



# Community engagement for science and sustainability:

Insights from the Citizens Science for  
Sustainability (SuScit) Project

**SuScit**  
Citizen Science for Sustainability

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For further information visit **[www.SuScit.org.uk](http://www.SuScit.org.uk)**

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## 1. Introduction

The Citizens Science for Sustainability (SuScit) Project was a unique attempt to provide local communities with a voice in the future of urban sustainability research. Funded under the EPSRC's SUE Programme, the SuScit Project comprised an innovative programme of action research and networking activities designed to promote engagement and dialogue between the EPSRC research community, professional stakeholders and sustainability practitioners, and most importantly local citizens: particularly socially and economically excluded citizens, such as older people, single parents, young people, and those from black, asian and ethnic minority communities.

The SuScit project in particular aimed to develop an innovative 'bottom-up' public engagement and foresight process. This report is intended as a guide for scientists and engineers, policymakers, practitioners and others with an interest in community engagement in science, technology and sustainability issues.

The report is not a best practice 'tool kit' or step by step receipt book to be followed, but rather provides a brief overview of the SuScit research process and reflects on some of the key principles and practical insights which have emerged from our work. The report also includes a list of further resources.

For a fuller account of the SuScit project and its substantive outcomes see *Towards a Community-led Agenda for Urban Sustainability Research: Insights from the Citizens Science for Sustainability (SuScit) Project* ([www.suscit.org.uk/resources/](http://www.suscit.org.uk/resources/)).



## 2. Citizens Science for Sustainability

Addressing the problems of urban sustainability - improving the environmental, social and economic well being of our towns and cities - is central improving quality of life not just for today but also for future generations.

Science and technology has a vital role to play in helping to develop solutions to the problems of urban sustainability. We know that it is often disadvantaged members of our society living in poorer neighbourhoods who are exposed to the greatest environmental risks, such as pollution from traffic and industry; have the worst access to environmental goods and services - such as good quality housing, energy efficiency measures, parks and green space, reuse and recycling facilities and the like; and, who experience the poorest health and life expectancy. At the same time people living in disadvantaged communities are also least likely to be engaged in dialogues – that is to have a say - about how science and technology can help to address these problems.

The SuScit project sought to face these challenges of urban sustainability by developing an innovative program of action research in the Mildmay area of Islington in North London. Islington is a vibrant and diverse, densely populated area. Whilst many people associate Islington with a certain middle class affluence, it also the sixth most deprived borough in the country<sup>1</sup>. As such Islington faces significant social, economic and environmental challenges. Mildmay is one of the most deprived wards in Islington. Throughout the research we worked closely with the Mildmay Community Partnership and Islington Council.

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<sup>1</sup>The One Islington Corporate Plan 2006 – 2009.

[www.islington.gov.uk/DownloadableDocuments/CouncilandDemocracy/Pdf/one\\_islington\\_corporate\\_plan\\_2006-07.pdf](http://www.islington.gov.uk/DownloadableDocuments/CouncilandDemocracy/Pdf/one_islington_corporate_plan_2006-07.pdf)

## Design principles of the SuScit engagement process

In designing the novel foresight methodology for the SuScit project we sought to:

- Recognise the inherently contested nature of sustainability, through providing an open and reflexive framing of the problem, and valuing local knowledge and expertise.
- Support lay participants through the use of appropriate facilitation and engagement tools, and by recognising the differing roles and responsibilities of the various participant groups involved.
- Work with and through the local community in order to build trust, promote engagement and maximise the value of the project's outcomes for all those who participated.

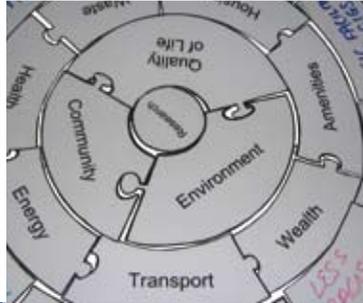
### 3. Five Phases of Action Research

Most public engagement activities around science and technology start out with a top-down expert-led approach, seeking to investigate the public acceptability of new or controversial technologies – such as nano-technology, GM food or nuclear power - or research techniques, such as stem cell research.

The SuScit project took a quite different approach. We set out to develop a bottom-up community-led engagement and foresight process, whereby local residents initially took the lead in exploring what the environment and sustainability meant to them, and researchers and practitioners were encouraged to listen and learn from what they heard. Later in the process responsibility shifted to the researchers and practitioners to discuss and respond to what they had learnt from the local community, by developing a research agenda for urban sustainability, which reflected the issues raised.

We used a range of tools and techniques - from community walks and participatory video to visioning and storytelling using a variety of puzzles and games.

Our six month programme of engagement and workshop activities was structured around five key phases.



## Phase 1: Engaging Local Communities and Recruiting Participants

Three different groups of participants took part in the SuScit project.

Our **Researchers' Panel** – comprised a multidisciplinary team of 12 experienced researchers with expertise across a range of urban sustainability issues

Our sustainability **Practitioners Panel** comprised thirteen professionals from local, regional and national stakeholder organisations (including the Mayville Community Partnership, Islington Council, Transport for London, the Environment Agency, Forestry Commission and several London based environmental NGOs).

And three **Residents' Panels**: a Young Peoples' Panel; a Women and Lone Parents' Panel; and an Older Peoples' Panel. The resident's panels were intended to reflect the ethnic and cultural diversity of the local area, and were recruited through the Mayville Community Centre in Mildmay.

## Phase 2: Exploring Narratives and Perceptions of Urban Sustainability

### Researchers and Practitioners Exploratory Meetings

The Researchers and Practitioner Panels were introduced to the project at two separate meetings, to prepare them for the engagement process; build commitment and ownership of the process; and, explore their initial views on urban sustainability research.

Our Researchers and Practitioners also took part in a guided 'community walk' around Mildmay to help them get to know the local area.



### **Citizen Focus Groups**

Focus group meetings were held with each of the Residents' Panels to introduce the project and to explore experiences of living in the local community. Knowledge and perceptions of environmental and sustainability issues were explored and the concept of 'research', and how research might further urban sustainability were discussed.

The focus groups were facilitated using an 'Environmental Puzzle'<sup>2</sup> exploring different aspects of urban sustainability. The puzzle comprised a series of key words placed in concentric circles. Residents added their own keywords, which they felt were missing from the puzzle.

### **Community Film Projects**

The main component of this phase of the research was a Community Film Project.

Working with Black Country Films, an experienced group of participatory film-makers, each of the residents' panels were provided with the opportunity to make several short films exploring their own stories of living in their local community and what the environment and sustainability meant to them. The choice of themes and story lines for the films was very much for the residents themselves to decide.

Each of the Residents Panels met weekly over a period of almost two months, planning, acting in and shooting their own films. In all some twelve short films were produced by the residents panels, together with short documentary comprising interviews with each of the Residents.

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<sup>2</sup>Lucas K., Fuller S., Psaila A. and Thrush D. (2004(b)) Prioritising local environmental concerns: where there's a will there's a way Joseph Rowntree Foundation/York Publishing Ltd.

## Phase 3: Sharing Local Knowledge and Experience

### 1st Shared Workshop

Our first shared workshop brought together all the project participants for the first time to watch and discuss the residents' films. The workshop provided our researchers and practitioners with the opportunity to engage, listen and learn from the residents' local knowledge and experience. By the end of the day residents, researchers and practitioners had together begun to distil some emerging themes based upon the community's views and concerns for urban sustainability.

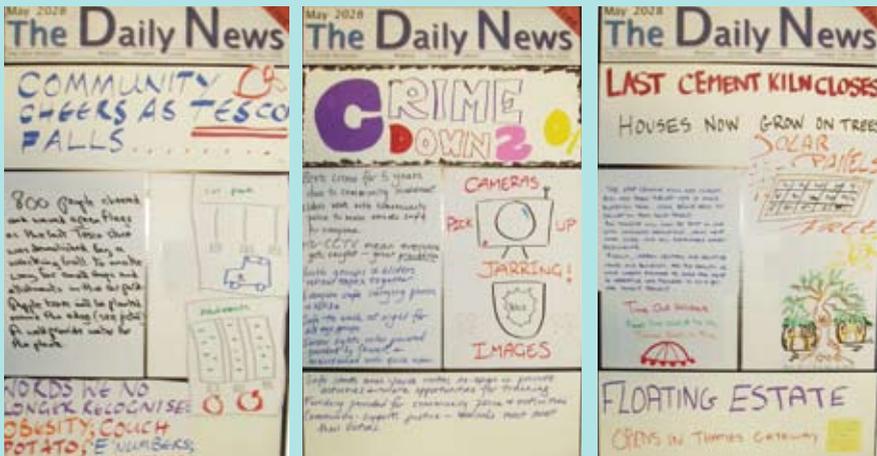
## Phase 4: Visioning Sustainable Communities

### 2nd Shared Workshop

This second day long workshop again brought together all of the project participants - this time with the aim of exploring residents' visions of what a sustainable urban community would look like. Participants were asked to think creatively about sort of sustainable urban future in which they would like to live.

The workshop was structured around two simple exercises, each involving mixed groups of Residents, Researchers and Practitioners.

### 2028: Tomorrow's News



Each group was given a template representing a newspaper front page from 2028 and asked to develop a positive news story – about how things could have changed for the better – with respect to one of the emerging themes from the first workshop.

## Mildmay 2028: Visioning Sustainable Urban Futures



Each group was asked to picture - using drawing, cartons and collage - their vision of a sustainable House, a sustainable Street/Estate, and a sustainable City in 2028.

By working together upon visions of urban sustainability residents were able to explore their views of the future, whilst the researchers and practitioners were again provided with the opportunity to engage, listen and learn from the residents' aspirations.

## Phase 5: Developing a Community Led Research Agenda for Urban Sustainability

### Researcher & Practitioner Workshop

Members of the Researcher and Practitioner Panels met together over two whole days to reflect upon and discuss what they have learnt from their engagement and dialogue with the Residents Panels. This workshop aimed to develop a research agenda and recommendations for research funders, such as the EPSRC, which responded to the concerns and priorities of citizens in Mildmay and similar communities. The workshop also provided an opportunity to develop more specific ideas for future projects and initiatives, which could be taken forward with the local community. Video was again used to produce a short film – entitled Common Knowledge – in which members of the Researchers and Practitioners Panels provided an oral record of their deliberations and emerging thinking on the form which a community led research agenda on urban sustainability might take.

### 3rd Shared Workshop

At this final half-day shared workshop all of the participants once again came together. The Researchers and Practitioners film was shown and members of the Panels reported back in person on ideas for specific local projects and initiatives. Residents were provided with an opportunity to comment upon and respond to the emerging research agenda. The workshop ended with discussion of opportunities to build upon the experience of SuScit engagement process, and a celebration of what had been achieved.

Whilst this final shared workshop brought to a close the formal SuScit process, the research team and Mildmay Community Partnership have continued to work with the project participants to build a local legacy from the project.



## A ten point agenda for urban sustainability research

Ten key themes were identified through the SuScit dialogue and deliberation process. These cover

1. Crime and Safety
2. Eco-Social Housing
3. Affordable Green Energy Services
4. Urban Food Production and Consumption
5. Sustainable Urban Transport
6. Greenspace, Parks and Places to go
7. Rubbish and Recycling
8. Community Cohesion and Empowerment
9. Shopping and Local Services
10. Health and Well-being

For a detailed description of the themes and related research questions see *Towards a Community-led Agenda for Urban Sustainability Research: Insights from the Citizens Science for Sustainability (SuScit) Project* ([www.suscit.org.uk/resources/](http://www.suscit.org.uk/resources/)).



## 4. Working with community participants

The SuScit action research process outlined above was specifically designed to achieve a particular set of objectives. We hope that elements of this process – such as the overall design and some of the particular tools and techniques used - may be directly applicable in other contexts. However, if you are thinking about developing a similar process it is perhaps more important to start out by considering some underlying issues with respect to community engagement and participation.

The following section is therefore intended to provide some practical insights and pointers for working with community participants. The ten key issues highlighted below are by no means intended to be definitive, but rather to reflect our experience of what worked (and what didn't work so well) for the SuScit project.

**Partnership**  
**Trust**  
**Respect**  
**Resources**  
**Inclusivity**

**Empowerment**  
**Creativity**  
**Reflexion**  
**Hospitality**  
**Community value**

## Partnership

The SuScit project was founded upon a partnership between academia and civil society. Building partnerships is central to effective cross-sectoral working and community engagement for sustainability. Partnership and collaboration allows us to overcome disciplinary and institutional silos, and barriers between researcher, practitioner and local communities. Working collaboratively with individuals and organisations to create a mutually beneficial relationship where all parties' views are valued and taken into consideration are essential steps to developing a sound and effective partnership. Creating and sustaining a partnership requires patience, understanding and appreciation of group processes and cultural sensitivities.

Building collaborative relationships with key 'gatekeepers' – both within the local authority and local community partnership - was a critical factor underpinning the success of the SuScit project in both engaging local stakeholders and recruiting a diverse group of individual residents to participate in the research.

On a day to day basis community outreach and youth workers also played a vital 'gatekeeper' role assisting the SuScit project team with recruitment and helping to ensure that residents remained engaged in the process. In other contexts, important local gatekeepers might include leaders of local faith groups, health professionals, teachers, or local business people.

Spending time in the community, attending local group meetings and events, also helps to build relationships whilst providing invaluable insights into the community's social and cultural dynamics.

## Trust

Fostering an atmosphere of trust is essential to the success of community-based projects. Building trust is particularly important in securing 'buy in' and ongoing commitment from participants and stakeholders, in order to ensure that all parties gain the maximum benefit from a project. Building trust takes time and energy. It requires open and honest communication, consistency, respect and a safe and supportive working environment. Practical steps to secure trust and commitment from participants include:

- **Managing expectations:** Be clear about the project's aims, remit and limitations with all potential participants from the start. Establishing a shared understanding of the project involving every participant can be time consuming. However building the project on shared ideas and expectations is crucial to ensure participant ownership and buy-in.



- **Informed consent:** Participants should be informed of the project's aims and objectives, what their participation will entail and how the outputs from the project will be used. Obtaining written consent is an important element of good ethical practice. Be clear about issues of ownership and copyright. Where possible, however, be prepared to be flexible in order to accommodate individual participant's personal or cultural concerns. Some people for example may not wish to be filmed or photographed but would still have a valid contribution to make to your process.
- **Maintain contact:** Make sure that at least one team member is always available to respond to participants' questions or concerns. Use a variety of communications tools to keep in regular touch - letters, e-mails, text messages, telephone calls or visits – whatever works best for your participants.
- **Cultural awareness and sensitivity:** Community groups in urban settings can be very culturally diverse. Team members should be well informed and prepared to deal with cultural sensitivities, taking the particular needs and concerns of each individual into consideration.



## Respect

Ensuring that all participants are treated with respect is an essential element of creating a safe and secure working environment where all can contribute and be heard. The importance of good quality facilitation can not be overstated.

Discussing and implementing a set of grounds rules is an effective way of dealing with differences among the groups involved in the process as well as giving the participants a greater sense of ownership. Ground rules may cover the behaviour of the participants, the role or behaviour of any third party (e.g., facilitator, researchers) the methods or process to be used, and/or the contents of the discussions. This should be an initial set of rules that are negotiated before or during the first meeting and at the beginning of each subsequent meeting.

Acknowledge that participants will have different values and priorities, different needs and motivations for taking part. For this reason, encouraging participants to discuss and take an active role in observing the rules can be very positive. It is also very important to be clear about non-negotiable rules from the start.

Respect also means valuing and acknowledging everyone's time and contribution to the process.

## Resources

Participatory processes are not cheap. They require significant investments of time and resources in planning, recruitment, facilitation, hospitality and venue hire, travel, etc. Moreover, it is important to recognise that many potential stakeholder organisations or individuals may be deterred from participating by lack of resources – both in terms of time and money.

In planning and designing participatory process it is therefore important to both; i) avoid making unnecessary or excessive demands on participants' time; and ii) make sure you can recompense participants for their expenses. This may mean paying for travel or childcare but also being prepared to recompensing participants (particularly lay participants) for their time.



## *Inclusion*

The SuScit project specifically set out to address issues of environmental and social justice by enabling lay citizens from a poorer neighbourhood to have a voice in setting the agenda for future research on urban sustainability. In particular SuScit sought to engage a diverse group of citizens (older people, single parents, young people, and those from black, asian and ethnic minority communities) who usually have little say in the societal discussion on science, technology and sustainability issues.

In working with different groups of people from diverse backgrounds, the professionals involved in the SuScit project had to display greater awareness of the issues regarding inclusion and diversity.

Arguably all community-based sustainability projects should have at their core the objective of challenging social exclusion.

There are practical ways of establishing and securing an inclusive environment and atmosphere:

- Emphasise the value and contribution of each individual involved.
- Remove barriers to the involvement of people from all walks of life and people who would not normally get involved, through for example ensuring the accessibility of venues, providing childcare, paying bursaries, etc.
- Consider the literacy levels of your participants in order to ensure that any written communications or briefing materials are appropriate, in terms of both length and content.
- Develop recruitment protocols which promote diversity and equal opportunities.
- Establish ground rules which challenge discrimination.
- Provide opportunities for and support the personal growth and development of individual participants.

## Empowerment

At its heart the SuScit project set out to develop a process which would empower lay citizens in a dialogue with natural and social scientists, engineers and professional sustainability practitioners. In this context empowering lay citizens meant:

- Thinking about the social dynamics of our residents' panels – whilst seeking to be as inclusive as possible and to reflect the diversity of the local community in which we worked, we also sought to ensure that members of each of our residents' panels shared enough common ground to feel comfortable working together as a group. We were also careful to provide time of each of our residents' panels to meet and work on its own at the start of the process, in order for them to 'bond' and develop their confidence as a group.
- Creating an environment in which all of our panels could work effectively together was a major challenge, which again required careful planning and effective facilitation. Here it was important to consider not just the interaction between our lay and 'expert' participants but also how members of our different residents' panels interacted.
- For some of our young people in particular participating in a workshop with a large group of adults was a difficult and challenging experience. We were able to draw upon the group's youth workers to help us support the young people through this task.
- For community engagement and participatory processes to be empowering also means providing space to allow the participants to shape the agenda. For the SuScit project this meant not starting out with a top-down definition of urban sustainability, but rather working with our residents panels to explore their understandings, concerns and priorities about their community, environment and quality of life.
- Be clear about the respective roles of different participants in your process. Build upon community participants' (local) knowledge and lived experience. Take care not to disempower people by asking them questions they cannot answer, or by allowing their views or opinions to be belittled or ignored.
- Avoid jargon and technical language – inappropriate and inaccessible language is disempowering and excludes those who are not familiar with the terminology or concepts used.
- Use appropriate facilitation tools and techniques – not everyone is comfortable with written briefings, writing on flip charts or power point presentations. Think imaginatively about how you present, elicit and collate information through out the process.
- Ensure experts and professional participants are properly briefed and understand their roles.

## Creativity



Be creative! Artistic approaches can provide a powerful means of expression for lay citizens and experts alike. Experiment with creative methods – such as film, photography, storytelling, drama and theatre, collage, etc. However, take care to:

- Keep in mind the objectives of each exercise.
- Remember the method is simple a means to an end – its not about who can draw the best picture or perform the best play but the ideas which your participants want to convey.
- Avoid stereotypes by knowing and listening to your participants – not every group of young people want to ‘rap’ or use graffiti but some do.
- Keep it simple, keep it fun. Bringing in complicated concepts or the professional’s own agendas may be counter-productive.
- Create opportunities for individual growth. If a participant shows a genuine interest in further learning, try to offer support.
- Think about social and cultural dynamics as well as the content. Some women for example are not comfortable with playing games or working in mixed sex groups.



## Reflexion

In order to create genuine dialogue, particularly when working with diverse groups of participants, it is important to make space for listening and shared deliberation.

Moreover, it is important to be flexible – to review and learn from what works and what doesn't as you go along. By building reflexivity into your process, participants have the chance to evaluate the links between the practice and theory and the objectives of the project as well as to question assumptions and social dynamics within the group on an ongoing basis.

A reflexive approach offers the opportunity for adaptation and empowerment as all participants' views about the process are taken into account. In the SuScit project ongoing feedback and evaluation included:

- Field work diaries and 'debriefing' meetings for team members after each event.
- Evaluation forms completed by participants after each workshop.
- Informal meetings with the community groups.

## Hospitality

For community participants who are not used to having their voice heard, or meeting experts and decision makers, taking part in workshops and similar events can be a very daunting experience. Careful planning and good facilitation are central to providing a safe and supportive working environment. But being a good host also means paying attention to:

- The physical layout of the chosen venue. Is the building accessible to all of your participants? Can everyone hear and see what is going on (remember older people in particular may have difficulties with vision and hearing)?
- Keeping sessions as short as possible and having plenty of breaks.
- Always finishing on time! Remember your participants may have other pressing responsibilities and commitments.

- Making appropriate food and drink available. Plan the provision of meals and refreshments taking into consideration the cultural and personal preferences of your participants.
- The transport and childcare needs of your participants.

## Community value

When designing a participatory process it is important to consider what the different participants will get out of the process, their motivations for engagement, and how the local community will benefit from the work. This is particularly important where, as with the SuScit project, one is dealing with longer-term research issues rather the delivery of shorter-term solutions to the sustainability problems confronting the community on the ground.

Even where projects have longer-term research objectives, however, there are many ways in which they can add value for the communities with which they work – creating real benefits for both individual participants and wider groups.

**Creating opportunities for individuals:** Within the SuScit project, the use of participatory film making not only provided a powerful and creative means of articulating residents' views and concerns, it also provided individual participants with an opportunity to gain a new set of new skills. Working with a group of experienced film makers residents learnt the basics of video production from equipment manipulation to editing the final product.

By opening and maintaining a channel of ongoing communication with the participants, a project can benefit individuals and groups through networking, guidance and the provision of information. After the completion of the research phase of the SuScit project, Capacity Global also provided the involvement of a number of Mildmay residents in an environmental justice training course, and organised a workshop on fundraising to support community initiatives.

Moreover for low-income participants in particular simply valuing their time and contribution by allocating part of your budget for financial stipends or bursaries can also provide an important benefit to those who take part.

**Creating a community legacy:** If managed properly working in partnership and collaboration with local stakeholder organisations can also provide significant spin-off benefits for the local community, by for example providing:

- Access to knowledge, expertise and resources, through facilitating networking with a wider pool of sustainability researchers and practitioners.
- An additional channel of communication, feeding back community issues and concerns to the local authority and other relevant agencies.
- Offering support to facilitate the development of future community initiatives.

## Annex: Useful Resources

### Web links for engagement tools and techniques:

Citizen Science for Sustainability: A Review of tools and techniques for community foresight and sustainability: [www.suscit.org.uk/resources/documents/Methodsfinal140706.pdf](http://www.suscit.org.uk/resources/documents/Methodsfinal140706.pdf)

Communities and Local Government: Community engagement:  
Some lessons from the New Deal for Communities Programme:  
[www.communities.gov.uk/documents/communities/pdf/969847.pdf](http://www.communities.gov.uk/documents/communities/pdf/969847.pdf)

Communities Scotland: Community Engagement How To Guide: [www.communitiesscotland.gov.uk/stellent/groups/public/documents/webpages/scrcs\\_006693.hcsp](http://www.communitiesscotland.gov.uk/stellent/groups/public/documents/webpages/scrcs_006693.hcsp)

Dundee City Council: Community Engagement Toolkit:  
[www.dundee.gov.uk/dundeeity/uploaded\\_publications/publication\\_562.pdf](http://www.dundee.gov.uk/dundeeity/uploaded_publications/publication_562.pdf)

EPSRC, Partnerships for Public Awareness, Good Practice Guide  
[www.epsrc.ac.uk/CMSWeb/Downloads/Publications/Other/PPA Good Practice Guide.pdf](http://www.epsrc.ac.uk/CMSWeb/Downloads/Publications/Other/PPA_Good_Practice_Guide.pdf)

Joseph Rowntree Foundation: Community engagement and community cohesion:  
[www.jrf.org.uk/sites/files/jrf/2227-governance-community-engagement.pdf](http://www.jrf.org.uk/sites/files/jrf/2227-governance-community-engagement.pdf)

March of Dimes: Making Community Partnerships Work: A Toolkit: [www.aapcho.org/altruesite/files/aapcho/Research/Making\\_Community\\_Partnerships\\_Work-A\\_Toolkit\\_11-07.pdf](http://www.aapcho.org/altruesite/files/aapcho/Research/Making_Community_Partnerships_Work-A_Toolkit_11-07.pdf)

People and Participation: Methods Database:  
[www.peopleandparticipation.net/display/Involve/Home](http://www.peopleandparticipation.net/display/Involve/Home)

Sciencewise: Knowledge Hub: [www.sciencewise-erc.org.uk/cms/knowledge-hub](http://www.sciencewise-erc.org.uk/cms/knowledge-hub)

Scottish Community Development Centre: Focusing on Citizens: A Guide to Approaches and Methods: [www.dundee.gov.uk/dundeeity/uploaded\\_publications/publication\\_285.pdf](http://www.dundee.gov.uk/dundeeity/uploaded_publications/publication_285.pdf)

Scottish Community Development Centre: Models of community engagement:  
[www.dundee.gov.uk/dundeeity/uploaded\\_publications/publication\\_283.pdf](http://www.dundee.gov.uk/dundeeity/uploaded_publications/publication_283.pdf)

Scottish Community Development Centre: PARTICIPATION WORKS! 21 techniques of community participation for the 21st century:  
[www.dundee.gov.uk/dundeeity/uploaded\\_publications/publication\\_286.pdf](http://www.dundee.gov.uk/dundeeity/uploaded_publications/publication_286.pdf)

Sourtney and Owlerton Area Regeneration: Engagement Tools:  
[www.soaregen.org.uk/files/Engagement\\_Tools.pdf](http://www.soaregen.org.uk/files/Engagement_Tools.pdf)

The Community Development Exchange: What is community empowerment?:  
[www.cdx.org.uk/files/u1/what\\_is\\_community\\_empowerment.pdf](http://www.cdx.org.uk/files/u1/what_is_community_empowerment.pdf)





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