

Advice Sheets

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STEP 4

UNDERSTANDING YOUR COMMUNITY

Purpose

This step guides you through the process of gathering evidence about your community so you are well informed when it comes to developing your plan's actions.

What's involved

Researching the wellbeing and sustainability of your community in its entirety, by making the most of existing facts and information and consulting everyone locally.

Useful resources

Resource Sheet 3/3 – Creating a simple project plan

Resource Sheet 4/1 – Community wellbeing and sustainability

Resource Sheet 4/2 – Researching existing facts and information about your area

Resource Sheet 4/3 – Tips for consulting your community

Resource Sheet 4/4 – Example consultation methods

Local resources – contact your Rural Community Action Network (RCAN) member for details

Introduction

Developing an understanding of your community is an essential part of producing a Community Led Plan. If you are able to gather information about how your community is changing and how people experience life locally, you will be in a much better position to say how it can be improved.

This step is designed to help you undertake some initial research that will allow you to identify the key issues for your community. It shows you how you can consider the wellbeing and sustainability of your area by making the most of existing facts and information and consulting with everyone locally. This will equip you with evidence that can be used to plan and prioritise future action which is detailed later in Step 6.

The importance of understanding your community

If you live or work in your community, you will no doubt already have some good ideas about its strengths and weaknesses and how things can be improved. However, it's essential that you back this up with evidence gathered and discussed by members of your community.

Spending time developing a more detailed understanding of your community at this stage will reap benefits in the long run. Plans that are well researched are much more likely to be successful, resulting in long lasting improvements that benefit everyone. This is because the actions they propose are:

- based on a evidence of local needs and aspirations rather than the assumptions of a few people
- linked in with other work that is being done in the area
- supported by a diverse mix of individuals, organisations and service providers.

Taking shortcuts at this stage can result in poor quality plans that lack the support of the majority of the community and therefore fail to achieve their aims. This also brings with it the danger of splitting the community and possibly causing long-standing resentment amongst those who didn't have an opportunity to get involved and whose voices weren't heard.

What do I need to find out?

One of the virtues of undertaking a Community Led Plan is that it can address a huge diversity of local issues. Ultimately it is up to your community to decide which ones are the most important, but getting to this stage will require a thorough assessment of local needs and aspirations. Only once you have identified the main issues for your community should you start planning and prioritising actions for addressing them. This is discussed later in Step 5.

A useful starting point is to think about the many different things that contribute to the wellbeing and sustainability of your community. In other words, what makes your local community a place where people want to live, prosper and be happy, both now and in the future.

Resource Sheet 4/1 takes a detailed look at the various social, economic, environmental and cultural elements that contribute to the wellbeing and sustainability of any community. Use this to think about how you can gather information about your own community relating to each of the elements described.

See also: ***Resource Sheet 4/1 – Community wellbeing and sustainability***

How do I gather the information I need?

To develop a detailed understanding of your community's wellbeing and sustainability, you will need to start by gathering existing facts and information about your area and then consult with everyone locally. This will not be a five minute job and needs to be carefully planned.

See also: ***Resource Sheet 3/2 – Creating a simple project plan***

Gathering existing facts and information

Gathering existing facts and information about your local area is the best way to begin thinking about how you take your plan forward. Depending on what you are able to find, this can confirm some of the key features of your community and show you how it is changing.

Undertaking this initial investigative work is useful for two reasons. Firstly, it can help you to bring together different members of your community, stimulating and informing discussion about the key issues locally and what can be done about them. Secondly, the evidence gathered can be used in your community's final plan, to support and justify any actions that you propose.

Resource Sheet 4/2 shows you how you can make the most of existing facts and information in more depth, showing you where you can find this information, what to look for and how to use it to best effect.

See also: ***Resource Sheet 4/2 – Researching existing facts and information about your area***



STEP 4

UNDERSTANDING YOUR COMMUNITY

Consulting your community*Why?*

Consulting with members of your community is probably the most important part of producing any Community Led Plan. It will prove invaluable to the development of any actions because:

- People in your community know the local area best
- It is important to understand that people may experience your local area in different ways
- It is an opportunity to bring the community together and create a better understanding of each others needs
- It can allow your community to take greater ownership of the plan and generate support for the actions that you will eventually go on to implement
- New people get involved in community life
- Existing facts and information can be double checked.

*What to ask?*

As previously mentioned in Resource Sheet 4/1, there are many elements that contribute to your community's well-being and sustainability. When consulting with your community you will need to find out:

- How your community has changed in the past, what people value in the present and what they would like to see happen in the future.
- What works well, what could be improved, what would make community life better
- What people think about the existing facts and information you have already gathered. For example, if the last census indicated that 30% of your community's population was over the age of 60, what do people in your community think about this?

See also: **Resource Sheet 4/3 – Tips for consulting your community**

What methods to use?

You can be quite creative in the ways you choose to communicate with members of your community. Many different methods can be used. For example, questionnaires, maps and models, focus groups and even video diaries. It is important that you don't just rely on a questionnaire because:

- Different groups within your community are likely to engage better with different methods. Try to pitch your chosen methods so that you get a range of different people involved – see Resource Sheet 1/1
- It will provide you with a breadth and depth of information, e.g. hard evidence such as statistics; soft evidence such as case studies, people's perceptions or opinions.

Resource sheet 4/4 will help you to decide which consultation methods are most suitable for use in your community. It provides an explanation of each consultation method outlining, what's involved, the resources and time you might need and who in your community they are best used with.

See also: **Resource Sheet 4/4 – Example consultation methods**

Keeping track of progress

At all stages in your consultation, remember to keep in touch with everyone in your community, letting them know what's happening, how they can get involved and what your steering group will do with the evidence collected (see Step 5). People are much more likely to get involved and stay involved if they can see that the work is well organised and going to make a difference.

Finally, make sure you keep a record of the different people and/or groups who participate in your consultation as it progresses. You might want to create a simple check list to make sure nobody has been missed out (see Resource Sheet 1/1). The check list will also provide you with evidence that your consultation is credible. This will be vital later on when you are asking for support from other groups, organisations and service providers to implement the actions that you have identified and included in your plan.

If done well, you can expect your plan's consultation to involve over 70% of your community!

By the end of this stage, it is recommended that you have:

- **Understood the different elements that contribute to the wellbeing and sustainability of your community**
- **Gathered existing facts and information about your community**
- **Consulted members of your community using a mix of different methods to find out how they experience the local area and what they think could be improved.**



STEP 4

COMMUNITY WELLBEING AND SUSTAINABILITY

Use this for...

Thinking about the different elements that contribute to the wellbeing and sustainability of your community.

See also...

Sustainable Rural Communities Toolkit (<http://tinyurl.com/SustainableRCtoolkit>)
Cumbria Sustainable Communities Workbook
 (<http://tinyurl.com/CumbriaSustainableCommWorkbook>)

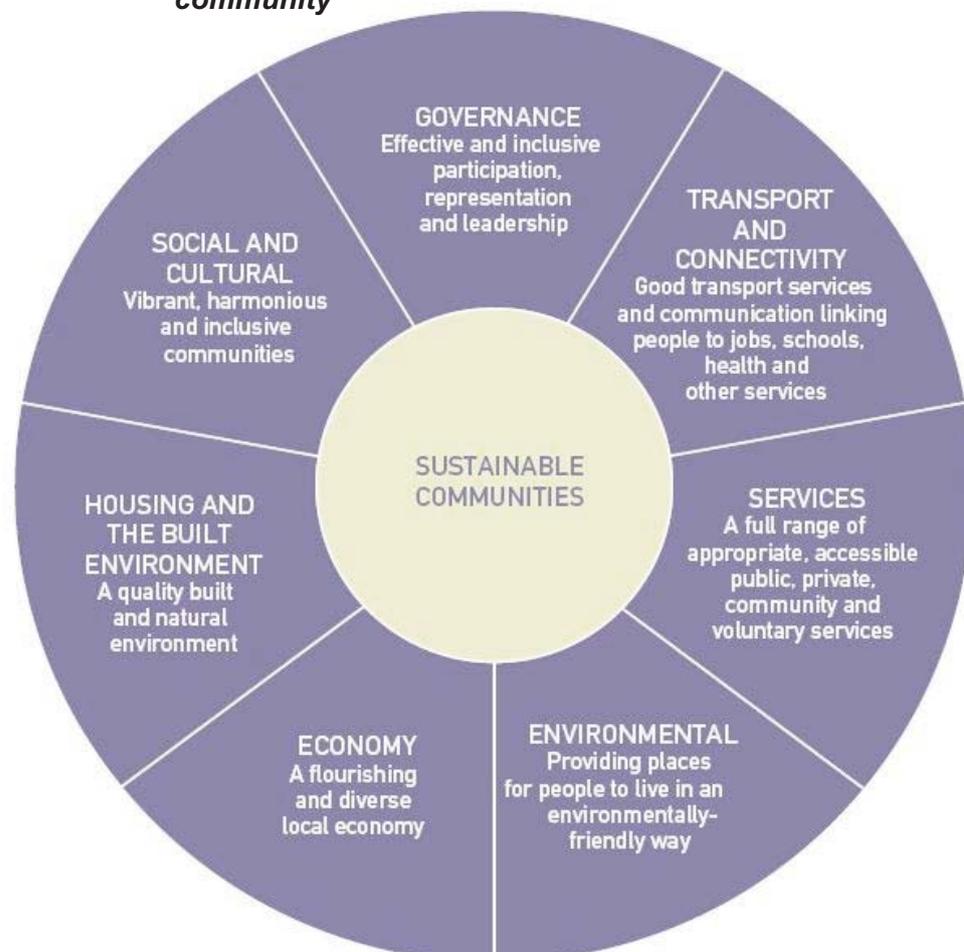
Community wellbeing and sustainability

A sustainable community needs to have the right balance of economy, social interaction and environmental considerations. At its heart will be a good sense of wellbeing: an understanding of the need for a vibrant economy, an awareness of the social make-up and value of the diversity within the community and an understanding and commitment to live within the environmental limits of the area.

The wider context for sustainable communities is that of sustainable development which has been widely defined as, “meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.”

Hopefully, discussion around these issues will enable you to develop a better understanding of your community; how it is changing, what features and characteristics are valued at the moment, and how it should continue to develop and prosper in the future.

A good way of looking at many of the aspects that we associate with wellbeing and sustainability is to use Egan's Wheel¹. Egan's Wheel sets out 8 interdependent elements of a sustainable community.

Egan's wheel: elements that make a sustainable community

¹ Egan J (2004) Skills for Sustainable Communities, ODPM, London

How to assess your community's sustainability and wellbeing

Egan's Wheel can be used as a tool for assessing sustainable communities. By using this wheel your community can build up a picture to understand what may need to be done to underpin its future sustainability.

For each of these 8 characteristics of a sustainable community, your community can explore the following questions:

- What change has taken place in the past?
- What key features and characteristics do people like or dislike at the moment?
- What changes would people like to see happen in the future?

Egan's Wheel can provide the basis for exploring the sustainability of communities. The Sustainable Rural Communities Toolkit, developed in Devon and also adapted by Action with Communities in Cumbria, poses a number of questions under each of 8 similar characteristics.

See also: ***Sustainable Rural Communities Toolkit***
(<http://tinyurl.com/SustainableRCtoolkit>)
Cumbria Sustainable Communities Workbook
(<http://tinyurl.com/CumbriaSustainableCommWorkbook>)

Both of these resources pose a number of questions that you can ask to appraise the sustainability and wellbeing of your community, looking at the different elements set out in the wheel. We recommend taking a look as there may be some questions that you would like to use that will help you to find out how your community is changing, what characteristics and features people value at the moment and what should happen in the future.

The following is an example of how you might use the wheel, and the resources signposted above, to explore the transport and connectivity of your community.

In the Sustainable Communities Toolkit, a key element of a sustainable community is described as:

- Well connected sustainable communities benefit from transport services and communications which minimise carbon consumption whilst linking people to jobs, schools, health and other services.

To investigate whether this is the case, your community could seek to answer these recommended questions:

- Is the community well served by conventional public transport services (bus and/or train)?
- How electronically connected is the settlement (broadband etc)?

You can seek to answer these questions by examining existing facts and information and consulting everyone locally as discussed in Advice Sheet 4. As you begin to explore responses to each question, you should be able to make a judgement as to whether this element of your community is doing well, or if there are concerns or issues that you would like to address as part of your Community Led Plan.

STEP 4

RESEARCHING EXISTING FACTS AND INFORMATION ABOUT YOUR AREA

Use this for...

Making best use of existing facts and information to identify features of your community that warrants further investigation and discussion by your community.

See also...

Resource Sheet 4/1 – Community wellbeing and sustainability

Resource Sheet 4/3 – Tips for consulting your community

Resource Sheet 4/4 – Example consultation methods

CLP Toolkit Topic Sheets - contact your Rural Community Action Network (RCAN) member for details

It is important to gather and consider existing facts and information about your area to help develop and take your Community Led Plan forward. Gathering this type of information can help to identify different features and characteristics that are significant or unique in your local area. The data and information can also help to identify changes in the community and the local area over time.

You can collect facts and figures from a variety of different sources, for example, your local authority. Another source of information is the Evidencing Rural Need (www.rural-evidence.org.uk) website. This provides summary information on rural issues and shows the real socio-economic picture of a rural community. A community profile has been developed for communities throughout England and is structured around the eight issues set out in Egan's Wheel (Resource Sheet 4/1 – Community wellbeing and sustainability) that have been identified as important for a sustainable community.



You can use the information presented in the community profile to identify key features and characteristics of your community which you may want to investigate further and discuss with other people locally. This information, and data from other sources will help you plan actions for the improvement of your area which are better informed and more likely to benefit everyone locally.

How do I gather facts and information?

Using Egan's Wheel, each component can be used as a guide for researching your local area.

See also: Resource Sheet 4/1 – Community wellbeing and sustainability

The following table sets out each component and signposts to where relevant data and information can be found. It also poses some example questions you could ask to gather the relevant information to support your Community Led Plan.

Component	Where can you find information?	Example questions you could ask?
Governance	Association of parish councils website Local Authority Rural Evidence website (http://www.rural-evidence.org.uk/home/)	How many people are involved in local decisions? How many seats on the parish or town council are filled?
Transport and Connectivity	Local Authority Transport Plan Rural Evidence website (http://www.rural-evidence.org.uk/home/) Local Transport Forums	How many cars are there in the local area? How far do people travel to work/nearest supermarket/town centre? To what extent are other means of transport alternative to the private car available?
Services	Rural Evidence website (http://www.rural-evidence.org.uk/home/) Local Authority NHS Trust or equivalent	How far away are you from your nearest job centre/secondary school/GP surgery? How does this compare with other communities in our county?
Environmental	Local authority Local Plan Rural Evidence website (http://www.rural-evidence.org.uk/home/) Local environmental/climate change/green groups Environment Agency	How much does the community recycle? Is there a flooding risk?
Equality	Local authority Local Plan Rural Evidence website (http://www.rural-evidence.org.uk/home/)	Are there any areas of deprivation in our community? How many households are in fuel poverty?
Economy	Local authority Local Plan Rural Evidence website (http://www.rural-evidence.org.uk/home/) Local Economic Partnership Local Federation of Small Businesses/Chamber of Commerce Office for National Statistics website	How many working people live in the community? Do retired people outnumber the economically active in your community? How many small businesses are there in the local area?

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RESEARCHING EXISTING FACTS AND
INFORMATION ABOUT YOUR AREA

Component	Where can you find information?	Example questions you could ask?
Housing and the Built Environment	Local Authority Local Plan Rural Evidence website (http://www.rural-evidence.org.uk/home/) Land Registry	Is there any affordable housing in your local area? Is there any social housing?
Social and cultural	Local Authority Rural Evidence website (http://www.rural-evidence.org.uk/home/) Local charities/volunteer groups Sports clubs/societies and events	How many people live in our community? How is the demographic of our community changing? How many societies, clubs and events are there in the area?

STEP 4

TIPS FOR CONSULTING YOUR
COMMUNITY**Use this for...**

Thinking about how you will consult members of your community.

See also...

Resource Sheet 4/1 – Community wellbeing and sustainability

Resource Sheet 4/2 – Researching existing facts and information about your area

Resource Sheet 4/4 – Example consultation methods

This resource sheet expands on the guidance in Advice Sheet 4 – Understanding your community and highlights some of the key issues you should consider when undertaking a community consultation. It should be used as an aid to your planning. All communities are comprised of a wide range of people of different ages, backgrounds and skills. Everyone in the community has a right to be involved and have their say, however you may have to make allowances or take into consideration the differing needs of certain sections of the community, if you want to be as inclusive as possible. If you have any questions about the approach you should take with your consultation then talk it through with your community development worker.

See also: **Resource Sheet 4/4 - Example consultation methods**

Top Tips

- Use a different range of consultation methods
- Take the consultation to different groups don't expect everyone to come to one place
- Try to involve different people in different ways
- Plan your consultation thoroughly and choose methods based on your existing knowledge of your community.

Key Questions to Ask

Before beginning any consultation you should always ask yourself these questions, the answers will help you decide what methods and techniques to use:

- Who are we consulting?
- What about?
- Why?
- Whose consultation will it be?
- Do people (and you) understand the issues?
- When should it be done?
- How long will it take?
- Who interprets and sees the results?
- Are there any comparable results?
- What might happen as a consequence?



Things to think about

When consulting with your community it is important to start with the assumption that everyone wants to contribute and have their say but that you may need to adopt different techniques to involve various sections of the community. Think about how you can be inclusive, bear in mind that people might not get involved due to a variety of reasons, for example:

- They don't have enough time
- They can't access the venue
- The method you are using discourages them
- Stigma or discrimination against a particular group, e.g migrant workers
- An assumption that their view is not going to be taken seriously.

Think about the different techniques you could use and which ones are the most appropriate for the people you want to involve. The following are commonly used:

- Questionnaires
- Planning for Real
- Parish walk
- Idea walls/banks/boxes
- Interviews/focus groups
- Video diaries and web forums.

See also: *Resource Sheet 4/4 - Example consultation methods*

Remember!

- Make it fun and interesting
- Don't ask leading questions
- Make sure you feedback to people
- Act on the results
- Keep people informed.

Acknowledgements

Thanks to ACT- Action with Communities in Cumbria, Humber and Wolds RCC and Action in rural Sussex

STEP 4

EXAMPLE CONSULTATION METHODS

Use this for...

Choosing suitable methods to consult different people in your community.

See also...

Resource Sheet 4/3 – Tips for consulting your community

Communities are made up of people of different ages, backgrounds and skills and it is important to recognise this when gathering information from them. People will engage in different ways and everyone should be given the opportunity to express their views. There are a range of different consultation methods that communities can use to capture the views and expectations of everyone locally.

This Resource Sheet will help you decide which consultation methods are most suitable for use in your community. It provides a brief explanation of each consultation method outlining their strengths and weaknesses, the kind of people they are best used with and the resources and time required.

Consultation method (description)	Strengths	Weaknesses	Best used with	Resources/ time needed	How to
<p>Surveys Structured way of asking questions to understand peoples' behaviour, views and opinions</p>	<p>You can gather information in a consistent, structured way Because all respondents have to answer the same questions you can easily compare responses</p>	<p>It can take time to design, deliver, collect and analyse surveys It's also easy to ask unnecessary or leading questions!</p>	<p>People who have time and inclination to fill out forms</p>	<p>Surveys can be conducted on paper or electronically to save costs You will need to allow plenty of time to think about the questions to ask and how these will be analysed You may also want to pilot your survey to make sure it is easy for participants to use and generates the right kind of information</p>	<p>Spend time planning your survey, thinking carefully about the information you want to find out, how to structure your questions and how you will analyse the results Pilot your survey with a small number of people Distribute your survey, either by hand, or electronically stipulating a date by which it must be returned Analyse results and look for patterns and inconsistencies in the data</p>
<p>Model making (Planning for Real) People are encouraged to comment on 3D models of your community expressing their likes, dislikes and views for future action</p>	<p>Interactive and visual way of involving a wide range of people Can be undertaken alongside existing community events</p>	<p>It can take time to make the models People tend to comment on the physical aspects of your community</p>	<p>This is a great method of engaging a wide range of people who like to participate in a more 'hands on' way Think about getting younger people to make the models</p>	<p>You will need to have a Planning for Real kit (http://www.planningforreal.org.uk/) or model making materials. Making the model can be fun, but takes time You will need a venue (preferably away from wind and rain!) Facilitators are best used to run the event (speak to your Rural Community Action Network member for details)</p>	

STEP 4

EXAMPLE CONSULTATION METHODS

Consultation method (description)	Strengths	Weaknesses	Best used with	Resources/ time needed	How to
<p>Neighbourhood walks Walking around your community, people are asked to comment on and discuss positive and negative features of interest</p>	<p>Good for starting your plan's consultation and establishing key issues of interest</p> <p>Visual references can serve as good prompts for discussion and allow more varied issues to surface</p>	<p>Discussion may gravitate towards physical aspects of the community</p> <p>Could exclude people with mobility difficulties</p> <p>It can be difficult to capture everything that's said</p>	<p>People who like to get outside and talk</p>	<p>Neighbourhood walks are relatively easy to organise and shouldn't require too many resources. You might need pen and paper or equipment such as a smart phone to record what's said</p>	<p>Plan route</p> <p>Publicise the walk</p> <p>Devise a method of capturing what is said or discussed</p> <p>Undertake walk</p> <p>Review notes taken from the walk and look to see if there are any key themes or issues that warrant further investigation</p>
<p>Idea walls/ banks/ boxes An opportunity for people to post comments and suggestions in their own time. They can be used at events or in public places over a period of time</p>	<p>Quick and easy to use</p> <p>If used in public places, you might get comments from people who don't have the time or inclination to get involved in other consultation activities</p>	<p>Takes time to gather responses</p> <p>The detail of the suggestions might be limited so best used alongside other consultation methods</p>	<p>People who are likely to turn up at public meetings or frequent places where they are displayed</p>	<p>Materials for display purposes</p> <p>Allow enough time to gather and analyse responses</p>	<p>Decide what you want people to comment on. Do you want to invite general comments about your community or do you want them to think about a particular aspect of it</p> <p>Produce display materials which clearly state the scope of views and comments sought</p> <p>Allow enough time for comments and suggestions to be posted</p> <p>Collate and analyse results, looking for patterns</p>

Consultation method (description)	Strengths	Weaknesses	Best used with	Resources/ time needed	How to
<p>Interviews/ focus groups A recorded conversation with individuals or groups to explore pre-defined issues or topics. Can be structured with pre-defined questions or take the form of a more fluid and open discussion</p>	<p>Particularly effective for exploring how different people experience your community. During the course of an interview or focus group participants can be invited to expand upon issues of interest</p>	<p>Whilst data collected is rich in detail, it can take longer to analyse Because responses are likely to be highly personalised, it's important that you seek to ensure participant's anonymity when feeding back information to your community</p>	<p>Interviews can be used with most people, however some might feel more comfortable to talk about things than others Can be used to target specific groups in your community</p>	<p>Its best to hold interviews and focus groups in places where people feel comfortable and where conversations can be easily recorded (i.e. no loud background noises!) Recording equipment</p>	<p>Think about who you want to speak to and what you want to talk about. Select participants Agree a time and venue with participants and let them know how you will use their responses Undertake interview/ focus group making sure this is recorded Reflect on the interview/ focus group making a note of</p>
<p>Video diaries People record their thoughts and opinions on video. These can be played back to the rest of your community at a public event</p>	<p>This can be a dynamic way of getting people involved, allowing people to express their thoughts or opinions in their own time</p>	<p>You'll need to think carefully about who you want to record video diaries Some people might be uncomfortable about speaking on camera or having this played back to the rest of the community Time consuming</p>	<p>People who are used to the internet and feel comfortable about sharing their views publically</p>	<p>Video camera or smart phone, projector or large screen TV Venue for showcasing video diaries to the rest of your community (if desired)</p>	<p>Thank about what you want participants to talk about during their video dairies Select participants and provide them with clear guidance about what they should and should not be prepared to talk about. Make sure they have equipment needed for recording their dairies Review video dairies before public screening Hold an event to play video dairies back to your</p>

STEP 4

EXAMPLE CONSULTATION METHODS

Consultation method (description)	Strengths	Weaknesses	Best used with	Resources/ time needed	How to
<p>Internet forums and social media An opportunity for people to share ideas and discuss topics of interest online. These can be pre-defined or user generated</p>	<p>Anyone with access to the internet can take part Conversations are automatically recorded and easily analysed Can be integrated with your community's website</p>	<p>Excludes people without access to the internet May attract inappropriate posts if not well moderated</p>	<p>Young people, people with limited time</p>	<p>Internet access Basic knowledge of how to set up forums/ use social media Time to promote and moderate the forum</p>	<p>Set up forum or chose appropriate social media platform Encourage members of your community to access the forum and share their views Stimulate discussions to keep them alive Analyse comments and feedback received</p>