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Increasing Public Engagement in Local Authority Development Plans - A Communications Toolkit

Item Type	report
Citation	Office of the Planning Regulator, 'Increasing Public Engagement in Local Authority Development Plans - A Communications Toolkit', [report], Office of the Planning Regulator, 2020-04
Publisher	Office of the Planning Regulator
Rights	Y
Download date	2026-03-14 20:34:48
Link to Item	https://hdl.handle.net/20.500.14765/92769



Increasing Public Engagement in Local Authority Development Plans

A communications toolkit

Contents

Introduction	3
Media Engagement	4
Actions	4
Social Media Engagement	5
Actions	5
Direct Engagement	6
Actions	6
Youth Engagement	7
Action	7
Branding	7
Action	7
Presentation.....	8
Actions	8
Accessibility	9
Actions	9
Conclusion.....	10
Appendix 1: Sample media invite.....	11
Appendix 2: Sample media release.....	12
Appendix 3: Sample social media plan.....	13
Appendix 4: Setting up promoted social media posts.....	16
Appendix 5: Tweet Sheet.....	17



Introduction

The need to encourage greater participation in local decision making and the importance of citizens playing a role in influencing the plans which affect their lives and communities is well recognised. Increased participation by communities in local plan making is good for the development of communities and good for local democracy.

This communications toolkit has been compiled as an aid to local authorities to encourage public participation in the development plan making process. It draws on existing good practices already used by many local authorities. It offers some practical suggestions and cites particular examples which have worked to good effect.

Under the Planning and Development Act, 2000 as amended, (the Act) planning authorities are obliged to use print media to inform the public and stakeholders of the intention to prepare a draft development plan. The Act also identifies specific actions that planning authorities must take as part of the consultation process. These include, holding public meetings, seeking written submissions and inviting oral submissions. The Act also prescribes that “the general public” and “other interested groups” should be consulted.

Notably, the Act states that in terms of the method of consultation, “a planning authority shall take whatever additional measures it considers necessary to consult with the general public and other interested bodies.” This toolkit aims to clearly outline, some of the “additional measures” which could be used by planning authorities.

The most recent guidelines issued by the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government (the Department) relating to Development Plans i.e. [the Development Plan Guidelines for Planning Authorities \(2007\)](#) and Local Area Plans i.e. [the Local Area Plans Guidelines for Planning Authorities \(2013\)](#) also provide guidance in relation to consultation with the public and stakeholders. Updated development plan guidelines are currently being drafted by the Department and it is likely that these guidelines will place a strong emphasis on the significance of engaging more people in the plan-making process.

Ideally, the actions in this toolkit should be undertaken in the context of a local authority’s overall communications function. Preferably, plan preparation processes should include a budget for items such as printing, launches, website, social media, advertising etc.

City/County and local area development plans offer a unique opportunity for local citizens to shape and influence how their communities grow and develop. Encouraging high levels of public interaction in preparing development plans is critical to the public’s awareness of and ownership of plans and will help to create more liveable and more sustainable communities.

The information outlined in this document is intended to help local authorities to achieve this vital objective of reaching a wide audience and engaging with as many people as possible.



Media Engagement

Promoting the consultation process among national, and particularly local media, is an effective way to inform citizens in your area about the start of the consultation process for a development plan. Planning authorities can choose to do this at either the Issues Paper stage or once the draft Development Plan has been prepared.

According to Local Ireland (a representative body for local newspapers), every week, 1.5 million people access local newspapers in print or online. While the Joint National Listenership Research (JNLR) figures show that more than half of the population tune into regional radio stations every day.



Actions

Hold a media launch to announce the consultation phase of your Development Plan. Invite local and national media.

See Appendix 1: Sample media invite

Issue a press release post-launch to local print, broadcast and online media

See Appendix 2: Sample press release

Encourage elected members to circulate the media release, share it on their social media platforms and place on their own websites if they have one.

Engage with local radio, seeking regular slots to update listeners about the progress of the plan and to remind them of key dates in the process and about upcoming public consultation events.

Work with the elected members in the area to identify community leaders and ask them to participate in the launch to help increase its profile.

Offer a senior official for interview to a local print or broadcast outlet in advance of the launch. This is done to good effect here by [Cavan County Council](#)

EXAMPLES

South Dublin County Council

Dublin Gazette [Plans to transform Tallaght town centre and develop local area revealed](#)

Kerry County Council

Radio Kerry: [Submissions sought on draft Listowel Municipal District Local Area Plan](#)

Monaghan County Council

Castleblaney.ie: [Public Consultation Workshop on the Draft Monaghan County Development Plan](#)

Meath County Council

LMFM: [Draft Meath County Development Plan 2020-2026 is now on public display](#)

Wicklow County Council

Wicklow News.net: [Wicklow County Council seek public help in forming Development Plan 2021-2027](#)

Clare County Council:

Clare Champion: [Ennis plan maps opportunities for the future](#)



**Virginia Development Plan
Northern Sound Radio**



**The Corkman Newspaper re Cork
Development Plan**



Social Media Engagement

Social media use in Ireland is high. Latest IPSOS/MRBI data shows 66% of Irish people possess a Facebook account, 43% Instagram, LinkedIn 35% and Twitter 30%. Clearly, the use of these channels can be an effective way to promote participation in the development plan making process.

Data from the EU's official statistical office Eurostat shows that 60% of Irish adults used social media in 2018. This compares to an EU average of 56%.



Actions

Develop a short social media plan for the development plan. This would outline the social media platforms and type of content which will be posted. The content could highlight key dates in the process, reminders of upcoming public consultation, how to make a submission, etc.

See Appendix 3: Sample social media plan

Regularly issue posts across different social media channels. Consider targeted or promoted posts. Promoted posts are "paid for" social media posts. Using different algorithms, the posts reach a larger audience and can be targeted to reach a specific demographic, e.g. all adults, aged 21 and over, living within 10 kilometres of Clonmel.

See Appendix 4: Setting up promoted social media posts.

Provide elected members with "tweet sheets," the contents of which they can use on their own social media platforms.

See Appendix 5: Tweet sheet

Develop a brief video relating to the consultation process. This would be played across all social media channels. It would also be played in civic offices, council buildings and libraries.

Videos should use simple, accessible language. Try to give tangible examples of how the development plan impacts on people's lives. Also, consider including input from local people to hear their stories about how they feel the county/city can develop and prosper.



**South Dublin County Council
Development Plan Video**



**Roscommon County Council
Development Plan Video**

Direct Engagement



Engaging with people directly and bringing the plan making process to the places where people live, shop or avail of public transport can be an effective mechanism to generate interaction in the development plan process. It proved particularly successful during the “Our Balbriggan” project in 2019 balbriggan.ie.

The Our Balbriggan initiative was a collaborative approach between Fingal County Council and communications firm MediaConsult.

The integrated strategy worked across both social, traditional and direct media, ensuring that the Our Balbriggan message reached every household, resulting in a strong public engagement response. Over 4,000 people took the Our Balbriggan survey – double the target objectives.

Actions

Engage, in person, with citizens at public events, shopping centres, at bus and railway stations and on the busy streets. Using tablets, invite them to complete a pre-designed survey to establish their views and preferences for their area.

Set up “pop-up” consultation booths facilitating people to complete the survey and provide a forum for feedback.

Compile and issue an [electronic newsletter](#) to local residents, seeking their views and informing them of updates. Develop materials for community notice boards and for display in civic buildings.

Create an online survey for completion, such as this one from [Roscommon County Council](#)



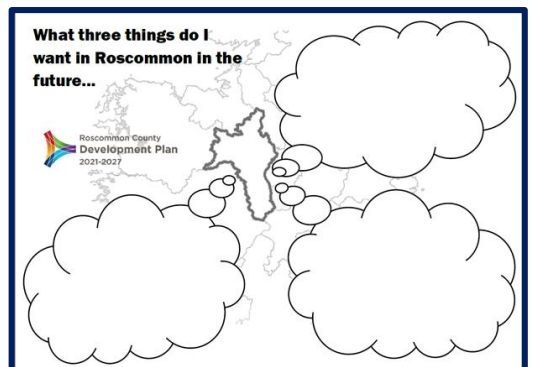


Our Balbriggan 2019 – 2025 Rejuvenation Plan



Youth Engagement

Encourage young people to start thinking about development in their localities and what type of amenities and facilities they would like to have in their locality.



Action

Create a schools activity pack similar to that prepared by [Roscommon County Council](#). This could contain questions on youth issues, fun score cards, etc.

For [The National Planning Framework consultation process](#), a poster competition was created. It invited children to Share Ideas About Ireland in 20 Years' Time.



Branding

Give the development plan process its own distinctive identity to make it recognisable as a unique project. This helps residents to identify with the plan and distinguishes it from other local authority work.



Action

Create specific branding for county/city Development Plans. This brand would be used on all printed and online material. An example of this is the Meath Development Plan 2020-2026 (right).





Presentation

When the development plan is concluded and adopted by the local authority, every effort should be made to bring it to a wide audience. Plans should be presented in a clear, accessible format. This means that citizens are aware of the blueprint for development in their area and will also find it straightforward to understand.



Actions

Stage a media launch to announce the completion of the plan and to convey its importance for the locality.

Issue a media release post launch. This approach was adopted by [Donegal County Council](#) which achieved local press coverage.

Encourage elected members to issue media releases which emphasise content from the plan relevant to their local catchment areas.

Seek speaking opportunities on local radio and offer local authority officials and elected members to the local press for interview.

Adopt the principles of Plain English. Include a NALA (National Adult Literacy Agency) accredited Plain English summary similar to that used in the [Longford County Development Plan 2015-2021](#)

Create attractive, accessible infographics to highlight some of the key aspects of the plan. For those looking for an overview of the plan, engaging infographics make the plan accessible and user-friendly.

Develop an interactive online mapping facility to give plans a “real-life” feel. An example of this is the Dun Laoghaire Rathdown County Council [Draft Ballyogan and Environs Local Area Plan](#).

Produce a video to complement the plan. This is a useful medium for those seeking a brief summary of the plan and its primary findings.



Donegal News



Extract from Longford Development Plan 2015-2021



Accessibility

Ensuring that the process of making a submission is as seamless as possible and that all submissions are easily available to the public is important from both an accountability and accessibility perspective.

It is important to ensure that development plans and all communications associated with them can be accessed, understood and used to the greatest extent possible by all people, regardless of their age, ability or disability.

The Centre for Excellence in Universal Design at the National Disability Authority has produced a document entitled [“The Customer Communications Toolkit for the Public Service- A Universal Design Approach”](#) This publication contains guidance which is intended to assist in informing the design and procurement of customer communications across the Public Service in order to make information as clear as possible to all audiences.

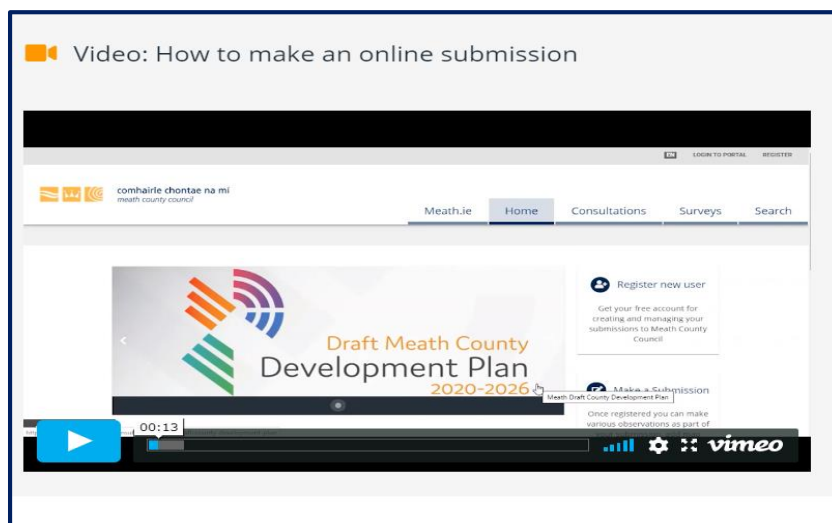
It is an excellent reference when compiling development plans.



Actions

Consider making all submissions from all parties available on a specific portal on the local authority website. This is instructive to others considering making a submission, indicates what issues have already been raised and gives a picture of the prevailing topics.

[Meath County Council](#) has a dedicated consultation portal which publishes regular updates in relation to the county development plan and has a video advising how to make a submission. [Wicklow County Council](#) uploads all submissions from all parties.



Meath County Council Video: How to make an online submission



Conclusion

All development plans span a period of six years. During the course of the plan, objectives will be achieved, projects will be completed and milestones will be reached.

Therefore, in order to portray the county development plan as an active and dynamic document which is having a genuine impact, it's important to mark the milestones in the plan when they are attained and to highlight achievements when reached.

All local authorities are obliged to compile a two year progress report which examine the progress made in securing the objectives of the plan, such as this one produced by [Kilkenny County Council](#) and this from [Dun Laoghaire-Rathdown Council](#).

These progress reports are potentially a rich source of information on all that implementation of the plan is achieving, outstanding or remaining issues and the demonstrable impacts the work of the plan is having on people's lives.

Given the hard work that goes in to plan preparation and implementation, it is worth promoting these documents in media activities. Showcasing what has been accomplished can add momentum to the development plan, increase appreciation for the planning process itself and most importantly demonstrate the real impact the plan is having on communities throughout the county.

Many of the measures outlined in this document could equally be applied to these interim reports.

In producing this initial toolkit, the OPR has not sought to be prescriptive but considers this a first attempt at contributing to increasing public engagement in local authority development plans.

We will continue to engage with staff and members of local authorities and other bodies, as well as the wider public, to identify best practice and ways to promote innovative communications methods. Methods which can further energise people to engage with their locality and contribute to making their communities better places to live.

Appendix 1: Sample Media Invite

(Insert name) City/County Council Media Invite

Insert date

You are invited to attend the City/County Council's launch of the consultation phase for the new City/County Development Plan.

The Cathaoirleach/Mayor of the Council and elected members of will perform the launch which will take place on (insert date) at (insert location)

The event will

- Consider some of the key upcoming challenges facing the city/county in areas such as population growth, employment, housing, infrastructure, climate action, energy and transport
- Examine how the new plan will address these topics
- Outline upcoming public consultation opportunities
- Detail how the public can contribute to the plan
- Unveil the new development plan video and schools' information pack
- Offer an opportunity to question local authority officials and elected representatives

When: insert date

Times: insert time

Where: insert venue

RSVP to email address or telephone number.

ENDS

Appendix 2: Sample Press Release

Public urged to have their say on shaping the city/county's future

(Insert name) County Council is encouraging everyone to get involved, become engaged and have their say in order to help influence how our county grows and develops over the coming years by contributing to the public consultation process for the new County Development Plan.

The County Development Plan is a document which guides the future growth and development of the County over a period of several years.

The Council commenced the public engagement for the plan on *(insert date)* with the publication of a public consultation document/draft development plan *(select as appropriate)* which identifies some of the key challenges facing the county in areas such as housing, employment, infrastructure, climate action, energy and transport.

Mayor/Cathaoirleach of the Council (insert name) said,

"We'd like to encourage as many people as possible to become engaged with and get involved in contributing to the county development plan. We want to hear people's views, expectations and hopes about how they feel the county should grow and prosper in the coming years.

The County Development Plan is a hugely significant document. It will cover everything from population growth, to employment and economic development, parks and playgrounds, transport, tourism, natural resources, community development, telecommunications, culture, environment, retail strategy. Everything of note that happens in the county is covered by the County Development Plan. This is why public input is so vital.

We know that local residents have the best insight and knowledge into what works for their communities, so we want to harness this expert knowledge to good effect. This plan will focus on ensuring that the towns, villages and rural settlements throughout the county thrive and become more vibrant and liveable communities in which to both live and work. The County Development Plan will carefully map out how this can be achieved while also safeguarding the environment, culture and heritage of the county which makes it so special."

A series of events at locations around the County are being hosted by the Council, where the public and community groups will have the opportunity to speak with Council planning staff about the issues they feel are most important to their locality (insert details)

CEO/Director of Planning at the County (insert name) said;





There are many opportunities for the County in terms of population, jobs and growth targets set out in national and regional strategy documents. Therefore, it's vital that we ensure we have the supporting infrastructure in order to reach these targets and deliver for the county.

We have produced a user-friendly document which outlines many of these challenges and gets people to consider what needs to be done to both maintain and improve their locality and enhance their quality of life."

The public consultation document covers a range of topics including Settlements and Place Making, Community, Rural Housing, Water Services, Energy, Transport and Mobility, Heritage, Tourism, Biodiversity, Climate Change and the Environment. It is available to view at (insert link).


ENDS

Appendix 3: Sample Social Media Plan

				
Account ownership/ Daily usage	66% / 64%	30% / 41%	35% / 15%	43% / 64%
What to post	Engage users so they comment, input ideas, share with friends. Use graphics and visuals to encourage interaction. Include “calls to action” such as read this link, go to website.	Engage users, ask and answer questions. Use Twitter polls, use hashtags, drive visitors to website Include “calls to action”	More professionally focused, so a little more formal in style. Promote news, publications, survey findings, reports.	Make your posts visually appealing by including photographs, graphic, infographics, GIFs, Video
Potential Development Plan content	Publication of issues paper Dates, times and venues of public consultations Images from launch/es Images from public consultation events Press release/s Graphics from Issues Paper or Draft Plan Stats from Issues Paper or Draft Plan Any video content Key/milestone dates re consultation process Twitter poll re certain aspects of the plan, seeking people’s preferences Publication of development plan itself Images from launch of plan			

Good examples

Facebook: Offaly County Council

 **Offaly County Council**
31 July 2019 · 🌐

TELL US YOUR VIEWS & BECOME INVOLVED IN THE FUTURE OF CO. OFFALY

Notice of Intention to review the Offaly County Development Plan 2014 - 2020 and to prepare a new Offaly County Development Plan 2021-2027

Notice is hereby given in accordance with Section 11(1) of the Planning and Development Act 2000 (as amended) that Offaly County Council intends to review its existing Offaly County Development Plan 2014-2020 and to prepare a new Offaly County Development Plan 2021-2027.




Check out <https://www.offaly.ie/cdp2021-2027> for details on how to make a submission and for further information

Public Information Sessions are planned as follows and we encourage all citizens to attend and have their say on this vital plan for the County:


Monday 19th August
Tullamore
4-7pm
Offaly County Council,
Áras an Chontae,
Charleville Road,
Tullamore,
Co. Offaly

Tuesday 20th August 2019
4-7pm
Edenderry
Edenderry Municipal District,
Market Square,
Edenderry,
Co. Offaly


Monday 26th August 2019
4-7pm
Birr
Birr Municipal District,
Civic Offices & Library,
Wilmer Road,
Birr,
Co. Offaly

 Like  Follow  Share ...





Birr Municipal District,
Civic Offices & Library,
Wilmer Road,
Birr,
Co. Offaly
#yourcouncil



**HAVE
YOUR
SAY**

 **Offaly County Council**
Comhairle Chontae Uíbh Fhailí

👍 25 14 comments 53 shares

 Like  Comment  Share 

Twitter: Cork County Council



Instagram: Dun Laoghaire/Rathdown Council



Appendix 4: Setting up promoted social media posts

Promoting social media to increase reach can be an effective way to amplify your message among your desired audience. It can also fit any budget.

Facebook: [Boost a post](#)

LinkedIn: [Sponsor an update](#)

Twitter: [Promote a tweet](#)

Instagram: [Advertise a post](#)

Appendix 5: Tweet Sheet

Some suggested social media posts which can be adapted as necessary

Want to influence how your county grows and develops? If so, then contribute to the County Development Plan. (insert link to details of how to do so) #developmentplan

So far, we have received 50 submissions to our County Development Plan. You can read them here (insert link). Why not make it 51 by making your own contribution? It's easy to do at (insert link) #yourcouncil

Are you interested in employment opportunities, economic growth, parks, playgrounds, transport, tourism, natural resources, community development, telecommunications, culture, environment, retail strategy? If the answer to any of these is yes, then go to (insert link) to contribute to the County Development Plan

Two weeks to go! Closing date for submissions to the Pre-Draft stage of the County Development Plan (insert link)

There was a great crowd in attendance at today's public consultation session at (insert location) for the County Development Plan. There were lots of great suggestions and plenty of food for thought! If you've got any ideas to share, attend the next public consultation at (insert details) or make a submission at (insert link) #yourcouncil

Just 48 hours left to contribute to the current review of the County Development Plan. Don't miss out on having a say on the future of your county. Make a submission at (insert relevant link)

The County Development Plan sets out a vision and an overall strategy for the proper planning and sustainable development of our county. You can help to shape this by making a submission at (insert link) #haveyoursay

Your county needs you! Everything of note that happens in the county is covered by the County Development Plan. This is why we need your views, suggestions and ideas so that the plan works for you and your community. Have your say at (insert link)

We need the new County Development Plan to reflect the needs and aspirations of the communities across the County. So it's important that we get public input. The Council would really welcome your views, and those of interest groups and organisations on what should be contained in the new County Development Plan. Have your say at (insert link) #developmentplan

