

Unified Government Public Works

community engagement



Using This Guide

This guide is a practical resource for Public Works teams working on projects, programs, services, or any effort that requires communication with the community. It provides clear guidance and simple tools that help ensure information is consistent, timely, and accessible across the department.

Throughout this handbook, the word *project* is used to keep terminology simple. In practice, project refers to any activity requiring engagement or public information, from construction and capital improvements to program rollouts, operational updates, and seasonal work.



You are not expected to use every tool for every effort. Choose the tools that fit the scope and needs of the work. Smaller efforts may only require one or two tools, while larger, high-impact initiatives may benefit from a fuller use of the RPIE framework.

The Research, Planning, Implementation, and Evaluation (RPIE) structure is designed to help teams focus on what they need to know, how they will engage, what actions they will take, and how they will learn from results. Use this guide as a reference, and as a shared standard for strengthening communication across Public Works.

When used together, the tools in this guide form a simple communications plan. This plan helps teams document engagement decisions, coordinate with leadership and partners, and guide communication throughout a project.

If you only do three things:

1. Complete the Engagement Screening Checklist
2. Select an engagement level using the IAP2 Spectrum
3. Document your decision and coordinate with Public Works' Community Engagement Officer/
Public Information Officer (PW PIO)



Public Works Accreditation and Communications Framework



Public Works is a nationally accredited agency through the American Public Works Association.

This guide builds on the procedures, standards, and model practices documented in the department's official accreditation materials. These policies ensure that every communication and engagement activity meets the same level of professionalism and accountability recognized across the country.

Much of the detailed procedure behind this guide can be found in Chapter 6: Communication in Public Works' Accreditation documents on Teams. This chapter outlines how Public Works communicates with residents, businesses, and partner agencies.

Chapter 6.2: Communication with the Public provides the foundation for this handbook and covers essential practices such as:

- How and when to notify the public of road or bridge closures, including thresholds based on traffic volume and impact.
- Coordination with Emergency Management, Strategic Communications, and Elected Officials during closures or emergencies.
- Required timelines, message content, and tools for public notification.

Together with this guide, the policies and procedures in Chapter 6 ensure that Public Works communication is not only consistent, but also measurable, transparent, and nationally benchmarked.

Tools like the IAP2 Spectrum and RPIE framework complement these policies by offering practical methods for planning, executing, and evaluating engagement, helping teams turn written procedure into real-world practice.



Contents

- 08** Framework for Engagement
- 10** Research
- 14** Planning
- 20** Implementation
- 24** Evaluation



Framework for Engagement

Community engagement is how we connect with residents and help them understand the work we do every day. It's also how we listen and learn what matters most to them.

Every engagement activity, big or small, follows a simple process designed to keep us consistent, transparent, and accountable. This process is called RPIE.

The RPIE framework has four parts:

- **Research** - Identify whether engagement is needed and what questions must be answered first. Research helps define the issue, the audience, and the type of input that would be most helpful.
- **Planning** - Decide who to reach, how to reach them, and what level of participation is appropriate. Planning turns research into a clear, actionable strategy.
- **Implementation** - Put the plan into motion by carrying out engagement activities, creating materials, and coordinating with internal and external partners.
- **Evaluation** - Measure results, document what was learned, and report back to the community. Evaluation helps us improve and maintain public trust.

You don't have to be a communications expert to use this guide. Just follow each step in order, document your work, and ask questions when you need to.

Research

Not everything requires a community engagement or communications plan. We use research to identify whether the community needs to be involved and what information is missing.

Example: *Before resurfacing a busy street, the team reviews traffic data, past complaints, and nearby business access needs to decide if public outreach is required.*

Planning

If outreach is needed, we identify who to reach, how to reach them, and when.

Example: *The communications team and project manager plan to send letters to adjacent properties, post a news article, and schedule a neighborhood meeting.*

Implementation

We carry out the plan and document what happens.

Example: *The team hosts the meeting, answers questions, updates the webpage, and shares photos showing progress.*

Evaluation

We measure what worked, what didn't, and what to improve next time.

Example: *Meeting attendance and feedback surveying show strong satisfaction with communication timing, but residents request earlier notice for future progress.*

Levels of Public Participation

There are many different approaches to determining the amount of public participation a project, program, or activity may need. Public Works uses the IAP2 Spectrum to define the degree of participation and influence the community has in each undertaking.

Level	Goal	Public Promise	Example Activities
Inform	Provide clear, factual information.	<i>We will keep you informed.</i>	<i>Website updates, news articles, flyers</i>
Consult	Gather feedback and listen to concerns.	<i>We will listen and show how input was considered.</i>	<i>Surveys, open houses, Q&A sessions</i>
Involve	Work directly with the community.	<i>We will work with you to ensure your ideas are reflected.</i>	<i>Workshops, neighborhood meetings</i>
Collaborate	Partner in each aspect of the decision.	<i>We will look to you for advice and innovation.</i>	<i>Advisory committees, task forces</i>
Empower	Place final decision-making in community hands.	<i>We will implement what you decide.</i>	<i>Participatory budgeting, community-led projects</i>



Not sure which level to choose? Ask yourself some questions like:

- Does the project affect the public or just inform them?
- Can the public influence how the work is done?
- Are we ready to share decision-making power?
- What resources, time, and approval are available?

Research

Research is the R in RPIE, and it's the first step in creating meaningful engagement. Before we design flyers, draft messages, or schedule meetings, we take time to understand the story behind the work.

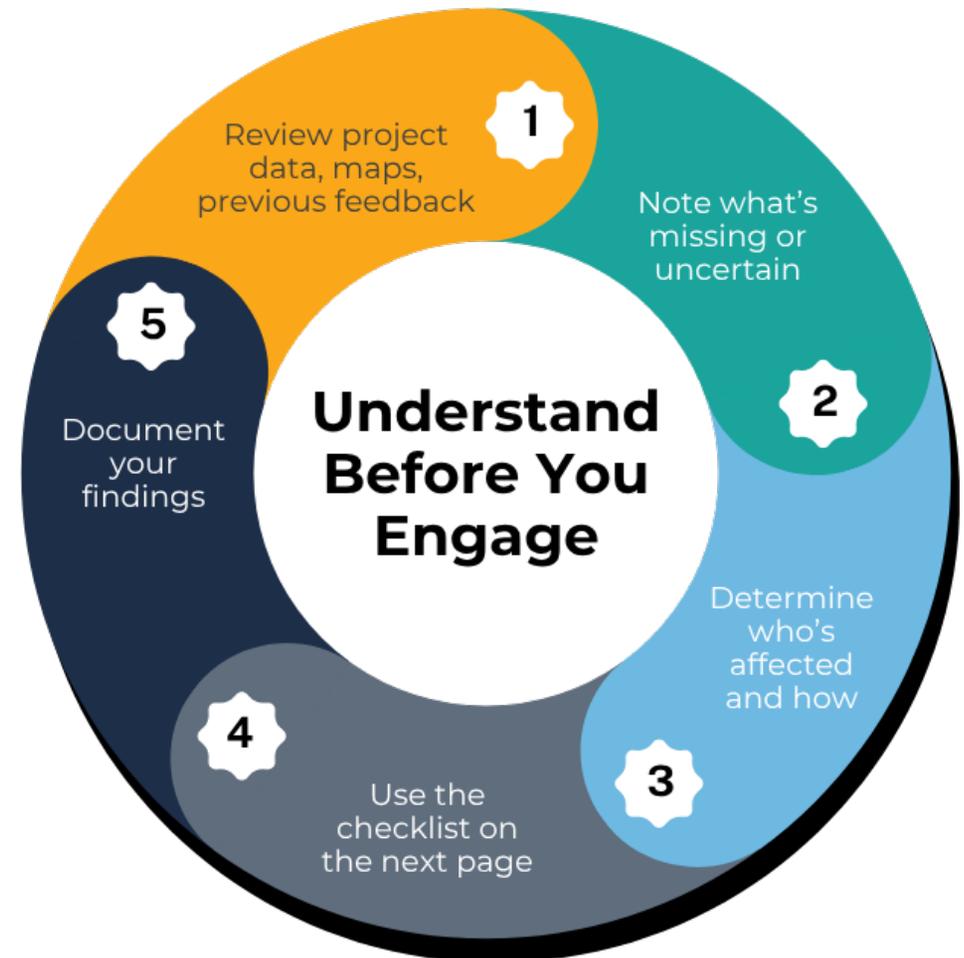
The research phase helps us identify what information is already available, what is still missing, and whether the community needs to be part of the conversation. It keeps us from guessing, ensuring that engagement activities are purposeful, inclusive, and based on real context rather than assumptions.

At Public Works, research isn't limited to technical data. It also includes community knowledge: past feedback, 3-1-1 calls, traffic counts, neighborhood priorities, and even informal conversations with residents or local leaders. Every piece of information adds perspective.

The results of this phase determine whether engagement is needed and, if so, at what level, and with what audiences. Some projects simply require a clear informational notice, while others call for consultation or collaboration using frameworks like IAP2.

The tools that follow - the **Engagement Screening Checklist** and the **What We Know / What We Don't Know Worksheet** - help organize this discovery process. Completing both creates a written record of how decisions were made and builds transparency across the department.

“ Somewhere, something incredible is waiting to be known. ”
- Carl Sagan



Engagement Screening Checklist

The checklist helps identify when Public Works should engage the public, what level of engagement fits best, and whether the project triggers additional notification requirements under Chapter 6: Communication.

Question	Yes/No	Notes/Details
Does the project have potential environmental, economic, safety, or health impacts?		
Could residents, businesses, or property owners be directly affected by the work?		
Is there known or likely public interest, concern, or controversy?		
Would engagement help ensure equitable outcomes or meet regulatory requirements?		
Does the activity involve funding from fees, bonds, or assessments paid by residents?		
Does the work affect neighborhood quality of life, access, or local infrastructure?		
Has a similar project received community feedback that should inform this one?		
Will this activity require public notification under Chapter 6 procedures?		

Policy & Procedure Notes:

- For detailed engagement requirements, see **Section 6.2: Communication with the Public** and **Section 6.5: Public Participation**.
- Completed forms should be retained in the project folder or SharePoint site for accreditation documentation and internal review.

Policy & Procedure

Not every “Yes” answer on the Engagement Checklist means the same thing. This page helps Public Works teams interpret checklist results using Chapter 6.2: Communication with the Public as a guide. It combines professional judgment with clear triggers that determine when engagement is required, recommended, or optional.

Guiding Principles

1. Automatic Triggers

If the project involves potential environmental, economic, safety, or health impacts, engagement is required.

2. Professional Judgment

For moderate impacts, such as temporary access restrictions or funding changes, consult with the PW PIO to determine an appropriate level (Inform / Consult / Involve).

3. Visibility and Duration

Projects with high traffic volumes, long durations, or recurring disruptions may require higher levels of engagement even if technical impact is low.

4. Document Your Reasoning

Always record how the decision was made, even if engagement is deemed unnecessary. Documentation supports transparency and accreditation compliance.

This list isn’t comprehensive, and no policy or procedure document will ever capture every possible scenario. When you find yourself in doubt, always reach out for help and lean toward performing some degree of public communication.

Impact	Typical Examples	Expected Action
Critical	<p>Environmental, economic, safety, or health impacts</p> <p>Street or bridge closure > 1 block Traffic > 5,000 vehicles per day</p> <p>Emergency / school routes</p>	Engagement Required. Issue public notice, coordinate with PIO, and plan at least Inform / Consult activities.
Moderate	<p>Direct property impacts</p> <p>Funding changes</p> <p>Recurring complaints</p> <p>Localized disruption</p>	Engagement Recommended. Coordinate with PIO; use Inform or Consult tools as appropriate.
Low	<p>Routine maintenance</p> <p>One-day lane restriction</p> <p>Low-visibility location</p>	Documentation Only. No formal engagement required; retain checklist and reasoning.

What We Know/What We Don't Know

This worksheet helps document current knowledge about a project or program and highlight any missing details. Completing it early prevents assumptions, improves coordination, and ensures engagement activities are based on facts.

Topic Area	What We Know	What We Don't Know/Want to Know
Project Purpose & Scope		
Affected Areas / Neighborhoods		
Stakeholders / Partners / Agencies		
Key Concerns or Community History		
Current Public Awareness Level		
Data Sources & Evidence (traffic counts, maps, funding)		
Opportunities for Public Input		
Equity or Accessibility Considerations		

Tips:

- If you can't answer "What do we know?" for a topic, that's your signal to research it before moving forward.
- Even short notes, like "Traffic data pending" or "Stakeholder list in progress," add accountability and transparency.

Planning

Planning is the P in RPIE and ensures every engagement effort reaches the right people, with the right message, at the right time.

Once the need for engagement has been confirmed, the planning phase defines who will be involved, how they will be reached, and what level of participation is appropriate. It translates research findings into a practical plan that fits project scope, resources, and timelines.

Good planning is intentional. It prevents outreach from being an afterthought and helps Public Works coordinate messages across divisions, partners, and communication channels.

It also sets the tone for how residents experience a project. Clear planning gives people enough time to prepare, respond, and participate - building trust before work begins. When timing and messaging are coordinated, engagement feels organized and professional rather than reactive.

Planning begins with mapping audiences, identifying who is most affected, who has influence, and who may be missing from the conversation. Understanding these relationships allows teams to design outreach that is balanced, inclusive, and aligned with department goals.

Use the tools on the right to prioritize stakeholders and visualize their roles. **These matrices help determine where to focus time and resources.**



A goal without a plan is just a wish.
- Planning Principle



Creating the Plan

The Planning phase is where research becomes an engagement plan. According to the Public Relations Society of America, this is where communicators set clear, measurable direction by defining goals, objectives, strategies, and tactics. These four elements ensure that every engagement effort supports department priorities, aligns with Public Works policies, and provides a foundation for later evaluation.

Term	Definition	Example
Goal	A broad, long-term result that communicates what you want to achieve. It provides overall direction for the plan. Public Works often calls this an Outcome, or the difference made.	<i>Residents are satisfied with the condition of local streets.</i>
Objective	A specific, measurable milestone that defines what must be accomplished to reach the goal. Objectives should be SMART: specific, measurable, attainable, relevant, and time-bound.	<i>3-1-1 call volumes decrease by 90% within six months.</i>
Strategy	A broad approach that describes how you will achieve an objective. Strategies identify key themes, messages, and methods that guide decisions.	<i>Engage the attention of the neighborhood group where the project will be.</i>
Tactic	A specific action, tool, or deliverable that executes a strategy. Tactics are the activities that bring the plan to life.	<i>Send postcards to residents, post detour maps online, post on social media, send a press release</i>

Check Your Plan:

- Each objective supports a goal.
- Each strategy explains how an objective will be achieved.
- Each tactic brings a strategy to life.

Impact Matrix

During the research phase, you likely began to develop an understanding of who your potential audience is. Now, it's time to identify who will be most affected by the project and how to prioritize outreach accordingly.

The **Impact Matrix** helps determine which groups are most affected by a project and how engaged they currently are. The goal is to pinpoint where impact is high and engagement is low. These are your **priority audiences** for early and personal outreach. The better practice is to have one audience per deliverable, but that isn't always possible, especially in local government where you have interested elected officials, administrators, and local news outlets. Remember to tailor your outreach to meet the needs of your audience.

How to Use the Matrix

Putting the matrix to work isn't difficult, but there are a few things you should know before getting started:

- 1. List your stakeholders.** Include anyone affected, including residents, businesses, agencies, schools, community groups, etc.
- 2. Estimate levels.** Rate each group's impact and current engagement as Low, Medium, or High
- 3. Plot or enter them into the matrix form** on the next page.
- 4. Act on what you see.** Groups with High Impact/Low Engagement are your priority for early, direct communication.
- 5. Update regularly.** Engagement levels change as projects move from design to construction to completion.

Interpreting Results

Plotting stakeholders on the matrix helps visualize priorities. Use this guide to interpret each quadrant and decide where to focus time and communication resources:

	Low Engagement	High Engagement
High Impact	Priority Group - needs personal outreach and timely updates	Maintain Contact - already informed; continue two-way communication
Low Impact	Inform as Needed - minimal updates are sufficient	Monitor - aware but lightly affected

Impact Matrix Worksheet

Stakeholder Group	Impact Level (L/M/H)	Current Engagement (L/M/H)	Priority Action & Notes

Tip:

Use this tool before selecting outreach methods. It identifies where communication will have the greatest impact. Chapters 6.2 and 6.5 have helpful information about audience selection and outreach intensity.

Engagement Method Guide

Once audiences are identified and priorities are set, the next step is choosing how to reach them. The **Engagement Method Guide** helps teams match communication methods to audience needs, project complexity, and available resources.

This tool supports clear and inclusive engagement by ensuring that every method (whether digital, printed, or in person) is purposeful, accessible, and proportional to the project's impact.

How to Use the Guide

Use the Method Selection Matrix after completing the Impact and Influence analyses. It helps you decide what to do and how to do it based on each audience's needs and the level of engagement required:

1. **List your audiences** from the Impact and Influence tools.
2. **Determine each group's engagement needs:** Inform, Consult, Involve, Collaborate, or Empower (based on the IAP2 Spectrum).
3. **Select communication methods** that best fit each engagement need and available resources.
4. **Record your choices** in the worksheet to guide implementation and documentation for accreditation reviews.

Example Methods

Engagement Level	Purpose	Common Methods
Inform	Provide consistent, factual information.	Press releases, website updates, postcards, signage, social media posts.
Consult	Gather feedback to inform decisions.	Surveys, comment forms, online feedback portals.
Involve	Work directly with the public throughout the process.	Public meetings, open houses, neighborhood visits.
Collaborate	Partner with stakeholders in decision-making.	Advisory committees, focus groups, co-design sessions.
Empower	Place decision making in the public's hands.	Ballots, community votes, participatory budgeting.

Method Selection Worksheet

Audience	Engagement Level (L/M/H)	Selected Methods	Responsible Party	Notes/Follow-up

Tip:

Not every project needs every method. Match the engagement level to the project's impact. Larger impacts require more opportunities for engagement. Chapters 6.2 and 6.5 have helpful information about method selection and engagement intensity.

Implementation

Implementation is the I in RPIE, and it's where planning becomes action. This phase focuses on carrying out the communication activities you designed, delivering messages at the right time, and maintaining consistent contact with the community. It includes publishing updates, posting notices, sending mailers, coordinating meetings, and making sure every engagement activity supports the goals and objectives established during planning.

Strong implementation depends on preparation. Before outreach begins, teams should confirm timelines, gather project information, identify responsible staff, and ensure materials are accurate and accessible. This creates a smoother workflow and reduces the chance of missed steps. It also helps communication from Public Works reflect the same level of coordination that residents expect from field operations.

Implementation is also where coordination matters. Projects often involve multiple divisions and partner agencies, and communication needs to stay aligned across teams. Keeping everyone informed prevents conflicting messages and allows the Public Works PIO to support the project with media coordination, website updates, and community outreach when needed.

Implementation requires flexibility. Project schedules shift, weather delays occur, and new information sometimes changes what residents need to know. Successful engagement adapts to these changes while keeping the public informed in a timely manner.

“ Ideas are a dime a dozen. People who implement them are priceless.
- Mary Kay Ash ”



Engagement Screening Checklist

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Implementation Tracker

The Implementation Activity Tracker helps teams **monitor and document each communication task** throughout a project. Use this tool to record when activities occur, who was responsible, how information was shared, and what follow-up is needed.

Tracking activities in real time supports coordination across divisions, improves accuracy of public information, and creates a record that supports APWA re-accreditation.

How to Use the Tracker

Use the tracker throughout the entire Implementation phase. It provides a central place for all engagement-related actions, helping teams stay organized and aligned as the project moves forward:

1. **List each communication activity** associated with the project.
2. **Record the date completed**, the method used, and who completed the task.
3. **Note any outcomes or questions** received from the public.
4. **Identify follow-up actions** so the team stays aligned and responsive.

Example Methods

Category	Examples	Why It Matters
Public Notices	Website updates, press releases, signage	Keeps residents informed and supports transparency.
Direct Outreach	Mailers, door hangers, canvassing	Ensures high-impact areas receive timely updates.
Community Engagement	Open houses, meetings, pop-ups	Provides opportunities for questions and dialogue.
Coordination Tasks	Interagency updates, PIO coordination	Aligns project messaging across divisions.
Feedback & Responses	Resident questions, business concerns	Helps track issues and guide follow-up

Tracker Worksheet

Date	Activity/Task	Method	Responsible Party	Outcome/Notes	Follow-Up Needed

Tip:

Update the tracker as tasks are completed, not at the end of the project. Small, frequent entries help prevent missed steps and keep communication organized.

Evaluation

Evaluation is the E in RPIE, and it focuses on understanding the results of your engagement efforts. This phase looks at whether your communication goals and objectives were met and how effectively your outreach supported the project. The purpose of evaluation is not to start over, but to learn what worked well and what could be improved for future projects.

Outcome-based evaluation measures the results of engagement, such as whether key audiences received timely information, whether feedback influenced decisions, and whether communication increased understanding of the project. These outcomes help determine if the selected strategies and methods were appropriate for the project's scope and impact.

Evaluation occurs throughout the project, not only at the end. Checking progress along the way helps confirm whether communication is working and allows for adjustments when needed.

Evaluation also provides insight into the overall experience of the community. Consider whether residents, businesses, and stakeholders felt heard, whether concerns were addressed, and whether questions were answered in a timely way. These reflections help shape future efforts and build long term trust between Public Works and the community.

The tools that follow will help you keep track of activities and evaluate the success of your engagement efforts.

“ Every project teaches us something. Evaluation helps us see it. - Public Works Proverb ”



Communication Log

The Communication Log helps teams **document questions, concerns, and feedback received** from residents, businesses, elected officials, and partner agencies during a project. Keeping a record of incoming communication supports coordination across divisions, provides a clear history of what information was shared, and helps teams respond in a timely and consistent way. It also creates important documentation for APWA re-accreditation.

How to Use the Communication Log

Use the Communication Log throughout the entire Implementation phase. Record any communication that requires follow-up, contains important project feedback, or may be needed later for reference or evaluation:

1. **Record the date** the question or comment was received.
2. **Identify the source**, such as a resident, business, neighborhood association, or elected official.
3. **Summarize the Communication** in clear, factual terms.
4. **Document your response** or note who is responsible for responding.

What to Track

Use this tool to record items like:

- Resident questions or concerns.
- Business inquiries about project impacts.
- Feedback from neighborhood associations.
- Coordination with elected officials.
- Agency-to-agency communication.
- Requests for maps, timelines, or follow-up information.
- Questions received during meetings or open houses.
- Complaints or service-related concerns connected to the project.

Log Worksheet

Date	Summary of Communication	Follow-up Needed

Tip:

Record communication as soon as possible. Brief notes made early help ensure details are accurate and prevent issues from being overlooked.

After-Action Reflection Worksheet

The After-Action Reflection Worksheet helps teams review the results of their engagement efforts and determine whether the communication goals and objectives were met. Use this tool to evaluate what outcomes were achieved, how audiences responded, and what lessons can be applied to future projects.

How to Use this Worksheet

Use this worksheet after major engagement milestones or at the end of a project. It supports continuous improvement and provides documentation for accreditation:

1. **Review your goals and objectives** from the planning phase.
2. **Compare planned outcomes to actual results** from your engagement efforts.
3. **Reflect on successes and challenges** based on team experience and public feedback.
4. **Document lessons learned** and recommend adjustments for future engagements.

Example Methods

Evaluation Area	What to Consider
Outcome Achieved	Did communication meet your stated objectives?
Audience Understanding	Did residents receive and understand the information?
Community Feedback	Did feedback influence decisions or reveal new insights?
Effectiveness of Methods	Were the chosen engagement tools appropriate and accessible?
Future Improvements	What should be repeated, changed, or avoided next time?

Tip:

Evaluate outcomes promptly while details are still fresh. Quick reflections improve accuracy and create stronger project documentation.

After-Action Reflection

Evaluation Area	Reflection/Findings
Outcome Achieved	
Goal and Objectives	
Audience Understanding	
Feedback and Insights	
What Worked Well?	
What Could Improve?	
Recommendations for Future Projects	

Engagement Outcomes Snapshot

The Engagement Outcomes Snapshot helps teams capture the key results of their communication and engagement efforts. Use this tool to compare what you planned to achieve with the outcomes that occurred. The goal is to create a clear summary of what worked, what evidence supports those results, and what adjustments may be needed for future projects.

How to Use this Tool

Use this tool at the end of a project or after major milestones. It provides a concise record of outcomes that can be included in project files, accreditation documentation, or leadership updates:

1. **List each engagement goal** you defined during planning.
2. **Describe the outcome** for each goal based on feedback, responses, or observations.
3. **Add evidence** that supports your findings, such as attendance counts or communication logs.
4. **Make notes for the future** based on what you learned.

Example Methods

Outcome Type	Examples
Reach	Residents received information through the intended channels.
Understanding	Audiences demonstrated increased awareness of the project.
Participation	People attended meetings, asked questions, or shared feedback.
Perception Change	Residents changed the way they think or feel about a project.
Experience	Residents felt informed, heard, or satisfied with communication.

Tip:

Keep outcomes factual and evidence-based. Simple observations are useful as long as they are clearly documented.

Outcomes Worksheet

Outcome Achieved	Evidence/Data	Notes for Future Projects

Communications Metrics Snapshot

The Communication Metrics Snapshot provides a quick way to document measurable results from your engagement activities. Use this tool to record key numbers, trends, and data points that reflect how well communication reached and supported your audiences. These metrics help confirm whether engagement objectives were achieved and provide useful documentation for future planning.

How to Use this Tool

Complete this snapshot at the end of a project, major milestone, or midway to check success. It works well alongside the Engagement Outcomes Snapshot and the After-Action Reflection Worksheet. A few simple numbers and a quick check can show:

1. **How many people you reached**
2. **How many engaged with the project**
3. **What channels were most effective**
4. **How communication supported the overall outcome**

Common Metrics

Metric Type	Examples
Reach	Residents received information through the intended channels.
Engagement	Audiences interacted with materials or demonstrated awareness.
Responsiveness	People attended meetings, asked questions, or shared feedback.
Effectiveness	Residents changed the way they think or feel about a project.
Performance	Residents felt informed, heard, or satisfied with communication.

Tip:

Use numbers when possible, but simple estimates are acceptable. The goal is to capture meaningful data, not perfect precision.

Metrics Worksheet

Main Category	Result/Data
Website Traffic Related to the Project	
Email or Phone Inquiries Received	
Social Media Reach or Impressions	
Social Media Engagement (Likes, Comments, Shares)	
Printed Material Distribution (Mailers, Door Hangers, Fliers)	
Public Meeting or Open House Attendance	
Questions Answered or Concerns Resolved	
Complaints Before / After Communication	
Channel Effectiveness (Best Performing Method)	



We Can & We Must

Developed by Dave Reno
Update 2026-V1 | Next Review January 2027

