

How to improve public engagement by noticing what you already do well – Dave McKenna

1. Introduction

Looking elsewhere for good practice may be useful but it's not always necessary. By noticing the things that work for you already, you can do more of what works and get inspiration for new things to try. This point was really well demonstrated at a workshop I ran at last year's Centre for Public Scrutiny [Annual Conference](#) on improving public engagement.

2. "What works for you already?"

People involved in local government scrutiny want to improve their public engagement work but it's a challenging aspect of their practice. It was no surprise, therefore, that this was chosen as a workshop topic at last year's Centre for Public Scrutiny's annual conference. It was also no surprise that the workshop was well attended by people who felt stuck on this issue and were keen to find out how to make progress.

However, by focussing on 'what works for you already?', we learnt about some great examples – even from the people who felt that they weren't doing much – it turned out, in fact, that they were!

We used a [zero to ten scaling question](#) to find out how well people felt they were doing. Even though the scores people gave themselves were sometimes quite low, they were able to highlight some really positive practice that had got them to those scores. In fact, once you start really noticing the things that have worked, you might realise that your score really isn't as low as you thought.

One example from a council was as follows. When asked to give a score about their experience of public engagement they gave it only one out of ten. When then asked if they had ever had a good experience, after some reflection they said yes, once we had a really good meeting about the proposed closure of a health centre. After some careful questions it became clear that this had happened because the issue had been spotted by the team in the local press. Noticing what had worked before led to the idea of scanning the local press for topics that would be of public interest.

3. Scrutiny practitioner ideas for better public engagement

Just to give you a flavour, below are ten of the good practices for better public engagement that participants noticed. But remember, the things that are likely to work best for you, in your particular context, might not be the same.

4. Use third parties to engage with people for you such as partner organisations, voluntary groups and the local media
5. Use existing council processes to engage through e.g. budget, planning, residents' associations, social media, media releases, council newspaper
6. Involve the public in developing your work plan work
7. Talk and listen to the user / interest groups linked to your council
8. Use the council comms team to get the most out of traditional and social media
9. Use committee members to get messages out about scrutiny business and support the especially active councillors to do more
10. Talk to Residents Associations and go to their meetings
11. Use your contacts in other council teams to advise and help you to engage with the people they work with e.g. schools, tenants, community groups
12. Use social media to contact interested parties
13. Scan the local media to pick up issues of public concern / issues the public will want to engage with

14. Noticing what you do well

So, the ideas above might have given you some inspiration but why not try this little exercise yourself?

Ask yourself where you are on a scale of zero to ten, where zero is 'our public engagement is a complete disaster' and ten is 'our public engagement is completely wonderful'.

Got a number?

Good.

Now write down ten things you have done to get you to that number, ten things that mean you are not at zero.

See, you do some good things already. Now get out there and do some more.

15. About the Author

Dave McKenna is a solution focussed practitioner with 20 years local government experience and a PhD in local politics, based in the UK.

He specialise in public governance; particularly local government scrutiny, partnership working, public participation and digital democracy.

He helps councils and other public bodies with improvement, design and research work.

He is an active member of Notwestminster - a volunteer network of people who want to redesign local democracy.