

Assessing Community Needs

Do you really know what your community needs are? You may think you do, but it's important that you consult and don't just move forward on a gut feeling. To maximise your impact, it's important that you establish a clear link between your organisation's goals and those of the community you want to involve. Unless you do, you will find it difficult to engage clients, volunteers and funders. Remember, what communities want is not always the same as what it needs – try not to get carried away in enthusiasm!

There are many ways to consult, and your choice of method may have to be guided by the finances you have available. Try to identify a method that will both give you the information you want and move you along within your present resources.

Interviews and background research

A good place to start is by talking to a few of the influential people and community activists who know about the area. This will help you to identify the important issues for the community, help identify who else should be consulted and where the information you want is held. Read up on any research which has already been done, with your community and where possible, with other communities.

Surveys

You might want to carry out a survey of your community. You could go door to door, ask people in the street, post out, or distribute through a partner organisation. How you design the survey will depend on what you are looking for, but try to keep the questions short, easy to read and focussed.

Focus groups

Gathering interested people together for a discussion around a table can be very useful. This method usually works best with a facilitator and a list of starter questions. These might include:

- What are the main concerns
- What groups/sections of the community particularly experience these problems?
- What has been done in the past?

Focus groups generally give you perceptions, not facts. Remember to take notes, without interrupting discussion. Check the results of the focus group before acting on the recommendations.

Community forums

If you want support from the community you're addressing it's important that the community feels an ownership of the process, feeling that they have been genuinely consulted and that their views have been taken on board.

If you can, try to get both your stakeholders and your partners together to help thrash out what's needed, who should be responsible for what and how best you can all work together. The experience and expertise that you can accumulate in a room full of administrators, members and advocates can be very effective in identifying needs and remedies.

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MasterBank Factsheet : Assessing Community Needs

Bear in mind, however, that this method can also be very time and cost intensive. If you want to take this forward, take some time to look around for suitable partners. Can they contribute any resources to the project? This will not only build relationships but may also help build trust for future collaboration.

Review what you've got

All of the methods in this paper will give you access to a large amount of information which you can use. However, using such a collection of views and opinions can be challenging.

Take some time to analyse all of the information you have gathered and try to identify the needs expressed and work out the priorities of each.

It can be helpful to think of things in terms of:

Commonness: was the need identified widely in the community?

Seriousness: is the need seriously hampering the community or only a minor inconvenience?

Reach: are the needs expressed community wide or limited to a particular section of the community?

Interventions: Some needs are going to be very real but too large for you to be able to cope with. Be careful to only pick out the needs that your organisation is capable of addressing – either within current resources or through developing new projects.

It can be useful to reflect on your previous assumptions of what community needs and see how close you were to results generated from your consultation. It can also be useful to consider any new partners who have emerged through your consultations, and how you might be able to work with them in the future.

After the Consultation

At the end of the process you should have

- a picture of the needs you should be addressing to best service and support your local community
- an idea of how you will go about dealing with them
- a story that you can use to motivate and inspire volunteers, staff, and funders
- use the information to set aims and goals in your business plans

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