

5 WAYS TO INCREASE CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT IN PUBLIC MEETINGS AND DECISIONS





“Trust in Britain’s core institutions is crumbling as people at all levels of society lose their faith in the system.”

Edelman Trust Barometer 2017

INTRODUCTION

At a time when public trust in politicians and government institutions is at an all-time low, the public sector must find ways to reconnect with citizens. Encouraging more people to get involved in decision-making processes is a vital part of building a society where citizens feel motivated, represented, and able to contribute to the way their country is run.

Empowering citizens to have a say in decisions which affect their lives can help government better meet the needs of the constituents it serves. But how can organisations engage more people? How can the public sector get the audience participation and feedback it needs to deliver modern services that are fit-for-purpose and even exceed expectations?

Whether you represent a central government department, council, education institution, police force, fire and rescue team, health and social care provider or another organisation involved in designing and delivering public services, increasing citizen participation in surveys, consultations, public meetings and other focus groups is crucial to enriching the discussion.

You need citizens to be actively involved in decision-making processes in order to earn back trust, govern effectively, and improve services and outcomes. One way to incorporate more voices, perspectives and experience in your organisation’s decision-making is to increase the number of people participating in public meetings.

1. PROMOTE YOUR MEETING ACROSS MULTIPLE CHANNELS

In an ever-changing digital age, there are many easy and cost-effective ways to inform your citizens of upcoming meetings. Leveraging multiple channels like social media, dedicated feedback channels, text messaging and your organisation's website are some good ways to ensure citizens hear about your meeting.

Social Media: When it comes to public sector meetings, social media can be a great tool for spreading the word and reaching different audiences. Test your message across different platforms to see which channel prompts the highest engagement.

Use the audience targeting features available with social media management platforms to reach specific socio-demographic groups. Be proactive and go to people, don't wait for them to come to you.

Example: Southampton City Council uses Facebook to promote public meetings, from opportunities for citizens to have their say on the way the council does business, to meetings where housing tenants can talk to the council about fire safety and new developments.

Text Messaging: Text messaging is another valuable tool when it comes to raising awareness of meetings and upcoming decisions. A text messaging service can automate this process for you so you don't even



have to think about it. Citizens will automatically get an alert on their phone about an upcoming meeting. You can also set up a series of drip-messages to maintain engagement over time. Granicus' [Interactive Text](#) solution is a great option for automated alerts, reminders and sustained campaigns.

Email Marketing: In a digital world, email stands the test of time. In the private sector, there is a high return on investment for email marketing ([for every \\$1 spent, companies see \\$38 in return](#)). In the public sector, this can translate to more people getting their flu jabs, or more people voting in an election. When it comes to public meetings, email marketing can have the same effect — the better the promotion, the higher the citizen participation. The [GovDelivery Communications Cloud](#) is the leading communications platform for government.





2. PROVIDE OPPORTUNITIES FOR CITIZEN FEEDBACK

In our recent [Public Sector Trends Report](#), respondents were asked a question about how they gather citizens' feedback. Nearly three quarters of respondents said the top two channels for collecting customer feedback on their services and encouraging citizen participation in surveys were via social media and email marketing. These are more cost-effective and less times-consuming than phone calls, and can engage significantly more people. You may also want to consider these methods:

Dedicated Citizen Engagement Tool: Many local governments use a dedicated citizen engagement tool to gather feedback from citizens. For example, the City of Austin, Texas, another current Granicus client, uses its platform, [SpeakUp Austin!](#), to gather feedback from constituents about how to improve the City of Austin. This is part of the reason it was awarded a "designation as one of the top-ranked US Digital Cities" in the US in 2016. Austin primarily uses its SpeakUp page to give citizens a platform to introduce new ideas.

Make it easy for citizens to request to speak at public meetings by enabling them to do so online. [eComment](#), a Granicus product, allows citizens to give online feedback on specific agenda items; it also gives them the ability to make a request to speak in person.

Optimised Website: An up-to-date website is a great way to engage your citizens while simultaneously making processes easier on staff. This can also mean more time for staff to spend on other citizen outreach. Ensure you promote upcoming consultations and public meetings on relevant webpages - perhaps with a pop-up overlay message, or sliding banner image at the top of each page with the option for visitors to "[add to calendar](#)".

Two-Way Text Messaging: Your public meeting is the perfect opportunity to gather citizens' feedback on a proposal, for example plans for new school or cycle routes. One easy way to do this succinctly is by using a text messaging tool like Granicus' Interactive Text.

Display text-in short codes on your presentation slides, display boards or handouts to give participants the chance to text a keyword which triggers a series of questions.

Try it yourself

Let's play pretend for a moment. You're a local resident at a public consultation event, or you're walking past a billboard with this call-to-action:

Text "WATERFRONT" to
01422 400794.



Bedford Borough Council

PROVIDING OPPORTUNITIES FOR CITIZEN FEEDBACK

Bedford Borough Council is a unitary council serving 166,300 people. Although the majority of residents live in the urban areas of Bedford and five large surrounding villages, 94% of the borough's land is rural and sparsely populated.

Situation

Bedford Borough Council was looking for a way to engage more people in their public consultations and meetings. They wanted to hear from a wider range of residents, staff, businesses and other stakeholders on a variety of issues which affect them. Bedford knew that audience insight and feedback would be key to the successful development of public services and spaces.

Solution

Like hundreds of other government organisations using the GovDelivery Communications Cloud (by Granicus) to promote public consultations (in-person meetings and online surveys), Bedford saw an opportunity to dramatically increase its pool of participants using email marketing. By providing a dedicated subscription topic called "Consultations – Your Voice, Your Views", and by cross-promoting participation opportunities in other relevant topic bulletins, Bedford is able to gather feedback from a keen subscriber base and continually reach new audiences. Email is the perfect platform for using a clever balance of information (presented in [plain language](#)), clear call-to-action buttons, compelling imagery and links to more details, to strike up engagement. The email bulletins also provide a

good platform for feeding back on the outcomes of consultations.

Results

In just under 12 months since launching the "consultations" subscription topic, Bedford has significantly increased participation in its consultations, and grown its audience of potential participants by nearly 450%. The council has tracked a clear link between peaks in participation and the deployment of email bulletins. For example, 55% of responses to a "licensing" consultation arrived within 24 hours of the email send which encouraged subscribers to have their say; and 70% of responses to a "customer experience" survey were submitted within 24 hours of a targeted email inviting people to contribute.

Approximately 5,550 people have opted in to receive bulletins about consultations (including library service changes, conservation areas, school mergers, community health provision, dog control and more); up from approximately 1,250 potential participants prior to implementing Granicus' citizen engagement platform. The council uses the feedback to plan and deliver services that better meet the needs of the people they serve.

450% audience increase leads to higher participation levels.

3. BE TIMELY

Timing is everything — especially when it comes to communication. Posting important dates, deadlines and opportunities for engagement is a process, and may not adhere to the “less is more” rule. Here are helpful deadlines for ensuring you are timely with your meeting communication:

Meeting Info: Increasing attendance or engagement in your public meeting all starts with the most valuable information: date, time and location. Make sure these details are communicated on a regular basis — and well ahead of your actual meeting (we suggest weekly reminders, then one day before).

Agendas: Before your meeting even begins, one way tool to increase attendance is publishing your agenda. This can help generate interest, increase transparency and alert citizens to relevant topics of discussion.

Meeting Minutes: After the meeting is over, it’s important to publish minutes as soon as possible either on your website or through another engagement platform (including agenda management applications). This is a process that can be easily automated. Allowing citizens to quickly access minutes can help them see the important and relevant issues that were discussed. Furthermore, they can review decisions that were made and understand how they will be affected.

4. LIVE BROADCAST MEETINGS

Webcasting: Giving citizens the chance to watch meetings live from the comfort of their homes is an important part in delivering an inclusive engagement strategy. It’s especially valuable to the elderly, those with disabilities and citizens without access to transport or child care. Broadcasting your meetings live for remote participants shows your organisation’s commitment to citizen participation, transparency and a “positive citizen experience” - which could score you reputation points among locals.

On-Demand Video: Giving people the chance to watch archived footage of a public meeting can help novices understand the meeting format and process. Live and on-demand videos can demystify the meeting experience, make it seem less intimidating, and encourage new people to attend.

“Over 50% of citizens want to be involved in major policy decisions, but only 7% feel their voices are heard.”

Institute for Government

5. CONNECT THE DOTS

Ultimately, every participating member of the public wants to know how their feedback and input will be used (responsibly) in the decision-making process. They also want to see real, tangible results from their active engagement. Adding a “Democracy in Action” section to your organisation’s website is a great way to track and display projects and initiatives that were suggested by citizens.

Be proactive about showing participants (and other would-be participants) how they’ve contributed to

change, and let them know their voice is important and influential.

You can then build an audience of repeat and new contributors, like Southampton City Council does through its [People’s Panel](#), to increase citizens’ trust in your organisation and democratic processes.

Credibility is vital for forging an effective relationship between the public sector and the people it serves. Organisations need the views, experiences, trust, and commitment of citizens in order to be successful.

Engagement Checklist

- 1. Post Your Meeting Notice on Multiple Platforms**
In an ever-changing digital age, there are many easy and cost-effective ways to inform your citizens of upcoming meetings. Leveraging multiple channels like social media can help amplify your message.
- 2. Provide Opportunities for Citizen Feedback**
While it was once the primary communication channel, using phone calls to gather feedback from citizens and putting them into reports is no longer a viable option for many time- and resource-poor teams. Adding a dedicated citizen engagement tool (in addition to your website) like [SpeakUp](#) or [eComment](#) to your suite of digital services makes it easy for citizens to have their say.
- 3. Be as Timely as Possible**
It’s one thing to promptly publish meeting and agenda notifications prior to your public meeting, but how quickly is your organisation following up with meeting minutes and action points? Connect with citizens within 24 hours to ensure they are informed about decisions or issues that are relevant to them.
- 4. Live Broadcast Meetings**
Webcast (live-stream) your meeting so that people can participate in real time (and engage with you on social media), and consider recording public meetings and posting an on-demand version on your website for others to watch later.
- 5. Connect the Dots**
Think of the public meeting process as an engagement funnel — first you need to build an audience by promoting opportunities across your communications channels, ensure participants have a way to give feedback easily, follow up with them in a timely fashion to show them you care about them, and finally give people the chance to engage with the meeting content and outcomes in their own time.



GRANICUS

ABOUT GRANICUS

Granicus provides technology that empowers government organisations to create better lives for the people they serve. By offering the industry's leading cloud-based solutions for communications, meeting and agenda management, and digital services to more than 150 UK public sector organisations and 3,000 worldwide, Granicus helps turn government missions into quantifiable realities. Granicus products connect than 10 million citizens in the UK and 150 million globally, creating a powerful network to enhance government transparency and citizen engagement. By optimising decision-making processes, Granicus strives to help government realise better outcomes and have a greater impact for the citizens they serve.

GET IN TOUCH

For more information about Granicus' citizen engagement solutions and meeting and agenda management tools, please visit **uk.granicus.com**.

To arrange a chat with one of our team please email **info@granicus.com** or call **0800 032 5769**.