

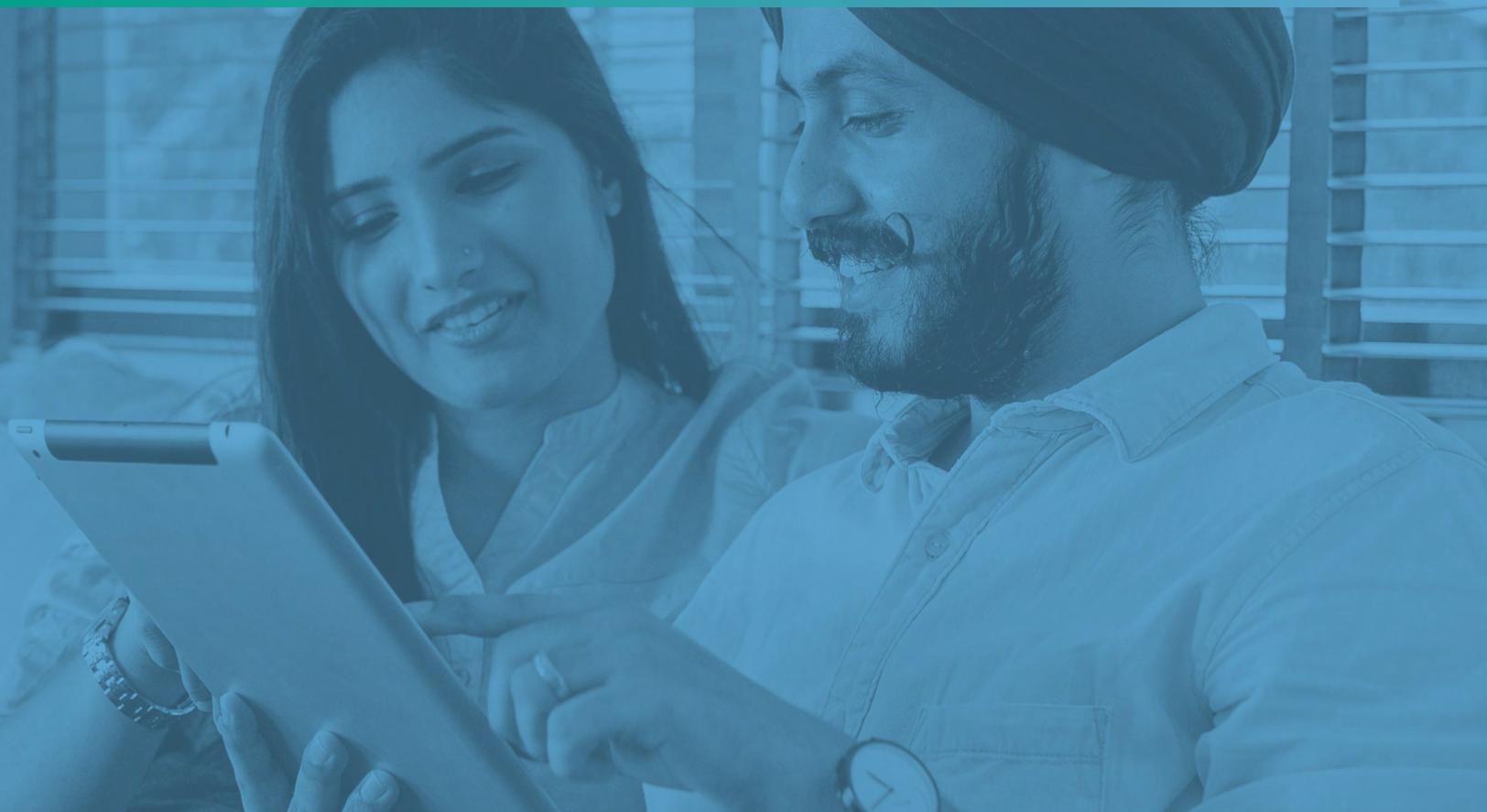
# Assessing the Value of Digital Community Engagement

Efficiency, Risk, Cost and Trust

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## Assessing the Value of Digital Community Engagement: Efficiency, Risk, Cost and Trust

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Bang the Table is a digital community engagement company with a strong social mission. Our purpose is to involve citizens around the world in the conversations that affect their lives and advocate public participation as vital for any well-functioning democracy.



# Foreword

Community engagement is an essential part of any well-functioning governing body. It increases the transparency of government actions to improve community perceptions and builds trust with stakeholders. It allows ideas for community improvements to come from those that know the community best — its residents. It enables decisions made at the top to be more robust and reflective of stakeholder desires. It prevents wasted time and energy on unwanted or problematic initiatives.

Ultimately, community engagement enables democracy to function properly.

Unfortunately, not all organizations see the value in community engagement, focusing solely on the cost or potential work required to carry out good engagement practices. While statutory requirements often mandate a certain amount of public input for local governance, some organizations look to just check that box, fulfilling requirements with a single town hall meeting or post for public comment. This type of engagement typically brings the same few voices to the table, satisfying mandates but not meaningfully engaging with the community on real issues.

Digital engagement opens the door to a new approach, bringing a more diverse representation of voices to your consultation. Digital community engagement allows stakeholders to provide their input asynchronously at their own convenience. It allows for far more reach compared to purely face-to-face efforts. With more community members engaged, expensive project pushbacks are minimized and better ideas are found through collaboration. Community engagement becomes more efficient when digital and traditional engagement strategies are utilized together.

Online engagement brings more people to the table, for a fraction of the cost per engaged individual.

In this e-book, we will walk through how digital engagement adoption presents efficiencies and mitigates risks associated with everyday government duties, creating a substantial return on investment.

Each section aims to identify the potential value of community engagement for both your community and organization.

**1: How Digital Engagement Better Serves Your Community**

**2: How Participation Has Changed Through Digital Engagement**

**3: How a Dedicated Engagement Platform Helps Mitigate Risk**

**4: How Digital Engagement Impacts Your Bottom Line**

**5: How Your Organization Benefits from Digital Engagement**

# How Digital Engagement Helps to Better Serve Your Community



## Improve individual wellbeing through civic participation

Civic participation leads to better governance. Community participation is increasingly recognized as an essential ingredient in addressing collective objectives and finding solutions to the complex issues that matter. Digital engagement enables community stakeholders to better advocate for themselves, leading to improved individual well-being. Additionally, when communities work together to define a path forward, local economies benefit. According to the American Planning Association, **75% of Americans believe** local planning engagement is crucial to improving local economies and supporting job growth through future development.

## Enhance social capital and community connection

Through online community engagement, conversations can happen between community members who otherwise would never have a chance to connect. Communities are diverse. The reach of digital engagement allows those diverse individuals to understand each other — and create innovative solutions together. Social capital expands as more community members engage with each other.

## Increase trust in governing bodies

According to the **2020 Edelman Trust Barometer** report, a growing sense of inequity is undermining trust globally. Trust can be built between the community and local officials through consistent communications and public consultations. Community stakeholders can see the benefits of their input when municipalities make the changes that residents ask for. “Closing the loop” and demonstrating the impacts of community contribution will encourage even more feedback in the future — and build more trusting relationships. According to a **Local Government Association poll out of the United Kingdom**, trust in local councils increased 10% just three months into the COVID-19 pandemic. This is thought to be due to effective communication and listening to stakeholder concerns.



## Work towards community consensus

While in-person consultations are invaluable to the engagement process, they are limiting because of time and transportation constraints. With online engagement, individuals across the community can control how long, when, and how they provide their own feedback. When contributing to a consultation, residents can see suggestions from others in the community and build off of those ideas. Meaningful community consensus is accomplished when differing ideas are considered.

### Case Study | Kamloops

The City of Kamloops, a community of under 100,000 people, has always valued community engagement. In the first half of 2018, the City of Kamloops held over fifty town halls, in the evenings and on the weekends, to maximize attendance. However, the same few residents were attending the meetings, resulting in limited knowledge of public opinion. Through a six-month trial of **EngagementHQ**, Kamloops expanded their reach — and received more community feedback than ever before. After a successful trial, they have continued to find success through EngagementHQ by integrating their site into every piece of communication, providing informative resources, and gaining internal buy-in.

**“Bang the Table has given us the ability to respond to new engagement needs within minutes and we will continue using online and in-person engagement for years to come.”**

Wendy Heshka, City of Kamloops Communications Manager

In the First 6 months, Let’s Talk Kamloops saw:

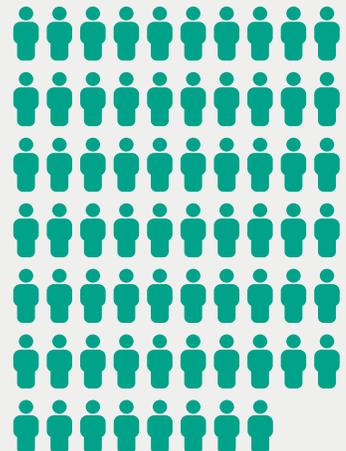
**21,000** Visits



 = 100 Visits

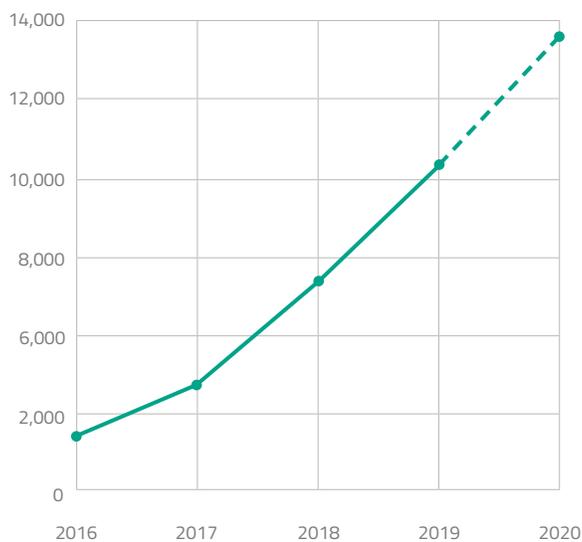
 = 100 Participants

**6,800** Participants



# How Participation Has Changed Through Digital Engagement

Online Projects  
Published on EngagementHQ



In the past decade, local governments have rapidly embraced online engagement across the world. This is reflected in our own findings. From 2016 to 2019, projects launched annually on EngagementHQ's platform have increased from 3,613 to 10,202 projects by the end of 2019, and that number is on track to increase even more in 2020.

## Reduce cost per engaged individual

Digital engagement saves time and resources compared to in-person meetings because an online community platform allows for more participants and feedback, for a fraction of the cost. As you bring more consultations online, you build a database of participants that can be re-engaged on future projects. Each consecutive engagement requires less marketing and outreach to build a network of participants willing to engage.

Overall community engagement costs per participant decrease when in-person efforts are used in combination with digital engagement. Meaningful deliberation and engagement happen when the two are used in tandem with each other, when ideas generated online can be referenced and built upon in-person, and vice versa.

## Increase overall participation

If the same amount of time and resources are allocated towards online vs. in-person public consultation, online efforts will earn an organization more participants and feedback than in-person efforts, usually by many more participants. According to Pew Research, in 2008, only 24% of Americans attended at least one town, local, or school meeting in the past year. An online engagement platform can reach thousands more community stakeholders eager to have their say. Our clients often see upward of a 1000% increase in participation through digital-first engagement efforts.

Our clients often see upward of a 1000% increase in participation through digital-first engagement efforts.



## Capture deeper feedback in less time

Planning projects, master plans, parks and recreation improvements all usually require public meetings and a certain amount of resources to ensure that community members have a chance to be heard. The process can take months and is extremely costly. Online engagement provides a way to cut down that timeline. Instead of solely relying on expensive bi-weekly meetings where the same few participants voice their opinions, online consultations can provide the necessary community input in a fraction of the time for projects. The time and resource savings from supplementing traditional engagement methods with online engagement allows for more cost-effective project budgets.

## Improve transparency in Governance

Transparency is invaluable for local governments. It keeps officials accountable and wards off corruption. It encourages projects to stay on time and within budget, because the public knows the amount of planned costs and time allocated from the start. Resources and time are used more efficiently within government bodies when they have to answer to their stakeholders. Online engagement allows organizations to establish more transparency quickly. **According to the Institute for Local Government**, transparency and accountability are essential in well-functioning organizations.

## Case Study | Coventry

**“The feedback we have received from the public is fantastic. People are reading our strategies that we put up ... And they are reading them line by line. They are giving us intelligent, well-considered feedback.”**

James Sampson-Foster, Analyst, Engagement Insight Team, Coventry City Council

Coventry City Council had been using various online survey options, along with social media, to engage with residents. However, surveys didn't provide context or facilitate discussions. Council wanted a one-stop communication hub where valuable dialogue could occur and Coventry could show residents how their feedback was implemented into various initiatives. Let's Talk Coventry was the solution.

EngagementHQ provided a dedicated hub for communications and feedback where more residents could have a voice. Coventry quickly found that an online space dedicated to community engagement not only facilitated easier communication, it encouraged **higher quality dialogue**.

**“We have built up a wonderful Q&A where the general public have been asking us tough and searching questions, as well they should. What we have been able to do with that is demonstrate good faith and a willingness to do what we can by answering them in a public way and that is one of the best things I love about the Q&A tool.”**

Sampson-Foster

# How a Dedicated Engagement Platform Helps Mitigate Risk

## Reduce costly misinformation from spreading

While global political trends can lead to uncertainty and polarization and federal government trust is fading, local governments tend to still be widely trusted among the masses. Local governments have the power to grab the attention of their communities and provide them with important information that could save massive amounts of resources. Whether it's a crisis where misinformation is rampant or pushback for a project that pops up due to fake news on social media, providing a single source of truth through online engagement saves time and money.

## Ensure equal representation of your entire community

While in-person meetings are an integral part of community engagement, they can also be limiting. A very finite number of individuals can usually attend town hall meetings, especially due to COVID-19. Many community stakeholders have major time constraints and have work shifts during the evenings and weekends. There is privilege in being able to attend town hall meetings. As a result, the same few people who consistently attend meetings have their voices heard disproportionately compared to most others in a community. Digital engagement empowers voices of those who are unable to attend in-person events.

## Curb over-reliance on social media

Social media is a powerful tool for promotional and information sharing purposes, but it can be a double-edged sword. These sites tend to be rampant with misinformation that can be harmful to communities. These falsehoods tend to be targeted to those most susceptible to them. Additionally, social media companies profit from selling and owning user data for ads and campaigns. As a result, communities do not trust social media platforms. Residents shouldn't be forced to sacrifice their privacy in order to participate in the democratic process.

72% of Americans have a **great deal or fair amount of confidence** in their local governments.



39% of people in England **believe local authorities should have more power.**



42% of Australians **trust their local council**, the highest level of trust seen in three years.



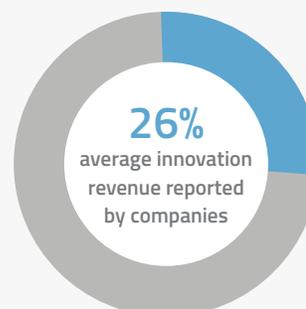
61% of Canadians feel that **municipalities understand their problems better** than the federal government.



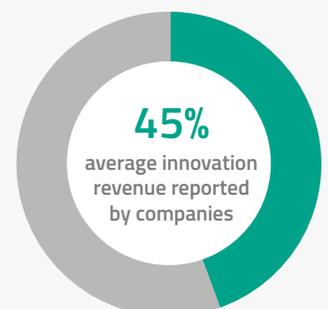
### Why inclusive engagement matters

Inclusive engagement means that better ideas will be generated. According to the World Economic Forum, there is a **clear link** between innovation and the amount of diversity. The ideas and creativity sourced from different groups of people collaborating to provide community feedback could lead to cost-saving and innovative ideas that would be impossible without including more people in the democratic process through online engagement. Innovation and diversity can help local communities find new ways to provide services and create more cost-effective projects.

Companies with **below-average** diversity scores



Companies with **above-average** diversity scores



Boston Consulting group, diversity and innovation survey, 2017 (n=1,681).

## Diminish bias inherent to in-person engagement

Community engagement topics can be complex and controversial. Due to the nature of local government, decision-makers and leaders tend to be those with formal education and degrees. Because of this, in-person meetings can sometimes be biased. Those leaders can have an unconscious bias giving greater weight to feedback from those who are formally educated, strong public speakers, or those with similar backgrounds. Online engagement comes closer to eliminating those biases, so feedback is weighed based on substance rather than the source of the information.

### Case Study | Wingecarribee

"We chose EngagementHQ because it was the only tool of its kind, and was developed in Australia by people who understood the local government context. It was a brave decision at the time, and it paid off."

Charmaine Cooper, Community Engagement Coordinator

In a Community of 48,000 Your Say Wingecarribee has seen:



125  
Projects



238,000  
Visits



2,000  
Registered Users

In Wingecarribee, in 2009, the local government was creating a master plan for the community. Knowing that many of their residents were time poor, they took a leap of faith and moved beyond engaging only through face-to-face meetings. The result: a decade of digital engagement and vast amounts of community feedback received online.

They earned this level of engagement success by:

- **Engaging often.** Officials built trust by engaging constantly, driving traffic to the platform and closing the loop by showing the direct results of the feedback.
- **Not Expecting Anything.** When engaging with the community consistently, officials were constantly surprised by what projects drew criticism or praise. They made sure to engage as much as they could, to minimize the risk of pushback.
- **Using a Variety of Tools.** Different online tools, such as interactive maps and idea boards, allowed for consultations to be more effective and inform community stakeholders.

# How Digital Engagement Impacts Your Bottom Line

## Minimize costly public pushback

Trust is not built between a community and its leaders just for the sake of building relationships. Trust is built to minimize pushback on necessary, controversial decisions or projects. Trust and relationships are also built so when officials need to rely on their community, the community is willing to do what is asked of them. In the long run, having a foundation of trust with the community lessens risk and saves time and resources.

In construction projects and capital infrastructure improvements, more time spent on a project equates to more money being spent on that project. Once a project is underway, if there weren't enough community members consulted, or there isn't enough trust built between stakeholders and leaders in the community, the project could be delayed due to public disapproval.

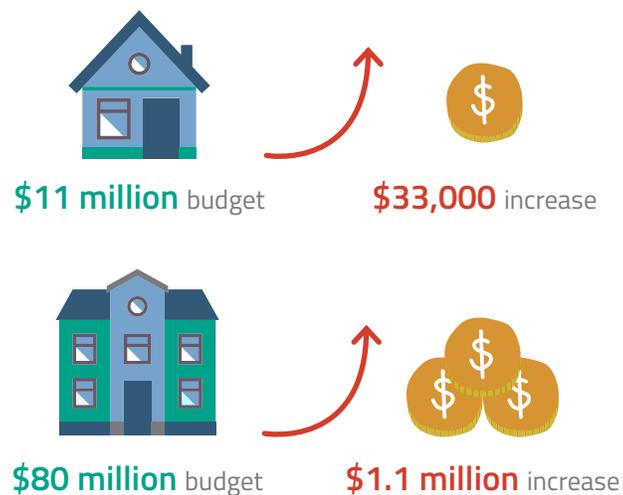
Building trust and engaging early and often with a larger number of community stakeholders mitigates risk, saving time and money for a local organization in the long-run.

## Prevent project delays and lost funds as a result

From 2005 to 2015, **Forbes** reported that community opposition in the United States led to \$1 trillion in lost funds. In New York, Amazon had to back out of a new headquarters plan that cost \$25 billion in lost potential tax revenue for the city. In Toronto, Sidewalk Labs had to **scrap a masterplan** for a riverfront renovation because of community activism regarding data protection, resulting in two years of work and negotiations to be in vain. In all of these examples, proper civic engagement of the project may have saved the community and businesses billions of dollars. Community stakeholders will voice their concerns either way about large projects and plans — it's important to engage from the start.

Delay costs are extremely expensive. According to Christoph Berendes, Senior Consultant at Public Engagement Associates and Editor in Chief at Facilitation Analytics, one month of delay could cause an **increase in expenses of 0.29% to 1.29%** to an overall project budget.

### Project Cost with **One Month** of Delays



# Increase participation at a fraction of the cost

In large planning projects, such as master plans, community engagement is a necessary but costly part of creating an effective strategy. The more feedback, the easier it is to create a plan that reflects the goals of the community while also reducing potential pushback or future expensive changes during implementation.

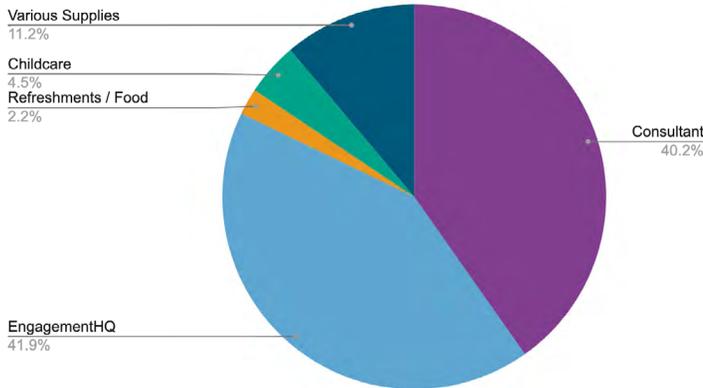
While a digital engagement platform does present a cost, it drastically decreases the cost per participant in the engagement process. The example below outlines the estimated costs and participation of in-person engagement only versus using a digital-first approach. The estimates assume a 1000% increase in participants when online engagement is utilized (which tends to be a conservative estimate). It also assumes that only four large-scale, in-person meetings are held, which can vary based on the duration and size of the project.

The cost per participant in the community engagement process **decreases by 85%** in the example below. Many communities that implement digital engagement into their projects see much larger decreases in costs.



## Engagement Costs for a Large Planning Project

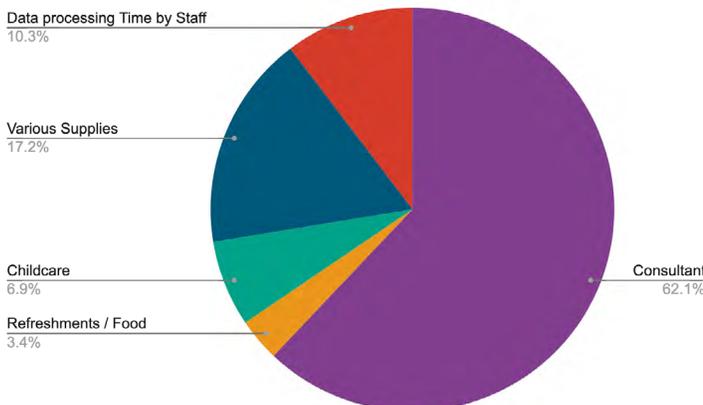
In-Person & Online



Estimated<sup>1</sup> Costs assuming 4 large meetings

Consultant	\$7,200
EngagementHQ	\$7,500
Refreshments / Food	\$400
Childcare	\$800
Various Supplies	\$2,000
<b>Total</b>	<b>\$17,900</b>
<b>Participants<sup>2</sup></b>	<b>2000</b>
<b>Cost Per Participant</b>	<b>\$8.95</b>

In-Person Only



Estimated Costs assuming 4 large meetings

Consultant	\$7,200
Refreshments / Food	\$400
Childcare	\$800
Various Supplies	\$2,000
Data Processing	\$1,200
<b>Total</b>	<b>\$11,600</b>
<b>Participants<sup>2</sup></b>	<b>200</b>
<b>Cost Per Participant</b>	<b>\$58</b>

1. Numbers are estimated based on a population of 150,000  
 2. Participant numbers estimated based on industry standards

# Improve organizational outcomes with a commitment to engagement

According to a [study](#) performed by Dr. Krithika Randhawa at UTS Business School in Australia, local governments that had a strong commitment to engagement and crowdsourcing ideas from the community had **better outcomes** compared to those that didn't. Some councils had invested in an engagement platform, but top leadership did not commit time or resources to using it, and some even saw the platform as a symbolic gesture for residents. As a result, those councils had worse outcomes than those that focused on internal buy-in of the platform across the organization. Not only did councils with a strong commitment to utilizing their engagement platform see high quality feedback from their community, they also implemented the feedback **more effectively**.

## Case Study | Parker

Within the first six months of using EngagementHQ, close to 20% of the Parker population visited Let's Talk Parker!

### Local Residents Weighed In On:



11

Projects



1082

Surveys



320

Quick Polls

### The Community Has:



68

Big ideas for the town's future



1082

Responses on growth & investment



459

Virtual map pins dropped

### How did Parker reach this level of success?

- **Asking engaging questions** provoked valuable community input from a broader range of voices.
- Driving traffic and engagement by **marketing their site to residents**.
- Not shying away from controversial topics.
- Emphasizing internal buy-in by creating an Engagement Committee with representatives across departments.
- Closing the loop with residents by sharing engagement results which helped build more trusting relationships between community and government.

**"EngagementHQ has been a hit in our community, helping to turn innovative ideas into reality!"**

Dannette Robberson, Town of Parker, Colorado

# How Your Organization Benefits from Digital Engagement

## Gaining Internal Adoption

You've identified community engagement as a priority, but not everyone in your organization sees the value. How do you gain the necessary buy-in from internal stakeholders to make your engagement program successful?

Often, the implementation of new technology or processes is met with unease as some employees will struggle to embrace change. The key to internal success comes with the development of a strategic framework, demonstrating the value of engagement and how it aligns with organizational objectives.

Get your team excited about digital engagement by embracing these strategies:

1. Consider these **5 components of a successful engagement framework** before you begin creating projects.
2. **Guide department heads** on projects that need public input and support them as they train their individual teams for execution.
3. **Appoint representatives from every department** in the organization to prioritize community engagement.
4. Create a '**Culture that Tries**' by recognizing meaningful impact to motivate organization-wide adoption for better outcomes.
5. **Embed community engagement into your internal decision-making**. Learn strategic approaches from Rotorua Lakes Council.

## Increase team capacity

Digital-first engagement doesn't mean that town hall meetings shouldn't be pursued, but rather, recognizing that both complement each other. Online consultations allow for greater reach within a community, gaining deeper community understanding for a fraction of the cost compared to in-person meeting expenses. It enables disenfranchised community members to give their suggestions in safe, moderated space, 24/7. Digital engagement platforms are more efficient and save time for officials that need to make informed decisions based on community data. Software inherently brings efficiencies to your team, helping reduce time spent on collecting feedback as well as responding to and reporting on that feedback. When backed by a powerful engagement platform, your team has more time to focus on the projects that have real impact for your community.

## Make community-informed decisions

An engagement platform should not only provide ways to gather feedback from the community, it should also enable easy data analysis and management of that feedback. Platforms should have innovative data tools such as **sentiment analysis and advanced analytics** to help you make sense of the feedback you receive, at scale. Sentiment analysis sorts through comments and qualitative feedback and converts hours of work into easy-to-understand quantitative data. Moreover, a platform should help you build and manage your community database, providing time savings and efficiencies when reaching out to the community. This makes closing the loop after a project complete an easy part of the process that makes the community feel heard and valued as a partner in your decision making process.



## Learn and implement good community engagement practices

When purchasing an engagement platform, there can be some hesitation about implementation and using the platform optimally. Any investment in digital engagement should include not only software, but access to support and expertise that allows organizations to utilize the platform effectively from the start. The best providers are focused on helping organizations develop good engagement practices that drive meaningful impact for the organization and community members. Lean-into this knowledge, work to build your team's capacity around delivering good engagement and with each consultation, you'll experience a greater return on your investment all the while fostering meaningful relationships with the community members you serve.

### Case Study | Maple Ridge School District 42

In Maple Ridge, British Columbia, during the COVID-19 pandemic, essential workers were working tirelessly to keep the public safe, healthy, and fed. As a result, local essential workers were struggling to find childcare solutions.

The Ministry of Education tasked each school district with identifying essential worker families, reaching out to them, and providing childcare to them during the crisis.

School District 42 had already invested time and resources into building relationships with stakeholders through their online community engagement site, Let's Talk SD42. Because the school district had already built their database of community members and engaged consistently in the past, they were able to reach 4,000 residents in 5 days.

With that community feedback, the school district swiftly identified essential worker families in need and started providing them with childcare. Without an online community engagement platform and a foundation of trust, the school district would have had to spend ample more time and resources to identify those families.



**Let's Talk SD42 was able to reach  
4,000 residents in 5 days.**

Interested in exploring  
digital-first engagement for  
your organization?

LET'S TALK