



**CITIZEN**

**ENGAGEMENT 101**

A guide for local governments

# Citizen Engagement 101: A Guide for Local Governments

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## Citizen Engagement Guide & Podcast Series

This guide has been provided by Govlaunch in partnership with Granicus and shares industry insights around effective strategies for citizen engagement, inspired by the Govlaunch community and with support from Granicus - an industry leader in full suite citizen engagement.

To supplement this free resource, the Govlaunch Podcast is interviewing local government innovators from communities of all sizes to talk about their approach to citizen engagement, what tools they are leveraging and important considerations for other local governments seeking a strong citizen engagement vendor to partner with.

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# Citizen Engagement 101: A Guide for Local Governments

What's the secret to a successful local government? An engaged citizen base.

At its core, local government exists to serve citizens. Bringing citizens into the local governing process is what makes a government more effective, more inclusive, and ultimately more successful at serving its community.

The challenge is, citizens aren't always lining up to participate in local government affairs. Cities and counties have to *work* to keep their communities involved and informed. This guide will explore how they do that.

*As Govlaunch works to build the global wiki for local government innovation, we're highlighting a series of resources to help governments foster citizen engagement. These conversations, best practices, and case studies feature communities and companies who are implementing transformative ideas, and highlight how others can follow their lead.*

## Common Types of Citizen Engagement

When it comes to interacting with your community, there's no one-size-fits-all answer. Each local government will have a different technique, based on population size, demographics, geography, budget, local customs ... you get the idea.

That said, there's an arsenal of tactics that local governments often turn to, whether it's Clark County, Nevada (population, 2.3 Million), the Leeds City Council, GB (population 800K), or Walkerville, South Australia (population 8K). Here are some of the most frequently used methods of engaging with citizens, plus some innovative spins applied by members of the Govlaunch community around the globe.

### Town Halls & Meetings

These face-to-face gatherings have historically been one of the most direct ways for a local government to inform citizens what it's working on. It's also been the channel for citizens to share feedback with city officials.

Local governments have been working to modernize the town hall and meeting experience. COVID-19 has (perhaps serendipitously) forced this modernization. This includes offering digital meetings — including town halls, virtual Q&As with officials such as the mayor or councilmembers, live streaming council meetings, and more. There are also new products, such as [Voterfied](#), working to deliver a more interactive digital town hall experience, bringing more voices and opinions into the fold.

Examples of innovative local government meetings:

- [Nanaimo, BC used eTown Hall format to expand input on upcoming financial plan](#)
- [Charleston, SC launched a monthly public statistic-based meeting to address flooding issues](#)
- [Verona, NJ launched a virtual town hall to increase citizen engagement in local decision-making](#)
- [Miami Lakes, FL uses teleconferencing video software for public meetings](#)
- [Lake Forest, CA is enabling citizen input at city council meetings through Facebook Live](#)
- [Snowmass Village, CO clerk preps meeting agendas 16x faster](#)

## Community Events

From country fairs to public concerts, events that bring together the community are one of the oldest forms of citizen engagement. These occasions help strengthen community ties — they're one of the best ways to celebrate local culture and boost civic pride. They can also have secondary benefits, whether that's raising awareness for a local government initiative, fundraising, or promoting a call to action (such as voting).

Some communities are putting new spins on the traditional community-style events, hosting pop-up gatherings or technology demo days.

Examples of innovative community events:

- [Canterbury Bankstown, NSW reveals Complete Streets vision through Future Street events](#)
- [North Vancouver, BC hosted an electric vehicle awareness event allowing residents to test drive](#)
- [Tulsa County, OK extends reach of assessment office with pop-up events](#)
- [New Haven, CT hosts annual event to encourage residents to go car-free](#)
- [St. Louis Park, MN hosts a Winter Solstice event to promote mental health awareness](#)

## Government Websites

At their most basic, local government websites provide information and a way to contact local government departments. However more and more governments are turning to their website as a one-stop-shop for digital services, engagement tools such as bots and surveys, and open data portals to better inform citizens about the work the organization is doing.

Citizens are starting to expect the same level of sophistication they encounter daily on private sector websites. This means local governments websites should load quickly, they should adapt to mobile devices, and they should be easy to search and navigate. Part of this seamless navigation includes accessibility features, which are critical when designing government websites and vetting third party tools that will be embedded. Other features, such as interactive dashboards or quick access to government forms (whether digital or downloadable), are

becoming more and more common. The [City of Adelaide](#) and the [City of Unley](#) in Australia have done a particularly good job ensuring digital tools are not only functional and mobile responsive, but also accessible.

Other examples of innovative local government websites:

- [County of Hawaii, HI Empowers Staff to Boost Website Performance](#)
- [Colerain, OH creates a website to help residents get engaged and imagine Colerain's future](#)
- [Far North District Council, NZ launched a suite of online transactions on its redesigned website](#)
- [Bridgeport, CT uses an interactive website that provides easy access to its Master Plan](#)
- [Chula Vista, CA launched a smart city digital headquarters website](#)

## Social Media

Social media remains a fixture in many citizens' daily lives, so it's no surprise that local governments are using these channels to reach their communities. Social media is a powerful engagement tool, with the ability to not only share information to residents, but also to have two-way conversations, analyze data, and reach new demographics, such as younger citizens.

Examples of innovative use of social media:

- [Leeds City Council, GB launched social media campaign for victims of domestic abuse in the pandemic](#)
- [Renton, WA uses Zencity to gather anonymous data from city-run social media](#)
- [Warwick, RI starts a dedicated Twitter page for emergency notifications](#)
- [Tampa, FL supplies residents with COVID-19 information and tips through TikTok account](#)
- [City of Chicago Launches First-Of-Its-Kind Snapchat Lens Encouraging Residents to Wear Masks](#)

## Mobile Apps

While some governments have focused on creating mobile-optimized websites, others have gone the app route, developing standalone mobile applications to serve a range of citizen needs, from 311 request portals to encouraging local exploration. These apps create a two-way line of communication, and put it directly in the citizens' hands.

In some cases, local governments have partnered with apps to white label or license the technology for their district's needs. Other localities have built their own apps from scratch. Keep in mind that launching an app typically requires additional outreach or marketing, to prompt residents to download and use the new product.

Examples of innovative use of mobile apps:

- [Bayside, VIC rewards residents for eco-friendly behaviors through the GreenMoney app](#)
- [London Borough of Haringey, GB "Haringey Connected" app helps migrants integrate into the community](#)
- [Novi, MI Parks Recreation & Cultural Services launched an eSports League with Mission Control GG app](#)
- [Hurst, TX developed the "Where We Live" mobile app as a civic engagement platform for residents](#)
- [Fingal County Council, IE collaborated with Smart Futures on "Fingal Voices" citizen engagement app](#)

## Non-emergency Municipal Services (311) & Public Information

Sometimes residents may reach out to report a broken street light, or ask what day recycling pickup occurs. Most local governments have some sort of municipal hotline or contact center for non-emergency services, information, and requests. (In the U.S. and Canada, citizens [can dial 3-1-1 on the telephone](#) to access this resource.)

Local governments are now using technology to more effectively engage with these citizen requests, whether it's voice technology to automate phone-based information, or artificial intelligence and chatbots to quickly answer or log residents' feedback. This cuts down on costs, speeds up response times, and frees up public servants to focus on more complex tasks.

Examples of innovative use of 311:

- [Walkerville, SA connects residents to public information through the My Local Services app](#)
- [Copeland Borough Council, GB adopts The Noise App to improve noise complaint accuracy](#)
- [San Jose, CA developed San Jose 311 mobile app to replace an inefficient customer management system](#)
- [Tempe, AZ upgraded its 311 mobile app to serve as a one-stop-shop for non-emergency city services](#)
- [Irvine, CA helps residents find services and updated city information with the Access Irvine app](#)

## Chatbots & SMS

As the general population becomes more and more dependent on their mobile phones, SMS or text messaging has grown in popularity among local governments looking for a quick way to send out information. Citizens can opt in to receive public safety alerts or general reminders from the local government.

While basic text services push information to residents in a one-way engagement, two way communication, via text or online, is also growing in popularity, thanks to the rise of chatbots. This technology uses Artificial Intelligence (AI) to answer questions or log requests. Citizens feel like they're communicating with a government representative, while technology is quickly getting them the answers they need.

Chatbot use varies; they can be embedded in a local government website or app, tied into a SMS service, or be used as a standalone product. The technology is commonly integrated into 311 applications, but can also be used for something totally different — like helping people quit smoking.

Examples of innovative use of chatbots & SMS:

- [Saint-Hyacinthe, QC implements text notification system for snow removal operations](#)
- [Maricopa County Clerk, AZ How the Clerk's Office Handles 8,300 Online Requests](#)
- [Tulsa's Court Texting Bot sends reminders to pay court fees on time](#)
- [Derby City Council, GB introduced a chat bot to help residents quit smoking during Stoptober](#)
- [Aberdeen City Council, GB launched the AB-1 Microsoft chatbot in its website for resident questions](#)
- [Williamsburg, VA leveraged Citibot's artificial intelligence platform to reduce staff workload](#)

## Dashboards & open data

One of the easiest ways to foster strong engagement with citizens is transparency. Local governments are recognizing this, and many are embracing open data dashboards to give the public a peek behind the curtain at how their government is working. While some open data dashboards provide interactive visualizations of the data, a basic dashboard can be as simple as regularly publishing datasets and graphs.

Examples of innovative use of dashboards & open data:

- [Mahoning County, OH explores all facets of public expenses with its Open Finance dashboard](#)
- [Ottawa, ON upgraded its Open Ottawa portal to improve transparency and tell stories through data](#)
- [Maple Ridge, BC shows the possibilities of open data through its Open Government Portal](#)
- [New Plymouth District Council, NZ launched "NPDC GeoHUB" its newly redesigned ArcGIS Hub](#)
- [Perth, WA allows data collaboration and narratives through Open Data Portal](#)

## GIS

They say a picture paints a thousand words. And Information Technology and city leaders across the world agree. Local governments have access to a treasure trove of data. But not enough are taking the necessary steps to make sense of this data. Taking the concept of Open Data one step further by utilizing GIS or Geographic Information Systems can help instantly create data visualizations to make more informed decisions and to better engage with residents.

Data visualization has become a vital tool in times of crisis and local governments are using GIS in their COVID response to help residents do everything from COVID-19 cases to city resources to grocery store inventories. These self service tools enabled citizens to access critical services and resources at a time when local governments were operationally constrained.

Examples of innovative use of GIS for COVID response:

- [Sioux Falls, SD becomes the first U.S. city to use Quantela CoVER for COVID-19 response](#)
- [Milwaukee County, WI developed a COVID-19 Dashboard that detects racial disparities](#)

But even before the pandemic, GIS was a heavily utilized tool to engage the community. Here are some examples of innovative use of GIS for more general citizen engagement:

- [Schaumburg, IL tracks snowplow operations with interactive mapping tool](#)
- [El Paso, TX tracks lost dogs and cats for pet owners and shelters with Interactive Pet Finder Map](#)

## CRM

With all these channels and platforms for engaging with citizens, more cities and counties are turning to customer relationship management (CRM) tools to keep everything organized. CRM is widely used across the private sector to manage customer inquiries and outreach. Now, the public sector is following suit.

A basic CRM allows local governments to store contacts, and manage or track communication with them, and often tracks tasks and workflow status. Sometimes a CRM is integrated with chatbots, email tools, or other communications platforms. The technology is usually cloud-based, allowing users to access it wherever they're logged in.

And although we're talking about citizen engagement, it's worth noting that CRM platforms are great for managing ALL relationships — with internal teams, other government contacts, vendors, and more.

- [Clay County, FL Launched a New Online Customer Service Platform in 3 Weeks](#)

- [Penrith, NSW expedites resident service requests to waste contractors using Microsoft Dynamics 365](#)
- [Durham County Council, UK saves \\$310k annually moving services online](#)
- [Woollahra, NSW battles electronic waste with free pickup service through city app](#)
- [Norfolk, VA is working with ARDX to develop an economically focused relationship management system](#)
- [Los Angeles, CA developed the "Chip" Chatbot to answers business questions on contracting](#)
- [San Diego, CA expanded their 311 "Get It Done" app for better customer engagement](#)

## Examples of Innovative Citizen Engagement

### [Louisville uses hackathons to drive community-led innovation](#)

The city is taking a page from the tech world, organizing collaborative challenges to tackle everything from fire prevention to the digital divide. The city partners with local groups to organize the hackathons, bringing community members into the problem-solving arena.

### [Derby City Council, GB introduced a chat bot to help residents quit smoking during Stoptober](#)

The council introduced a Facebook Messenger bot that provides customized responses and interactive games to help citizens who wanted to stop smoking.

### [Cities tap into digital currency to spur economic growth](#)

Cities around the world are using local digital currency as a tool to boost citizen engagement and encourage behavior that leads to health and environmental benefits. The approach also helps boost the local economy, especially during times of economic distress.

### [San Antonio, TX 'gamifies' 311 to reduce calls and improve digital services](#)

The new 311 app boosts community engagement by encouraging citizens to up-vote flagged issues, and share them via social media, earning “points” that can be redeemed for medals and titles. The interactive approach led to record citizen engagement with the 311 app.

### [Norfolk, VA released a website where citizens can create their own city budget with real data](#)

Citizens can see the city’s current budget allocations and make adjustments to various spending categories. The city hopes the hands-on access will increase residents’ understanding of the budget process, and increase community buy-in.

### [See more innovative citizen engagement projects around the world](#)

## Citizen Engagement Tools & Platforms

While citizen engagement doesn't require any technology, there are a number of products that make it easier for local governments to interact with their community. These range from chatbots to polls to service request management.

When choosing a citizen engagement product, it's important to keep the specific needs and challenges of your community in mind. Will your citizens have the tools or access, such as smartphones or internet access, to use the platform? Are they likely to embrace something new, or would it be better to reach them where they're already familiar?

It is also important to identify technology partners who understand the needs of local governments and are built to specifically address these needs rather than going with a repurposed private business tool.

Tip: [Consider these 7 questions before you implement new technology.](#)

With citizen engagement covering such a broad range of tactics, it's no surprise that the types of products available varies widely. This can make identifying and selecting an appropriate partner very difficult.

In the [Govlaunch Podcast](#), we're interviewing local government innovators from communities of all sizes to talk about their approach to citizen engagement, what tools they are leveraging and important considerations for other local governments seeking a strong citizen engagement vendor to partner with.

This series highlights technology leaders in the citizen engagement space in an effort to help local governments large and small assess what product may be best suited for their community needs. You can subscribe wherever you get your podcasts or follow the Govlaunch Podcast [here](#).

*For a complete list of citizen engagement tools, check out [citizen engagement products](#) shared on the Govlaunch wiki.*

## 6 Tips for Effective Citizen Engagement

Go where your constituents are — don't make them come to you

A fancy engagement platform is worthless if people aren't going to use it. Understand how willing your citizens are to adopt new platforms and tools, or if it'll be more successful to integrate into something they're already using.

It's also important to pay attention to demographics and use patterns. Some cities, such as [Minneapolis, MN](#), and [Tampa, FL](#), are turning to Tik Tok to engage with younger residents, due to the social platform's popularity among Gen-Z. Others, such as [Clark County, NV](#), are coupling digital options with in-person services, understanding that different segments of the county's large population will have different engagement preferences.

## Make it easy for people to find the information they want

Many cities have focused on automating information or 311 services via bots or voice-enabled devices like Alexa. This makes it easier for residents to quickly find the information they're looking for (without combing through complex government websites). It also reduces the strain on employees working to field simple questions.

## Understand how you'll analyze and act on feedback before you ask for it

If you're polling your community, engaging on social media, or otherwise asking for input from citizens, it's important to have a full-process plan before you begin. Asking the public for input and then NOT acknowledging it can do more harm than not soliciting input in the first place. This is where it's helpful to use a CRM or platform to manage engagement, and ensure citizens are getting a timely and accurate response.

## Make sure engagement efforts are inclusive and available to all citizens

The more members of the community who are brought into the local government process, the stronger the local government. Including voices from all parts of the population is vital to create a fair and inclusive government.

Sometimes this means translating government proceedings to help non-native speakers understand, like how [Asheville, NC, is live-translating local meetings in Spanish and Russian](#), or accounting for accents, like [Aberdeen, GB's incorporation of the Doric dialect into its chatbot](#). Other efforts are aimed at increasing the accessibility of websites, apps, and other local government communication devices. This type of work is happening across the world, from [Bracknell Forest Council, GB](#) to [Cockburn, WA](#) to [Portsmouth, VA](#).

## Citizen engagement is a sustained effort, not a one-off project

At the end of the day, citizen engagement is about relationship building. This takes time. The most engaged communities aren't those who launched one flashy app or hosted a popular event. They're the places that know how to speak to their residents, and who do so on a regular basis.

## Use available resources to share your work with others

Information and resource sharing in local government has never been more important and local governments and companies alike are working collectively to make information more open.

[San Rafael, CA](#) and [London Borough of Camden, UK](#), for instance, are working to make their playbooks available to others in local gov (and sharing these resources with Govlaunch). [Granicus](#) is using machine learning to determine what types of messages work best in a crisis across all of their customers and is sharing those templates with their wider network.

From open resources shared on our platform to companies leveraging their work across local governments to glean insights and best practices, Govlaunch is enabling information sharing and sorting in a medium like no other.

Govlaunch.com is a free resource for local governments innovators to share best practices, projects and disruptive technologies. We've amassed thousands of easily searchable innovation projects and tools shared by local governments across the world.

We believe that together, we can leverage each other's experiences and take on common challenges to make government work better for everyone. [Join us!](#)

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This Guide has been made possible by Govlaunch partner, Granicus. Granicus connects governments with the people they serve by providing one of the first and most trusted citizen engagement platforms for the public sector. Over 4,500 federal, state and local government agencies and more than 250 million citizen subscribers power an unmatched Subscriber Network that turns government missions into quantifiable results. With comprehensive cloud-based solutions for communications, government website design, online service delivery, meeting and agenda management software, and records management, Granicus empowers stronger relationships between government and citizens. For more information, visit [granicus.com](http://granicus.com).