SURE Guides for Preparing and Using Evidence-Based Policy Briefs
8. Informing and engaging stakeholders

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The SURE Collaboration

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SURE is a collaborative project that builds on and supports the Evidence-Informed Policy Network (EVIPNet) in Africa and the Regional East African Community Health (REACH) Policy Initiative. The project involves teams of researchers and policymakers in seven African countries and is supported by research teams in three European countries and Canada. SURE is funded by the European Commission's 7th Framework Programme (Grant agreement no 222881).

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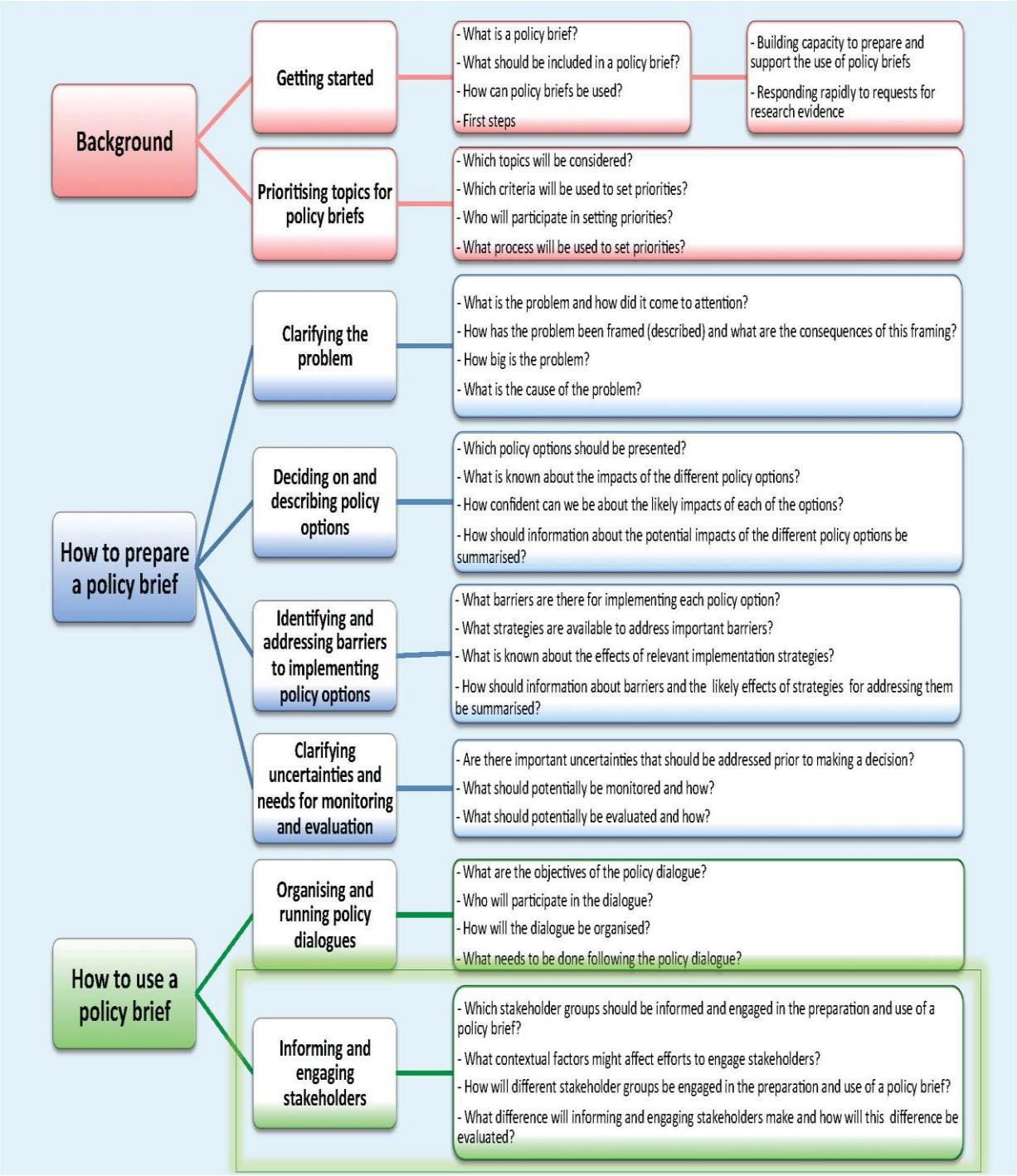
8. Informing and engaging stakeholders



Summary

The engagement of stakeholders can help to ensure that appropriate policies are developed and implemented. The following questions could be used to guide decisions about how to inform and engage individuals, groups or organisations with an interest in deliberations about health policies in the preparation and use of a policy brief:

- Which stakeholder groups should be informed and engaged in the preparation and use of a policy brief?
- What contextual factors might affect efforts to engage stakeholders?
- How will different stakeholder groups be engaged in the preparation and use of a policy brief?
- What difference will informing and engaging stakeholders make and how will this difference be evaluated?

A systematic approach should be used when making decisions about the objectives of informing and engaging stakeholders, about which stakeholders to inform and engage, about how to inform and engage them, and about how to use their input. A worksheet for planning how to inform and engage stakeholders is provided in the 'Additional resources' section of this guide. This worksheet addresses the main considerations described in this guide.

Evaluating the guide

As you use the guides, please complete the evaluation form included in the 'Additional resources' section of this guide so that the guides can be improved.

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Background

Engaging stakeholders in deliberations about health policies can help to ensure that:

- Their concerns are heard and taken into account
- The problems are analysed, described and perceived correctly
- Appropriate solutions are identified
- Important barriers to implementing solutions are considered
- Effective implementation strategies are identified
- Appropriate values are used when balancing the pros and cons of options
- Policy decisions are appropriate, understood and acceptable

Informing and engaging stakeholders effectively can result in better policy decisions, the improved implementation of policies, and better healthcare and better outcomes. The World Health Organization's Declaration of Alma Ata states that: "The people have the right and duty to participate individually and collectively in the planning and implementation of their health care."[1] Stakeholder involvement, therefore, can be viewed as a goal in itself by encouraging participative democracy, public accountability, and transparency.

However, engaging stakeholders may not always be helpful. Poorly planned and implemented efforts to engage stakeholders can create mistrust, waste people's time, and undermine future attempts at engagement.[2] Engagement without clear objectives may anger participants and fail to add benefit to the policymaking process or outcomes. Care should also be taken not to engage stakeholders for inappropriate reasons. Sometimes, for example, they may be engaged simply to legitimise decisions that have already been made behind closed doors, and their involvement may mislead them into believing they are able to affect the decision. Similarly, stakeholders should not be engaged simply to allow others to avoid responsibility for difficult decisions.

Efforts to engage stakeholders should respect the time they have available and the value of their potential contributions. This means that there should be a clear purpose; that their input is considered; and that the way in which they are able to influence decisions is made clear.

Different circumstances require different levels of engagement and these have been conceptualised in a number of ways. The "spectrum of participation" developed by the International Association for Public Participation (IAP2) emphasises public participation in decisions made by governments or private organisations, [3] particularly in situations where the government retains final authority but may choose to inform, consult, involve, or collaborate with others during the process of making decisions. Its deliberate horizontal arrangement indicates that there is a range of options to be considered rather than a hierarchy of choices, and it describes what the public (or stakeholders) can expect at each level. An adaptation of the IAP2 spectrum for decisions about how to involve stakeholders in the preparation and use of policy briefs is shown in Table 8.1.[3]

Little rigorous evaluation of the effects of different strategies for engaging stakeholders in health policy development is available.[4, 5, 6] However, substantial experience and anecdotal evidence can be used to inform decisions about how to involve stakeholders in

policymaking. To ensure that stakeholders are better informed and effectively engaged, systematic consideration should be given to identifying which stakeholders have an interest in a policy brief, the degree to which they should be engaged in preparing and using the brief, how to inform and engage them, and how their input will be used.

Table 8.1 Degrees of involvement in the preparation and use of a policy brief*

	Information	Consultation	Involvement	Collaboration	Delegation
Objectives of stakeholder involvement	To provide stakeholders with information derived from a policy brief in order to help them understand the problem and proposed solutions	To obtain specific types of input from stakeholders, feedback on the policy brief, or input into deliberations about the policy brief, or their views and values related to the decision that the policy brief is intended to inform	To work directly with stakeholders in preparing a policy brief to ensure that their views are understood and considered, or to engage them in deliberations about the problem and the proposed solutions described in a policy brief	To partner with stakeholders throughout the process of preparing a policy brief and its use in the policy development process	To give control over the preparation of some or all of the policy brief and its use in the policy development process
What stakeholders can expect	To be kept informed	To be kept informed, listened to, and provided with feedback on how their input has influenced the policy brief or subsequent deliberations and decisions	To work together in the preparation of the policy brief or subsequent deliberations	To be looked to for advice which will be incorporated as far as possible	To make decisions
Ways of achieving the objective	One-way information dissemination such as: The policy brief itself A website Tailored information Press releases Press conferences Interactive media Presentations	Two-way communication which involves seeking input, listening, and the exchange of views. This may take the form of: Written comments Interactive media Question and answer sessions Open phone lines Interviews Focus groups Surveys Public hearings	Interactive discussion and dialogue which supplement internal decision-making processes: Workshops Working groups A policy dialogue or other deliberative processes	Stakeholder representatives "at the table", and active as team members in the preparation and use of the policy brief. Stakeholders are not involved in final decisions but will be involved in: Advisory groups Task forces Consensus processes	Decisions by a group or organisation with specific authorisation: Delegation of authority to make decisions about the policy brief or subsequent uses of the policy brief

* Adapted from IAP2 and Bruns.[3, 7]

Which stakeholder groups should be informed and engaged in the preparation and use of a policy brief?

Careful consideration should be given to deciding which stakeholder groups should be informed and engaged in the preparation and use of a policy brief. Before starting, it may be useful to consider how much effort this warrants.

How much effort should you put into identifying and engaging stakeholders?

Answering the four questions in Box 8.1 can help to determine how much effort should be expended on identifying and engaging the stakeholders.

Box 8.1 Questions to clarify how much effort should go into engaging stakeholders*

1. **Can anything change as a result of engaging stakeholders?**
   If nothing can change by informing or engaging participants it is may be better to limit engagement efforts to simple, passive dissemination strategies.

2. **Is there a demand or interest from stakeholders to be informed or engaged?**

3. **Do you have the time and resources to engage stakeholders effectively?**
   Engaging stakeholders within only a short period of time is challenging and should be avoided even if it is possible to establish the appropriate processes. Stakeholder engagement can be time-consuming and requires sufficient resources, time, skilled staff, as well as a sufficiently large budget. Preparing high-quality information tailored to target audiences will also place demands on available resources.

4. **Are there important risks that need to be managed?**
   Like any activity, efforts to engage stakeholders entail risks. These should be considered early in the process both because they may militate against investing substantially in efforts to involve stakeholders and because they will allow for better risk planning management. Risks related to engaging stakeholders include:
   - Resource wastage
   - Diminished credibility
   - Damaging the reputations of those who are engaged
   - Damaging relationships between those who are engaged

5. **What are the risks of not engaging stakeholders?**
   Not informing or engaging stakeholders will also entail risks. A lack of stakeholder input, for example, may impede the implementation of appropriate options or result in poorly-informed decisions.

*Partially derived from People and Participation, Involve 20052
(see also www.peopleandparticipation.net/display/ProcessPlanner/Scope+Introduction)

Categories of stakeholders and the reasons for engaging them

The identification of stakeholders can be assisted by considering which different categories of stakeholders should be informed and engaged, and the reasons for doing so. Such categories may include:

- Public officials – including elected officials, political staff and civil servants in different government departments (e.g. health, finance, education, labour), and those in agencies at the national and sub-national level of government
- Managers – in districts or regions, healthcare institutions (e.g. hospitals), non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and other relevant types of organisations
- The public at large
- Sections of the public – particularly those affected by the problem and policy options
- Health workers – including professionals, professional organisations, and non-professionals
- Unions – including professional organisations representing the interests of their members, and other trade unions
- Special interest groups formed for the purpose of putting forward the views and interests shared by their members
- NGOs – on both a national and international level
- Donors and international agencies, such as the WHO
- Individuals, groups or organisations with particular expertise and experience (e.g. researchers, technical experts, and people with relevant practical experience)

For each category of stakeholder it may be helpful to consider the potential reasons for engaging particular organisations, groups or individuals in the preparation and use of a policy brief. The main reasons are likely to be to the need to:

- Inform them
- Obtain specific types of input
- Engage them in deliberations about the problem and the options to address this
- Reach a consensus or make a decision

In addition, there may be other reasons that are external to the specific policy issue, such as the need to:

- Improve governance, transparency, accountability, social cohesion and social justice
- Build capacity and learning

The reasons for engagement and the degree of engagement desired will vary across the different kinds of stakeholders. Similarly, the amount and type of information needed and the importance of engaging certain people in the deliberations will also vary. Therefore the way that is best suited to engaging different stakeholders will depend on the particular circumstances. A matrix such as the one in Table 8.2 can be used as the basis for mapping out the reasons for engaging the different kinds of stakeholders. It may also be useful when beginning the process of identifying the key organisations, groups and individuals within each category.

Table 8.2 Different stakeholders categories and the reasons for engaging them

	Reasons for engagement				
	To obtain input into		To inform	To engage	To reach a consensus
	The policy brief	Deliberations			
Public officials					
Managers					
The public at large					
Sections of the public					
Health workers					
Unions					
Special interest groups					
NGOs					
Donors and international agencies					
Experts					

Questions such as the ones listed below can help to clarify further which organisations, groups or individuals to engage from each of the above categories:

- Who has access to the types of information and evidence that is needed to clarify the problem, the options for addressing the problem, the barriers to implementing those options and the implementation strategies?
- Who has practical experience related to the problem and the possible solutions?
- Who has been engaged in efforts to address the problem in the past?
- Who has *not* been engaged and should have been?
- Who will be affected?
- Who is influential?
- Who can obstruct a decision if they are not engaged?
- Who runs the organisations with relevant interests?
- Who is directly responsible for decisions regarding the options and their implementation?

How should stakeholders be selected?

After such questions have been answered, stakeholders should be selected from the list of participants who could potentially be involved in the policy brief process.

Some strategies to involve stakeholders require little or no selectivity and may only require the dissemination of information to the general public. However, because time and resources are always limited, the establishment of priorities is advisable. Even a very broadly focused dissemination approach may require setting priorities related, for example, to how much effort should be spent on informing those who are illiterate, speak different languages, or who live in different parts of the country. To be effective, information may need to be tailored to specific audiences and it may therefore be important to determine which groups will be most in need of tailored information. In general, it is better to consider such priorities explicitly in order to maximise the likelihood that the time and resources available will be used efficiently.

Finding the right participants is important in order to ensure that the deliberative processes work well. It may also be essential as a way of ensuring that these processes have legitimacy and credibility.

The aim of selecting participants for participation in deliberative processes should be to:

- Involve those who are appropriate to the particular process, including those who feel that they have a stake
- Ensure that people are not excluded simply because they are outside familiar networks

Certain stakeholder input, such as polls or other kinds of surveys, may require the use of representative samples to ensure greater accuracy. The use of representative samples may also enhance the legitimacy of the deliberative processes.

Special effort may be needed to prevent unintentional exclusion of people and organisations as this could undermine the legitimacy and credibility of the deliberative processes and reinforce existing power inequalities and access to resources.

The following issues should be considered when deciding which stakeholders to include in the deliberative processes: [2]

Who decides who will be included and how – For some processes, the selection of participants can be a politically charged issue. If this is the case, it may be useful to ensure that the steps undertaken are done so as transparently as possible. This will make it easier to answer questions related to issues such as who was responsible for the selection decisions made, what the criteria or reasons were when selecting the participants, and the processes used during the selection. The actual number of people included in the deliberative processes should not be an arbitrary one – instead, this should be based on an understanding of the purpose and context of the process itself.

The usual people – People should be included because they are the right people. Previous involvement – or the lack of it – should not be used as a reason for exclusion or inclusion

The range of opinions – There may be good reasons for including rather than excluding those who have conflicting opinions. These may be the very people who most need to be engaged. Participation may allow them to gain a degree of ownership of the process and, by doing so, it is possible that they will be more likely to support any final outcome – or at least be less inclined to undermine it.

Conflicting interests – Competing interests are common and cannot be avoided entirely. Health professionals, for example, will have a particular interest in their own profession and in their own particular working conditions. These interests may sometimes compete with the interest they have in doing what is best for patients and communities. Apparent conflicts of interest are also common and occur when a person's interests lead to their objectivity being questioned by others. If the objective of a deliberative processes is to reach a consensus or make a decision then conflicts of interest should be disclosed using a structured form and it may be appropriate to exclude or restrict the involvement of certain organisations or individuals.[8]

What's in it for them? – It is important to consider what stakeholders may want to get out of a deliberative process and what could prevent them from participating. If everyone's motivations are clear, there will be less confusion and people are more likely to be satisfied with the outcomes.

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What contextual factors might affect efforts to engage stakeholders?

The methods used to engage stakeholders should be appropriate to the context of the engagement. Understanding the wider context is important to ensure that efforts to inform and engage stakeholders:

- Link with other relevant activities
- Do not duplicate other activities
- Build on previous experience
- Are responsive to stakeholder needs and sensitivities
- Are relevant

Important characteristics of the context should be considered, including the decision-making environment, any relevant history, the characteristics of the stakeholders, and other relevant activities. A consideration of the following factors can help to guide decisions about how best to engage different stakeholders:

- The interest and commitment that key decision-makers have to engage stakeholders
- How the engagement of stakeholders fits within the relevant decision-making system
- Past efforts to address the same problem
- Other relevant past activities that may affect discussions or how the information is perceived such as whether the decision-makers or stakeholders have any previous experience that relates to the option for addressing the problem
- Sections of the public which are unlikely to be engaged but ought to be (e.g. disadvantaged populations)
- Existing relationships between key stakeholders (e.g. antagonism or close alliances), including relationships with potential facilitators and relevant decision-makers
- How much experience key stakeholders have of deliberative processes. Those with more experience, skills and confidence, for example, could dominate the processes. Different processes could be used to mitigate this: stakeholders with more and less experience could attend different breakout sessions, and extra training and support could be given to those with less experience
- The cultural diversity of stakeholders which may affect people's willingness to meet together, or affect the way they participate in discussions (e.g. those with formal committee experience may expect a chair and formal debating procedures)
- Language (e.g. it may be important to prepare information in different languages or to ensure that the deliberative processes can accommodate different languages)
- Barriers that may affect the way people work together (e.g. the role of gender)
- Other relevant recent, current or planned activities to address the same or related problems and which might affect the feasibility or acceptability of the solutions, or which might engage the same participants. An awareness of such activities can help to ensure that information is shared appropriately, undesirable duplication is avoided, and that the activities and outputs are coordinated, if appropriate

How will different stakeholder groups be engaged in the preparation and use of the policy brief?

As suggested in Table 8.1, different kinds of objectives require different ways to engage stakeholders. These approaches will probably need to be adapted to the specific contexts in which they are being applied. The different approaches to informing and engaging stakeholders listed below are described in the 'Additional resources' section of this guide. These can serve as a menu for deciding which approaches to apply to the different constellations of stakeholders in Table 8.2. Sources of additional information regarding different approaches are also listed in the 'Additional resources' section.

Ways to inform stakeholders

- Disseminating a policy brief
- A website
- Tailored information
- Press releases
- Press conferences
- Presentations

Ways to consult stakeholders

- Written comments
- Interactive media
- Question-and-answer sessions
- Open phone lines
- Interviews, focus groups and surveys
- Public hearings

Ways to involve stakeholders

- Workshops
- Working groups
- A policy dialogue or other deliberative processes

Ways to collaborate with stakeholders

- Advisory groups and task forces
- Consensus processes

Ways to delegate to stakeholders

- Delegation of authority

Workshop materials and a presentation on engaging and informing stakeholders are provided in the 'Additional resources' section of this guide. Further guidance is given in the SUPPORT Tool on engaging the public in evidence-informed policymaking.

What difference will informing and engaging stakeholders make and how will this be evaluated?

Evaluation is an integral part of stakeholder involvement. Planning the evaluation in advance is important to ensure that the necessary data are collected and that the evaluations are able to inform decisions about any necessary adjustments to the approaches used.

Measurable success criteria that reflect the objectives of informing and engaging stakeholders should be developed. The evaluation should address whether:

- The intended outputs were delivered and appropriate
- The intended outcomes were achieved
- The level of involvement was appropriate
- The approaches that were used were appropriate and worked as expected
- The stakeholders were informed and engaged to an appropriate extent
- The input was appropriate and whether it was used appropriately
- The efforts were worthwhile relative to what was achieved

The evaluation should include a basic description of what was done, including the objectives, how stakeholders were targeted, and the approaches used to do this.

Collecting feedback from a range of stakeholders is likely to be important since their assessment of the efforts and the extent to which they succeeded may vary.

The evaluation can also help with risk management by raising awareness of the challenges and issues related to monitoring.

To further develop our understanding of how best to inform and engage stakeholders in the preparation and use of policy briefs, it is important that the evaluations are undertaken and shared. These should include an assessment of the lessons learned, examples of successes, and an understanding of things that may have gone wrong. As part of this learning process, obtaining feedback about this guide is also important and we encourage you to send us your thoughts based on your own experiences, so that we can improve it for future use.

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Additional resources

Evaluation form

A form for evaluating the SURE guides

Glossary

A glossary of terms used in the guides

Worksheet for planning how to inform and engage stakeholders

Worksheet for planning how to inform and engage stakeholders

Approaches to informing and engaging stakeholders

Descriptions of the different ways of informing and engaging stakeholders

Guides to informing and engaging stakeholders

General guides

Oxman AD, Lewin S, Lavis JN, Fretheim A. SUPPORT Tools for evidence-informed health Policymaking (STP). 15. Engaging the public in evidence-informed policymaking. Health Res Policy Syst. 2009; 7(Suppl 1):S15. www.health-policy-systems.com/content/7/S1/S15

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Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). Citizens as Partners: OECD Handbook on Information, Consultation and Public Participation in Policy-Making. Paris: OECD, 2001. www.oecdbookshop.org/oecd/display.asp?K=5LMQCR2KHGLV&lang=EN&sort=sort_date%2Fd&stem=true&sf1=Title&st1=Citizens+as+partners&sf3=SubjectCode&st4=not+E4+or+E5+or+P5&sf4=SubVersionCode&ds=Citizens+as+partners%3B+All+Subjects%3B+&m=5&dc=8&plang=en

Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). Promises and Problems of E-Democracy: Challenges of online citizen engagement. Paris: OECD, 2003. http://www.oecdbookshop.org/oecd/display.asp?sf1=identifiers&st1=9789264019492

Ways to inform stakeholders
SURE guides for preparing and using policy briefs

Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC). Communications Toolkit. Swindon, UK: ESRC, 2010. http://www.esrc.ac.uk/funding-and-guidance/tools-and-resources/impact-toolkit/tools/index.aspx

National Environment Research Council (NERC). Engaging the public with your research. Swindon, UK: NERC, 2011. Available at: http://www.nerc.ac.uk/publications/guidance/comyourideas.asp

Ways to consult stakeholders
Audit Commission. Listen Up: Effective Community Consultation. Abingdon, UK: Audit Commission, 1999. www.audit-commission.gov.uk/SiteCollectionDocuments/AuditCommissionReports/NationalStudies/listenup.pdf

Ways to engage stakeholders
SURE Guide 7. Organising and running policy dialogues.

Involve. People and Participation. How to put citizens at the heart of decision making. Involve and Together We Can, London: Involve, 2005. Available at: http://www.involve.org.uk/people-and-participation/

Involve. Making a Difference: A guide to evaluating public participation in central government. London: Involve, 2007. Available at: http://www.involve.org.uk/evaluation-guide

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Cabinet Office. Viewfinder: A Policy Makers Guide to Public Involvement. London: Cabinet Office, 2002. www.nationalschool.gov.uk/policyhub/docs/Viewfinder.pdf

Workshop materials and a presentation
Guides for a workshop and a PowerPoint presentation on informing and engaging stakeholders

SUPPORT Tool on engaging the public in evidence-informed policymaking
Questions to consider when informing and engaging stakeholders in evidence-informed policymaking

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