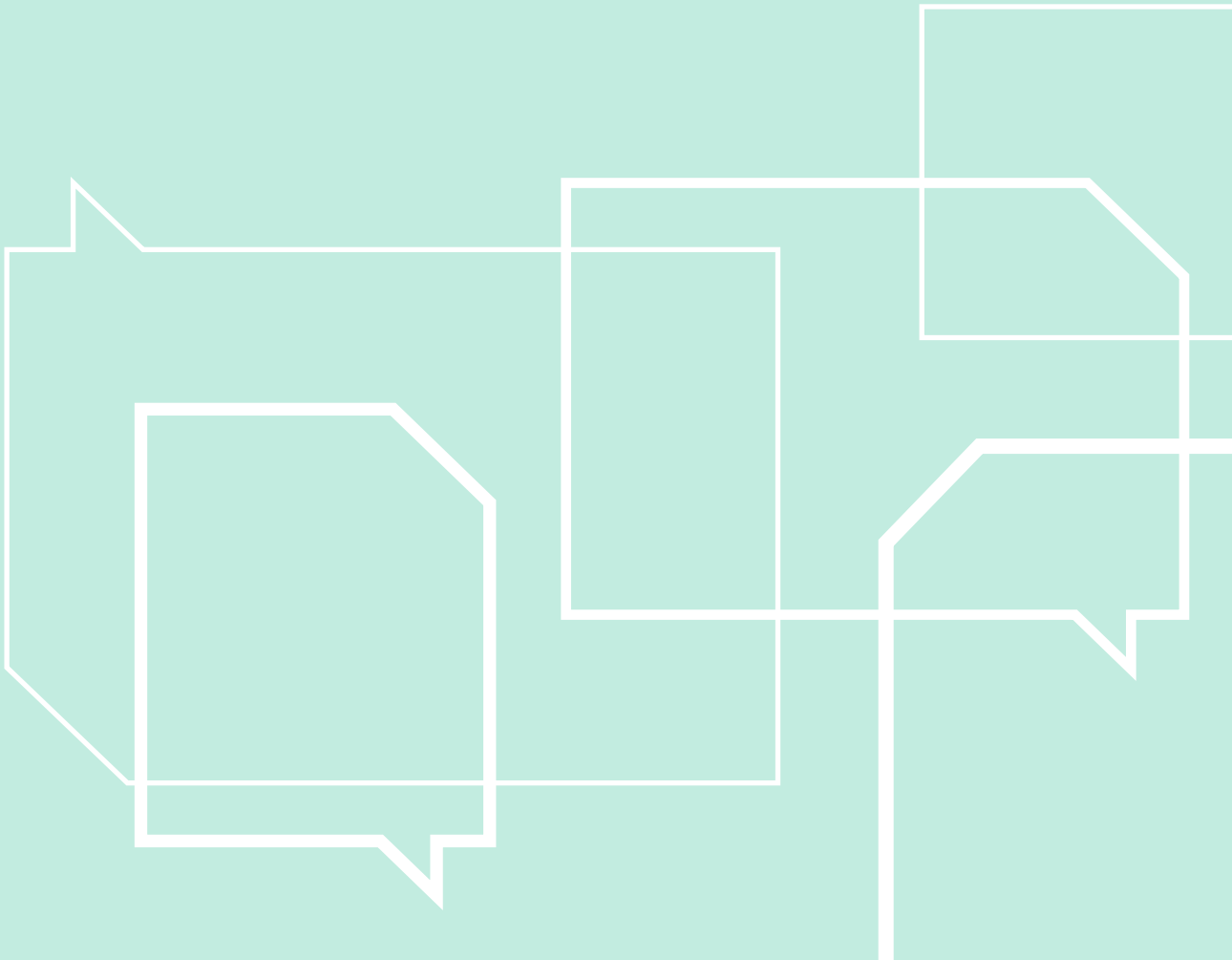
Digital platforms streamline the community engagement process, reducing the time and resources required to gather community input and manage projects. This can appeal to politicians who are concerned about the cost and workload associated with traditional engagement methods.

Moreover, a platform like Go Vocal provides valuable data and insights from more people in the community, enabling elected officials to make better-informed, more inclusive, and equitable decisions. It is clear that this will help them gain more support from residents.”

Deepdive: **Steps to build internal support**



We understand that local authorities are at different stages in their engagement journey. This step-by-step guide aims to provide you valuable insights, whether you are just starting out with community engagement, already have made some offline efforts but want to add an online component or have experience with both digital and physical engagement.



Step 1:

Come up with a plan to get the initial go-ahead

First up, identify the potential challenges of (online) engagement and formulate solutions. Inherently, opening the door to community engagement will be met with risks and pushback, internally and externally, but it is nothing that a local government has not faced before. If you are prepared and can show your peers you know how to address these challenges, it will build confidence and support for your initial efforts.

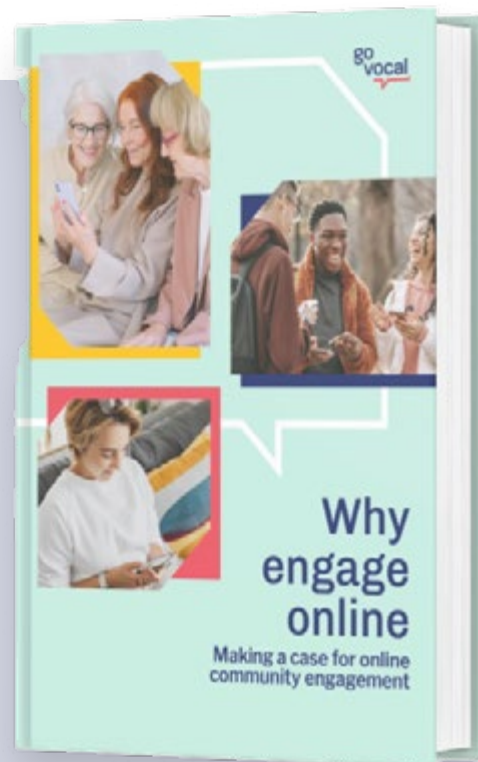
Starting with community engagement can take a lot of time and likely an array of meetings with various stakeholders. The same counts when you already do offline engagement and want to add an online component to your strategy.

Know these are essential to developing long-term buy-in from your team. The more you can discuss and continue to display the value of community engagement, the more likely you will succeed.

Looking for good arguments to build your business case?

Look no further: download our guide, “The ROI of online community engagement”. We focus on the many benefits of online engagement but also explain how it can help make offline engagement more effective.

[Download the guide](#)



Step 2:

Define key goals, expectations, and processes for engagement

Once you've secured approval, work with your colleagues to set clear, measurable, and achievable goals. To do this, ask the following questions:

- What do you hope to accomplish through community engagement? Examples of goals include the number of participants, the diversity of participants, the diversity of answers, etc.
- How will you engage with your community and gather feedback?
- Who do you want to hear from? What type of feedback are you looking for?
- How will you analyze and use the data collected to influence your decision-making?
- What methods will you use to keep your residents continuously informed and engaged?

The City of Lancaster (US) has built an incredibly strong community engagement culture by doing just this. Danene Sorace, the Mayor of Lancaster, shared her advice on the importance of devoting time upfront:

*When you intentionally do engagement at the front end, it will save you time and money as the process progresses. So my first piece of advice would be to invest in it. That **return on investment** will come because the projects will go more smoothly in the later phases. And there will be a lot more goodwill and good feeling about those projects as they relate to public investment."*

Step 3:

Start slowly and deliberately, one project at a time

By starting small and thoughtfully, you can develop a clear, holistic engagement approach that will set your culture of engagement up for success from day one. It is easy to get discouraged when you put a lot of time and effort into an exciting initiative that, in the end, doesn't pay off, and it will also cause key stakeholders to give up providing support.

Focusing on launching a single, well-thought-out project rather than multiple projects simultaneously has numerous advantages. By selecting a pilot project and dedicating resources and energy to meticulous preparation, the likelihood of successful execution and tangible results significantly increases. By prioritising quality over quantity at first, you can establish a proven track record that bolsters credibility and trust, ultimately paving the way for long-term success and internal buy-in.

What makes for a good pilot project?

A topic that you know is a top priority for a wide range of residents.

This will help drive motivated people directly to the engagement. Once you get people to sign up on your community engagement platform, it is much easier to engage them continuously on current and new topics.

Learn by doing and know you are in this together

Good preparation is important, but community engagement always remains a process of trial and error. Unforeseen circumstances that make it impossible to follow the processes you mapped out in advance can emerge and cause friction or delays. Mutual communication and constructive collaboration are the keys to overcoming any obstacles.

As a pilot project, it should be limited in scope and timeline.

The idea is to be able to launch a project and to get started with the input you collected immediately after. This allows for easier evaluation and proving the added value of community engagement. Good examples are, for instance, an update to your current mobility plan to cut down on heavy traffic in a specific neighbourhood, a bike lane improvement exercise, or a participatory budget inviting residents to come up with suggestions to create more green spaces.

Here are two tips to avoid getting discouraged:

Meet your community where they are.

Understand the current culture of engagement – or lack thereof – in your community and pinpoint the opportunities as well as limitations of what new engagement methods could have. Whether you are using digital or offline methods, you won't be able to change your culture of engagement overnight, so it is essential to take the current status into account, including the existing gaps.

Develop a clear communications plan that fits within and improves upon your existing engagement strategy.

Your engagement efforts will only be successful if your community knows about them. Whether it is social media, paper flyers in schools, or a video announcement, take the time upfront to plan how you will communicate your engagement initiative to continue to build the culture of engagement.

Get support to promote your engagement efforts by downloading our communications guide

[Download the guide](#)



Step 4:

Maintain positive engagement, both internally and externally, by providing continuous updates

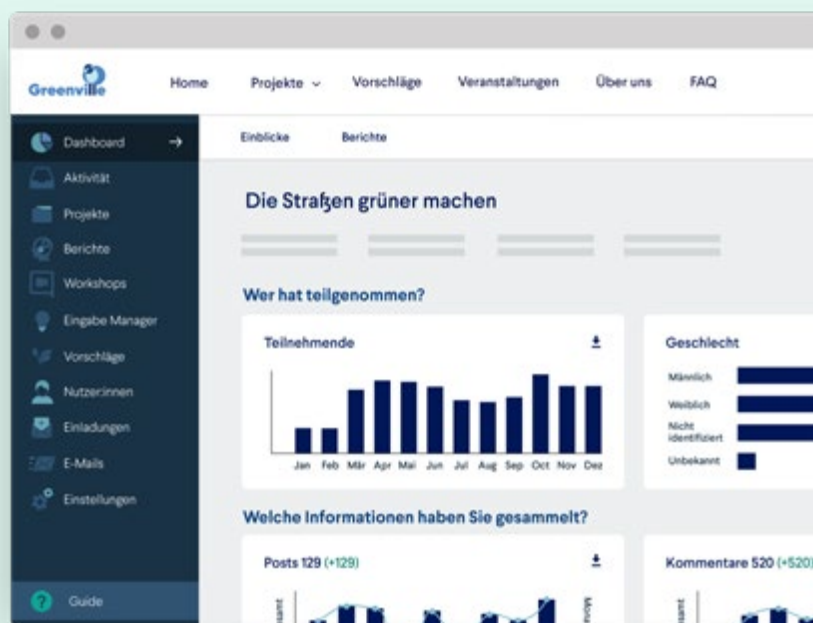
It is important to continuously share the success and benefits of the engagement to your team to maintain their support for the initiative. Besides highlighting successes internally, it is also important to show your community that their input is valued and truly taken into account. Ultimately, a culture of engagement results from stakeholders from all sides of the process showing continuous engagement and excitement.

Do this by reporting on your goals and presenting the data in an easy-to-understand and visually appealing format, such as charts, graphs, or infographics.

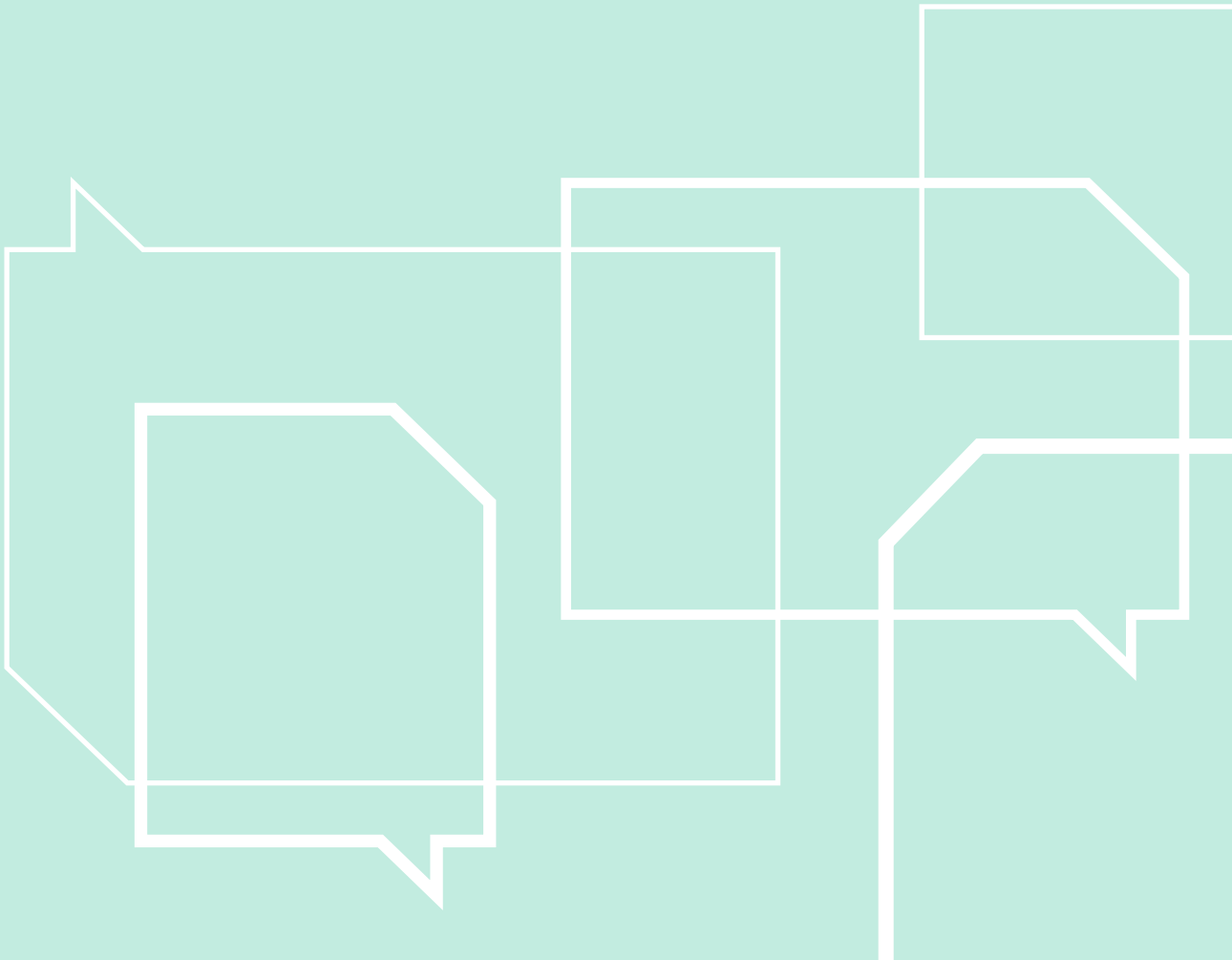
Enabling local governments to make more informed decisions based on more data is one of the key pillars of Go Vocal's mission. That's why we not only offer a platform that enables you to reach your community at scale, but also helps you make sense of the input through built-in analysis tools, such as automated dashboards, and topic clustering using our AI-enabled insights tool.

No need for a degree in data analysis or a data analyst on your team; with our tool, you get relevant insights out of your data to use in decision-making, reporting back to your community or the elected officials in next to no time!

[Check out our platform features](#)



Worksheet: **Online engagement canvas**



It is clear by now that launching successful (online) engagement projects is not something you should leave up to chance.

It is essential that before the start of any consultation, all stakeholders sit around the table to clearly state what their expectations are, as well as which levers you will use to reach these goals. It may sound obvious, but finding a common space and format to jot down all of this information is not always easy.


Our engagement experts developed a simple framework for setting up your engagement strategy: the online engagement canvas. The canvas allows you to define the different building blocks of a project and by extension your wider engagement strategy. It will help you:

- **Be transparent and accountable:** The canvas helps clarify the purpose of your engagement strategy, who is involved, and the goals you are trying to reach.
- **Keep a high-level overview:** In the long run, and even weeks or months after launching your platform, it is always useful to be reminded at a glance of all the aspects of your strategy, such as your engagement levers or planned risks and barriers.
- **Brainstorm together:** Filling out or updating the canvas is a good moment for you and the stakeholders you want to involve to finetune your objectives or reorient and change the actions you plan to take.

Now let's get to work! Sit down and formulate answers - alone or with your colleagues - to questions like:

- What are your short and long-term goals for engagement? How will you leverage an online engagement platform?
- What projects will you launch?
- Who will be on the core engagement team?
- Who is your target audience?
- What channels will you use to communicate about your engagement projects?
- How will you close the feedback loop?
- Are there key dates to work towards?

- What is going to be measured and when? When is the platform a success?
- What is possibly blocking inside your organisation? Are there external factors to take into account?

Online Engagement Canvas


Online Engagement Canvas

Define the building blocks of your engagement platform and strategy

1. Goals Did you agree on shared objectives? What are the short and long term goals of your platform? What projects will be put on the platform? What projects will be open for input continuously?	2. Organization Who will lead the core team? Who are the operational and strategic stakeholders? Does every project manager know how to set-up and follow-up on projects?	3. Communication How will be the platform fit in the overall communication strategy? What channels will be used to communicate launches? How will feedback or follow-up be organized?
	4. Audience Who is the targeted audience? Are there particular groups or organisations to focus on?	5. Calendar Are there key dates to work towards? What activities or events are opportunities for engagement?
6. Metrics What is going to be measured and when? When is the platform going to be seen as a success?		7. Risks What is possibly blocking inside your organization? What are the external factors to take into account?

2

[Click here to access the worksheet](#)

Change of power - community engagement back to square 1?



Navigating a change of political power can be challenging, as new leadership may question current working methods and initiatives, including community engagement. Developing a robust culture of engagement is essential to minimise frustration and prevent feeling like you're starting from scratch. By establishing clear, efficient processes that consistently yield results, the likelihood of a new administration putting engagement initiatives on hold or overhauling them entirely is significantly reduced.

Adopting an engagement plan is one effective way to institutionalise your approach and ensure you can continue your work, even when a newly elected team comes in. This formal document outlines the values, principles, and procedures regarding engagement activities, ensuring continuity and commitment to meaningful community engagement.

You can read more about the engagement plan in part 2 - **follow us to be notified when it's available for download!**



Want to see the platform in action?

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the platform
in action