The FAQs of digital consultation

Tips & tricks from real-life case studies and civil servants

Get your citizens engaged on local topics

citizenlab

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Introduction

Over the course of four years, CitizenLab has worked together with over 125 governments in 11 countries on launching and maintaining digital citizen participation platforms. Local governments around the world often share the same concerns and have similar questions about getting started with online citizen engagement. That's why we're sharing our experiences on the most common questions administrations face in the early stages of setting up online participation projects or platforms.

While there is no golden rule for successful digital citizen participation, there are guidelines that have proven to help you achieve your participation goals. Some of our suggestions are tailored explicitly to the online citizen participation methods offered on the CitizenLab platform, but most of them apply to any digital citizen participation project.

In this guide, we draw learnings from real-life case studies and share insights from participation professionals we have worked with at CitizenLab. We discuss ten recurring themes, along with practical tips and tricks that can assist your government in launching a digital citizen participation project.

Do you have any questions or remarks after reading this guide?
Feel free to reach out to us!

Where in the policy cycle should you start involving citizens?

Your local council can consult citizens at four phases in the policy cycle: (1) Agenda setting, (2) Policy Formulation, (3) Policy Implementation and (4) Policy Evaluation.

Many practitioners and researchers agree that citizen engagement is **most meaningful early on in the policy process**. Involving citizens in setting the agenda or formulating policy gives them direct influence on the issues to address and how to do so. It allows them to weigh in on decision making and establish strategies, whilst including citizens at the end helps in finding concrete solutions and evaluating policies.

Benefits of citizen participation early on in the policy cycle:

- It helps in gaining a **better understanding** of citizens' needs at the start of the process;
- Potential **problems are identified** straight away, which lowers the odds of new issues popping up once the policy is (nearly) finished;
- It offers the opportunity to **co-create policy**, and hereby contributes to support for the new policy in the community.

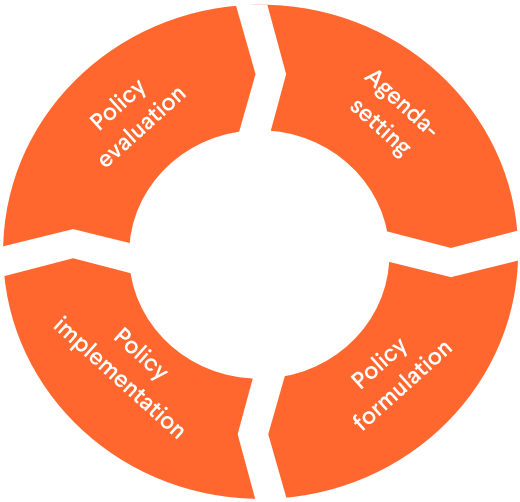
CASE STUDY

Mol, Belgium

The Flemish commune of Mol asked for citizen input to establish their strategic **multi-annual plan**. Citizens could share their ideas for the municipality via an online "idea-market", and all the ideas combined received **more than 2000 votes**. Moreover, the posted ideas provided Mol with insights as to which themes the community is most concerned with: a vast majority of the ideas dealt with mobility or living environment issues.

Wim Caeyers, Mayor of Mol:

"If you start with participation in time and involve citizens from the beginning, you notice it has a very positive effect on the result of a project. In Mol, we have realized that by only organising information events later in the decision-making process, the policy ends up being less supported in the community. People don't feel that they truly have been able to contribute their ideas - or that they've been listened to."



There's a critical side-note to make regarding this insight: the Flemish commune of Mol has been actively involved with (offline) citizen participation for years. If participation is new to your administration, and there aren't any internal processes in place yet to manage participation, it could be difficult to start off your participation endeavours right at the start of the policy cycle. In these cases, you can decide to start projects with lower levels of engagement, like surveys or polls on your council's existing policy plans, instead of immediately aiming to co-create policy with your community. **Engaging citizens later on in the decision-making cycle can be a great stepping stone to get used to citizen participation**.

Though, keep in mind, that eventually the most rewarding citizen participation processes - for both city and citizen - happen early on in the policy cycle. Ideally, your government ends op offering engagement opportunities for citizens throughout your policy process.

How do you organize a digital participation platform internally?

Setting up a citizen participation platform is no small feat. It requires defining clear goals, juggling deadlines and coordinating with multiple stakeholders, some of which are outside of the government. **Efficient internal organisation is thus key to the project's success**, and yet it remains one of the main challenges that many administrations face.

Step 1: Having the right people at the table

The number of stakeholders involved will vary depending on the size of your participation project and/or your council. For each platform or project, it will be necessary to collaborate at least with the following roles:

- **Policymaker:** there needs to be political will and support. A mayor or councillor doesn't need to be actively involved in the implementation on the platform, but should be aware of and on board with the participation aspect. As the objective of a participation platform is to influence local policy and decision-making, policymakers must be willing to listen to citizens' input.

- **Project manager:** someone to keep an overview of the project and/or platform, and with the explicit responsibility to keep policymakers in the loop about developments.

- **Communications manager:** the participation platform needs to be embedded in the broader communication strategy and must be included in existing communication channels. Via communications, they can direct citizens towards the platform.

- **IT manager:** what is technically possible on your platform? Especially if you work with an in-house platform, someone in the team needs to know the functionalities and possibilities to ensure smooth internal operations. When working with a partner, technical expertise will not be necessary for the platform but could still be helpful in ensuring it integrates well with existing tools.

Step 2: setting cross-team expectations

- **Define objectives**: The first step is to set your goals and choose the relevant metrics to measure success. Does the project aim to reach a lot of votes? To engage a certain age group? And how will this be measured?

- **Agreeing on key dates:** This will keep things ticking along. We also recommend sharing some of these deadlines on the platform to set clear expectations towards your community.

- **Communications:** Who is in charge of communications with the administration? There should be enough coordination between the team in charge of the platforms and the departments responsible for the projects. But also, how (often) will you respond to citizens' ideas on the platform? When and how will you share results or updates?

Step 3: learn by doing

Yes, it's essential to make time and sit together to discuss these elements. But keep in mind that citizen participation always entails some form of trial and error. It's okay to give your administration time to get used to these new processes. Once the overarching objectives, roles and deadlines have been set, it's time to get out there and give it a try.

CASE STUDY

Texel, Netherlands

The Dutch commune Texel consciously started small to ensure a smooth internal process and launched quick polls regarding their environmental policy. Even in the early stages, the platform illustrated a **strong internal collaboration**: the deputy mayor and councillor Edo Kooiman was actively involved and assisted with communication efforts to raise awareness about the platform in the community.

The communication team also promoted the platform by sharing videos, pictures and tweets about the process on Texel's social media platforms. Moreover, the communication team used the fact that citizens can now start sharing ideas as a hook to relaunch new communications campaigns. All in all, these practices illustrate the commitment and internal alignment of a variety of stakeholders.

Linda Dinkelman, Communications advisor of Texel: *"We felt that it was vital to deliver on the promises the participation platform made to citizens. Therefore, we decided to start by creating a platform without any beginner's mistakes. Now that everyone feels comfortable with the platform, we launched the next phase: citizens can share their ideas and engage in a conversation with us and each other. In the first phase we'd only ask them to comment on the ideas we put forward."*

At CitizenLab, we always provide our partners with a personalised workshop on internal organisation and expectations. Following the experiences from these training sessions, our participation strategists have created the **e-participation canvas**. In essence, this is a framework that can assist your administration in outlining the most essential elements of a participation project. **You can download the e-participation canvas and fill it out for yourself.**

How do you get citizens to use your platform?

You're organised. Your platform is ready. But... no-one's using it. Raising awareness about your platform and participation projects is vital. Ideally, the results of a project reflect a wide range of voices within your community, fulfilling your need to reach as many citizens as possible by actively promoting your platform. A successful launch doesn't always require a considerable budget or a large team, but it always requires effort and serious consideration.

3 fundamental principles to craft your message:

In a nutshell, your communication relies on **clarity, continuity and diversity**. There might be a lot of information to share, but it's essential to keep it simple: How can citizens participate? Why should they join? What will you do with the results? A simple call to action and clear value proposition will help your message stand out.

5 channels to get your message across:

1. **Local press:** involve local news outlets via press releases about your platform's launch, but also about its direct results.

2. **Letters:** sending out letters with unique registration codes to citizens will not only spread the word about the platform's existence, but will also make your community curious about the platform and featured projects.

3. **Email campaigns & newsletters:** if you have a mailing list of interested citizens or former participants, it can be interesting to share the news with them via email as well. These campaigns shouldn't be just a one-off: keep citizens in the loop about the results too.

4. **Social media channels:** Facebook, Twitter, Instagram - each platform allows you to share engaging posts about your platform. Many communities already interact with each other via Facebook groups, such as neighbourhood associations.

5. **Direct web traffic:** make sure that your platform can easily be found by citizens who look for it in search engines or on your government website. This means choosing easy titles and explicit descriptions - for instance, "Our participatory budget for MyCity" is a clearer title than "Co-creating the future of MyCity". By adding links to the platform on your websites, you also improve the platform's rating, which makes it easier to find.

Rome wasn't built in a day, and neither is your platform's audience. Continuously remind your citizens on different channels that they can contribute to local policy via the projects you are running. Moreover: don't just mention that you have a platform, but also share updates of the most popular ideas or replies from the council to get citizens genuinely engaged and excited.

CASE STUDY

Kortijk, Belgium

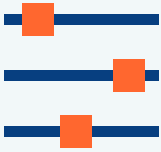
The Flemish city of Kortrijk started off strong with its digital platform. With their "Big Inquiry", the city allowed citizens to share their thoughts on 5 clear statements in diverse policy areas. The communications team set-up a campaign that was successful for multiple reasons:

1. **Kick-off event:** the city launched the "Big Inquiry" in a festive atmosphere during the new years' reception on a large square in the city. This event, which attracted 5.000 citizens, also received local press coverage, which immediately led to a lot of awareness about the participation project and platform. Following the event, the city created short and catchy videos which could easily be shared online.

2. **Low-threshold inquiry:** if awareness is your first objective, accessible projects regarding day-to-day questions can appeal most to citizens and convince them to sign up for your platform. Although the goal should eventually always be to engage with your community in a more meaningful way, it can kick-off the engagement on your platform and ensure that citizens have a profile before larger, deliberative projects take off.

3. **Quickly communicate first results:** we cannot stress it enough: show your citizens their voice matters from the very beginning. Two weeks after launching the "Big Inquiry", Kortrijk already shared some first results. This raised awareness, received press attention and led to a new surge of registrations on the platform.

You can download our free **communication kit** to get more tips on successfully launching your platform.



How do you pick the right consultation method?

There are many participation methods, ranging from in-depth offline deliberation to direct online voting. Every approach provides an opportunity to achieve your council's goals but also involves additional challenges. For online participation, there are six common methods. If your government does not have a participation platform yet, make sure to look for one that supports a variety of methods. It'll allow you to **tailor the participation method for every project.**

Questions you need to answer internally per project:

- Is there a specific plan we want to receive input on?
- How much influence can we give citizens?
- Are we open to new ideas?
- Is there any budget available?
- Do we want citizens to engage with each other's input?

6 commonly used participation methods:

1. **Polling:** giving citizens one clear question with only closed answers as an option.

2. **Scenario Testing:** providing citizens with multiple policy plans to choose from, explaining the pros and cons per proposal, and allowing debate.

3. **Surveys:** offering questionnaires for citizens to fill out, which provide deeper insights into their reasoning.

4. **Participatory Budgeting:** allowing citizens to allocate (part of) the council's budget to selected projects.

5. **Idea Collection:** asking citizens to share ideas within a defined policy area or as a solution to a specific policy question.

6. **Citizen Proposals:** offering citizens the opportunity to share ideas on any topic, at any time, which your council will consider after a threshold of votes has been reached.

It's good to realize that **these methods don't have to be mutually exclusive** in one participation project. Participatory Budgeting, for instance, often starts with an ideation phase that allows citizens to share suggestions for ideas and plans that could receive funding.

CASE STUDY

Oudenaarde, Belgium

The city of Oudenaarde launched their participation platform in June 2019. The administration used the platform several times to consult its citizens via a variety of surveys on mobility, living environment and culture. The local government has also asked citizens to share ideas on improvements in the city, which led to 238 ideas, 426 comments and 3027 votes.

Jelle Didier, communications officer of the city Oudenaarde:
"We always consider which participation method is appropriate in consultation with the involved department or any external partners. An important starting point is the degree of input that is still possible. It makes a big difference if there's still room for new ideas or whether clear boundaries have already been set. In the case of participation for a new mobility plan, we went with a survey. At that stage the partner we were working with needed insights on concrete bottlenecks; this method would enable us to define and structure the input more clearly."

Each method has its advantages and disadvantages. We wrote an elaborate guide on the pros and cons per method, outlining in which specific situation they are suitable - and illustrating them via real-life case studies. You can download the **guide on 6 methods of online consultation** for free.

How do you get your citizens to trust your participation platform?

Trust is a two-way street. To convince your citizens that your platform is trustworthy, they need to feel that they receive a similar trust from you. In our experience, it takes time to build trust, but the three following tricks might help you to get started:

Communicate clearly and transparently

Offer citizens all the information they need to make a well-considered decision and participate in your project and show that their voices are being taken seriously. Commit upfront on how input will be used, as the weight of citizens' voice in the final decision should be clear from the beginning. Citizens must also be able to identify where your messages come from, for instance, by clearly branding your platform with the **visual identity of your council**. Making it easy to recognize who is asking these questions and why, will increase the likelihood of citizens participating.

Make sure your platform offers a genuine and concise answer to the following questions:

- What is the goal of this project?
- Who is it aimed at?
- How will the input be used?
- Which selection criteria will be used?
- How will the ideas be implemented?

Showcase results

Building trust takes time. The best way to achieve it is by keeping your promises: showcase the direct results of (earlier) participation projects. It points out to citizens why they should bother to register and participate, as it illustrates that they can make a real impact. In the early stages of your project, showing results may be less straightforward, but not impossible. You either share the first results while the project is still ongoing, or you share previous (offline) participation projects your government has launched. Both will **underline the fact that you are listening to the input**, genuinely care about the voices of your citizens, and hopefully inspire them to engage with the platform.

Take privacy seriously

It's as evident as it is crucial. Privacy, citizen data and data ownership are thorny topics these days, and for a good reason. Explain clearly on the platform why you're asking for (specific) citizen data and what you intend to do with that information. **Only collect the data you need to influence your decision-making process**, and be mindful of collecting personal information when it's not relevant or will not be used. The Privacy Policy and Terms and Conditions of the platform have to be easily accessible, so that citizens always know what they're signing up for. As it concerns data from within a community, it's good to explicitly state that the shared information will never be used for commercial purposes.

As we're talking about trust as a two-way street, we also provide the option for governments to verify participants. We've worked on implementing local citizen verification, e.g. for official voting, with multiple partners. This is recommended when results have to include a variety of stakeholders or if only certain neighbourhoods are allowed to participate.

CASE STUDY

Orsay, France

Antony Pereira, Director of Communications for the city of Orsay:
"Our aim was to involve as many people as possible while avoiding any risk of fraud; the projects we are talking about would cost the city several million euros, so we needed guarantees that the obtained results would not be biased, and it's real citizens that are voting."

Orsay was the first French city to implement ID verification on a citizen platform. To our own surprise, the verification process in Orsay did not discourage citizens to register on the platform. Much to the contrary, the city saw a 213% increase in the rate of registered users compared to the average of other platforms. Orsay led a good communication campaign to help increase the visibility of the platform, but **verification may help to build a positive perception**. It gives citizens the confidence that the platform is legitimate and serious, and brings trust and legitimacy to the debate as everyone must be part of the community.

How do you combine the online platform with your offline projects?

Digital citizen participation can complement offline engagement but doesn't replace it. Offline participation methods are still wide-spread, as they've proven their value for many communities by allowing for deliberation and debate. We recently launched our online workshop feature to ensure councils can host town hall discussions online, but if citizens prefer to engage in a real-life setting they should be given this opportunity too.

Luckily, many governments have found ways to align the offline and online aspects of their participation projects. The idea is to actively transfer the ideas and arguments from one domain to the other, to ensure that the conversation includes all citizen suggestions.

Quick ways to start integrating your processes:

At your offline events:

- Make a video of expert speakers or government officials who outline their stance, so that these views can be shared on your platform as well;
- Capture the feedback, stories and ideas from citizens present at the event and share these in the online discussions. This allows you to understand whether the ideas that are popular during an event also receive broader support from a (potentially) more diverse audience;
- Did the project start online already? Share a summary of the discussion that has happened on the platform and which ideas have been exchanged. Is the offline event kicking-off your online participation? Promote the online platform by saying that the conversation will continue there or by publishing the results there.

On your online platform:

- Ask input on the agenda of your offline-event;
- Use online surveys or polls to gather broad community feedback as a starting point for offline discussions;
- Give a clear recap of the main topics and challenges that came up during the offline talks to ensure the conversation can build upon this and evolve further.

CASE STUDY

Harderwijk, the Netherlands

The Dutch municipality Harderwijk integrated their digital platform as a clear way to bridge the time between two offline events. In the winter of 2019, the local government hosted a first offline "City Conversation" to deliberate on questions concerning **life without natural gas**, such as: What are challenges for our neighbourhoods? Are there any active green initiatives in the community? What opportunities do citizens see?

Following this offline get-together, ideas were also posted and shared on the online participation platform. Here, **citizens could continue their discussion** over the course of three months. Afterwards, Harderwijk hosted a final offline "City Conversation" in June 2019, where they brought all the shared ideas into the discussion and shared the final suggestions.

As evaluation, the municipality made a clear visualization of the main concerns and opportunities in the community, which was then shared on the online platform as well as in the local council meeting. These insights will be taken into account in the upcoming discussions on an action plan.

How do you reach a different audience than your usual suspects?

A digital participation project can be perceived as inclusive when you reach every demographic group in your community (regardless of gender, social class, age, or location), and when they have the necessary tools to fully participate. However, some groups are harder to reach than others. **Mixing offline and online participation methods**, as discussed before, can assist in reaching a wider audience. It provides multiple opportunities to participate, and some people will prefer giving their input at a moment that suits them. In contrast, others prefer joining an event to share insights.

Pointers that can have a big impact on the inclusion of your platform:

- **Language:** keep it neutral by steering clear of stereotypes and assumptions about your audience. Also, in order to make everyone feel welcome and included, make sure that the communication about your project is available in all the main languages that are spoken in your community. The same rules apply for visual language: images and photos should reflect a diversity of cultures, ethnicities, genders and ages.

- **Launch for inclusion:** getting the word out there in every social group is essential. They have to be aware of your project or platform. Consider the kind of ads, newspaper or media they consume to ensure you can get a hold of them as well. A great way to reach as many citizens as possible is to collaborate with community influencers: either by sharing the news in relevant Facebook groups or by asking involving community organisations with the platform directly.

- **Clear User Experience (UX):** a digital platform should be clear and accessible, i.e. by being compatible with all kinds of devices. The software should also cater to visually impaired citizens, which can be verified with an accessibility label such as WCAG 2.1 AA, which the CitizenLab platform has. If your participation platform is not user-friendly for different audiences, it will automatically exclude them from participating in your projects, so this should not be taken lightly.

Taking these elements into consideration is, unfortunately, not a guarantee for inclusion. You can ensure every group in your community is involved by measuring your results along the way and adjusting your strategy accordingly. If specific stakeholders are missing from the conversation, you could consider addressing them directly to ensure they have at least had a clear opportunity to engage with the project.

CASE STUDY

Leiden, the Netherlands

Hester Tuinhof, communications advisor of the municipality Leiden:
"The big advantage of digital participation is that you reach citizens who normally don't attend town halls. That's why we launched a digital platform in January 2020. Our first project concerned the redesign of 'het Roomburgerpark, a local park. Citizens not only received a letter, but we also communicated about the project in our city newspaper, digital newsletter and on social media. Communication should be tailored to your citizens, and remains a process that you have to reconsider along the way. This allows you to evaluate, make adjustments and involve your target audience as much as possible. As we believe it is key that anyone who wants to participate, can do so."

The municipality of Leiden started a participation project to transform the Roomburgerpark into a contemporary sports park, together with local residents. Through a survey on the platform, about **1,000 citizens** shared their ambitions for the park. The final design proposal was drawn up by the municipality in co-production with a working group of ten selected residents and representatives of involved organisations. During the meetings of this workgroup the results of the survey were taken into account.

In case you are looking for more tips on setting up an **inclusive participation project**, make sure to check our free guide on this particular topic.

What's the cost of a citizen participation platform?

It's the million-dollar question... How much time and money can you save through digital participation? It depends on your current (offline) participation expenses. However, what's often forgotten in this assessment is the fact that **not involving citizens often results in (unintended) costs**. In essence, not consulting citizens can cause cities to make unnecessary investments and fail to address the most pressing needs of the community.

Besides the initial investment in the digital platform, there also two **hidden costs** to keep in mind:

- **Time:** digital platforms don't run by themselves. Setting them up, managing citizen input, moderating comments and analysing contributions takes time. It requires involvement from staff within the administration and is an essential point of any citizen engagement project: even the best platforms will fail if there's no sufficient stakeholder buy-in and no internal support for the tool.

- **Communication:** Ideally, there is a separate budget for launching the platform and investing time into excellent communication. But it's also possible to communicate about your platform with limited resources. In no case should your communication efforts stop at the launch. Once the project is over, it's essential to communicate how citizen's input is going to be used, which ideas are going to be implemented, and what the timeline looks like.

Offline citizen participation also requires an investment: Town hall meetings or focus groups take time to organise, require on-site staff, and have to be repeated throughout different phases of the project. The input that us collected during these meetings is more difficult to process and equally share throughout the administration. As fewer people can attend a meeting at a particular time compared to logging into an online platform that's available 24/7, you're likely to get fewer contributions, making it a potentially less attractive investment.

Digital tools often help to lower the cost of citizen participation by decreasing the number of citizens that are impossible to reach. Of course, the nature of this input is different from the information that comes from focus groups. Online, citizens can provide brief feedback through comments, or choose the projects they want to support. But they're less likely to share a full argumentation, and can't be pushed to elaborate.

Despite these limitations, this type of consultation remains very useful to reach younger citizens or people within the community who are not able to attend physical meetings. Digital platforms make it easy to access large numbers of people and to collect input on a broad scale. Besides, it cuts event organisation and recruitment costs. Cities usually purchase a yearly license, on top of which they can add unique features and project management fees. Typically, the pricing model depends on two elements: **the city's size, and the number of requested features and services.**

At CitizenLab, we developed three core plans. These are designed to match the most frequent requests, but can always be tailored to fit specific needs. **View our pricing plans** to gain a better understanding of the pricing and features in the different options.

How do you keep your platform interesting?

You have launched your platform successfully and know how to work with it internally. But how do you keep its engagement going? If your government has invested resources in setting up a proper platform, you can't let the momentum of your projects go to waste. Too often, councils view participation as a one-off project. But a real **participation platform is all about building and maintaining engagement**. It's keeping citizens informed between the different phases of the policy cycle, up-to-date on what happens with their input, and involved with next steps, taken by your government.

Practical tips to keep your platform relevant over a longer period:

- **Share (and repeat) results.** Give frequent, short and sweet updates about what's been going on on your platform. Which ideas sparked debate? Did you notice that multiple citizens shared similar thoughts? Give attention to what's happening on your platform by joining in on discussions and sharing results or updates regularly to keep citizens informed and engaged. Moreover, ensure that (a summary of the) results of previous participation projects are easily accessible on the platform. This helps citizens to understand the value of their input.

- **Remind citizens that your platform exists.** Citizens are most likely to register and directly participate in a project that interests them, but they may need reminders to come back and engage with new projects or ideas. Instead of sending actual reminders, your communication team can consider creative ways to share engaging reminders about your platform. Local governments could, for instance, consider social media posts about popular ideas, videos from council members addressing citizens to join in on the discussion, or sharing experiences from citizens who are actively involved with the platform.

- **Have at least one active project.** When citizens log into the platform, there should always be a running participation project and an opportunity to participate. If this isn't the case, people are less likely to come back, as it will not seem like an actively used platform. When your ongoing project is in the analysis phase, make sure that citizens can find when they can participate again or when results will be shared.

Allow citizens to share proposals. Within a participation project, citizens can sometimes share ideas related to specific policy topics. But what if they could always share their ideas outside of the ongoing projects? This would mean they could contribute to policy at any time by simply posting their best suggestion or urgent need for the community. It provides an endless opportunity for citizens to participate, as the proposals don't have to fit in the timeframe of the existing projects.

At CitizenLab, we've developed the **Citizen Proposals feature** to ensure that citizens can always contribute to the policy agenda. It allows citizens to share ideas on any topic, at any time, from anywhere, and opens up the debate on improving your community with a bottom-up approach. By sharing proposals and getting sufficient votes from fellow citizens, **citizens are empowered** to influence the policy agenda. The local **government remains in control** of defining the threshold of necessary votes and the actions to be taken once this threshold is reached.

CASE STUDY

Linz, Austria

In the third-largest city of Austria, Linz, the government decided to implement citizen proposals on its participation platform. The city set its own threshold that proposals should reach 30 votes from other citizens within 60 days to be taken into account by the council. If this happens, the initiators are invited to the town hall to discuss their proposal, and eventually meet with the relevant local experts.

In just a few months, citizens shared **26 unique proposals** on the digital platform, 4 of which reached the city's threshold. Linz confirmed that they will soon be implementing the first citizen proposal: new benches for the city centre, designed by a citizen. This was a conscious move to show citizens that the city is listening and to encourage others to share their proposals as well.

Julia Widy from HuemerIT, a consulting company, working with the city of Linz on digital participation: *"Now, citizens can participate whenever they want, and can share their ideas about whatever they want, which gives the mayor an idea of the citizens' needs. Even though citizen proposals are very new, they are very popular among citizens - so much in fact, that we're considering raising the threshold of signatures that are needed. We've seen that some citizens are truly invested in what's going on in their city, and really enjoy the opportunity to be active."*

How do you follow-up on citizen input?

Once your platform is fully up and running, it hopefully results in large numbers of citizen input. Citizens make time to visit your platform and share their ideas, so your **administration should make time to follow-up on this input sufficiently**. Always communicate what is happening with the input provided on the platform, as it will help to build a relationship of trust with your community.

For the record: following up on an idea does not necessarily mean that it has to be implemented by your local government. **Don't be afraid to say "no"** if a suggestion does not fit your administrations' strategy or budget. However, make sure to always share your reasoning with citizens by replying to them on the platform. Citizen participation is not about implementing every (popular) idea; it's about engaging in dialogue with your citizens on the ideas that can improve the community.

Tips your administration can consider to follow-up on citizens' input:

Commit to giving official feedback. Make citizens feel heard by replying to their ideas with the official city accounts. This may be difficult if there are a lot of ideas, but it's not impossible. The Belgian city of Leuven proves it can be done, as long as there is sufficient political will. After collecting 2.331 citizen ideas for the strategic multi-annual plan, the administration replied to 96% of these ideas over the course of one summer. Depending on the size of your team, this may not be feasible, but it's a great way to build a dialogue and relationship with your community.

Align before the start of the project who is responsible for organising these follow-ups. Ensure that your administration can at least reply to popular ideas and show the community that you're taking their views into account.

Make use of the available technology. The enormous benefit of a digital platform is the fact that technology can help you to process a large amount of data. The available technology will differ per platform. At CitizenLab, we work with **Natural Language Processing (NLP)**. NLP technology clusters citizens' ideas and provides decision-makers with insights on overarching trends. This technology, for instance, helped the Belgian Youth4Climate movement to group 1.700 ideas into 15 priorities on climate action, which the organizers could then share with politicians.

Share decision-making. The most critical follow-up is, of course, sharing the actual results of your project. Many governments underestimate the importance of doing this sufficiently, but an engaging way of sharing the outcome will inspire citizens to come back to participate in the following project! Therefore, make sure your results are easily accessible, clearly state how the citizen input informed your decision-making, and try to visualise the most significant policy actions taken by your administration. By making this information more engaging and easy to comprehend, more citizens will understand and remember the exact results. It makes them more likely to feel supportive of and connected to the policy decision.

One last tip...

Ana Zuljevic, Project Manager at the Innovation Hauptplatz of the Austrian city of Linz: "*To make your platform successful it can help to have clear processes in place, but you also learn a lot by doing. You might be really well prepared, but as a city, you have to accept that things are going to change along the way and that you're going to have to adapt. Don't be scared, just do it!*"

Want to engage your community online? We're here to help!

CitizenLab has worked with **+125 local governments** on online citizen engagement and launching a participation platform. **The platform offers a mix of participation methods**, allowing you to customize and utilize the toolbox differently per project. We're happy to walk you through all the functionalities of the platform and discuss how it could support your councils' participation ambitions.

Schedule a free demo of the platform

citizenlab

Get started with digital citizen participation
in your city or municipality!

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