Community needs analysis

Theme B

Community needs analysis

For community engagement to become more proactive and effective, research participants suggested that being able to complete detailed and accurate community needs analysis was key.

While this process can be assisted by collating existing data, this has to be coupled with direct conversations on the ground, to drill down into specific community wants and needs.

Desired and suggested elements of best practice included:

Integrate community needs analysis early in the project lifecycle
- Begin community needs analysis during the business case development phase, not after mobilisation.
- Embed analysis into environmental and social management plans to ensure alignment with community priorities from the outset.

Combine desk-based research with direct engagement
- Use publicly available data sources such as:
  - ONS statistics
  - Indices of deprivation
  - Local Authority Plans
  - Crime statistics
  - Network Rail suicide hotspot data
- Supplement this with on-the-ground engagement:
  - Visit project areas to gain contextual understanding.
  - Observe physical conditions and community dynamics.
  - Conduct outreach to gather lived experiences.

Prioritise localised and context-specific analysis
- Recognise that even neighbouring communities may have different needs.
- Avoid one-size-fits-all approaches; tailor analysis to local demographics, challenges, and aspirations.
- Use data such as:
  - NEET rates
  - Employment levels
  - Travel confidence and SEN barriers

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Community needs analysis

Engage and empower local communities

- Build relationships with local residents, community leaders, and grassroots organisations.
- Use inclusive engagement methods beyond formal consultations:
  - Community events
  - Informal conversations
  - School and youth group visits
- Ensure communities are active participants, not passive recipients.

Collaborate with strategic local partners

- Identify and work with:
  - Community rail partnerships
  - Schools (e.g. for STEM programmes)
  - Charities and VCSEs
  - Environmental groups
- Approach partners with a collaborative mindset:
  - "We're here for X time, with Y resources—how can we work together?"

Promote knowledge sharing across projects

- Document findings and activities from each project.
- Make this information accessible to future teams working in the same area.
- Encourage inter-organisational collaboration to avoid duplication and maximise impact.

Include rail-specific operational data

- Enhance community needs analysis by integrating data such as:
  - Passenger usage statistics
  - Trespass incidents
  - Violence against staff
  - Infrastructure details
- Use this to build a rail-relevant picture of community priorities.

Establish formal community needs analysis frameworks

- Develop structured tools and templates for analysis, such as:
  - Social value plans
  - Local area profiles with schools, parks, charities, etc.
- Ensure staff have access to area-specific resources to guide engagement and partnership working.

Use technology and platforms for data analysis

- Explore platforms like Loop/RSVT or Impact to:
  - Input demographic and rail-related data
  - Identify top community priorities
  - Justify actions in tenders and funding applications.

Community needs analysis

"Check your analysis with those that know, the people on the ground. Make those connections."

"Approach partners to say, 'we're here for this amount of time, we've got these resources, how can we work with you?'"

"Desktop research can be useful, but the bulk needs to be based on direct conversations, going out and seeing people in their areas. You can't get a true picture without doing that."

"Information and knowledge sharing should not be controversial or problematic; it leads to mutual benefits for the industry."

Why is community needs analysis important to the rail industry?

Effective community needs analysis ensures that rail projects are rooted in a deep understanding of the people and places they affect. By integrating this analysis early in the project lifecycle, during business case development rather than after mobilisation, rail industry partners can align their plans with the real priorities of local communities from the outset. This leads to better designed projects, fewer delays, and stronger long term value.

A robust needs analysis blends desk based data, such as deprivation indices, crime statistics, employment levels, and rail specific indicators like trespass or passenger usage, with direct engagement on the ground. Visiting project areas, observing local conditions, and speaking with organisations like community rail partnerships and other local groups provides vital context that no dataset alone can capture. This is particularly important because even neighbouring communities often have different demographics, challenges and aspirations.

For the rail industry, which operates across diverse geographical areas, this localised insight helps shape social value plans, environmental and social management strategies, and partnership opportunities with schools, charities, and community groups. It also empowers communities to become active participants rather than passive recipients.

Successful community needs analysis strengthens relationships, supports safer and more responsive rail operations, and ensures investments deliver meaningful, measurable benefits to the people they are meant to serve.

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Community needs analysis

Case Study:

Transpennine Route Upgrade community needs analysis

The Transpennine Route Upgrade (TPRU) has embedded community needs analysis at the heart of its strategy to ensure long-term social value across the North of England. Before construction began, TPRU teams conducted extensive engagement with local communities along the Manchester–Leeds–York corridor. This included surveys and focus groups to understand local priorities, with feedback from early engagement helping to shape project designs and public consultations.

Using tools like the Rail Social Value Tool and the WELLBY Assessment, TPRU identified key needs: employment and skills development, mental health support, improved public spaces, environmental protection, and reduced disruption during construction. These insights shaped the project's four sustainability pillars: Northern jobs, environmental enhancement, customer satisfaction, and community collaboration.

The TRU Community Fund, managed by Neighbourly, offers grants up to £20,000 to local organisations within five miles of the route, supporting projects that enhance community facilities and green spaces. The education programme has reached over 100,000 young people, while volunteering initiatives have generated 25,000 hours of community service. Overall, TPRU has invested £813 million locally – whilst generating £2.2 billion in social value for the region.

By aligning infrastructure improvements with targeted social investment, TPRU ensures its legacy extends beyond rail upgrades, delivering cleaner transport, stronger communities, and lasting regional benefits.

Community needs analysis

Asset-Based Community Development

Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) is a participatory approach to community engagement that focuses on identifying and mobilising the existing strengths, skills, and resources within a community, rather than concentrating on its needs or deficits. This method empowers communities to take ownership of change by recognising their own assets – such as local organisations, individuals, networks, and physical spaces – and using them as the foundation for development and collaboration.

It can be productive in terms of conducting community needs analysis as it focuses on the positive and how this can be built upon further, while also addressing any gaps in services or support.

In the context of rail industry projects, ABCD can be a powerful tool for fostering meaningful community engagement. By working with partners such as community rail, rail organisations can tap into local knowledge and relationships to co-create initiatives that reflect community aspirations. For example, station adoption schemes, educational outreach, and volunteering programmes can be shaped around the talents and interests of local people, enhancing both relevance and impact.

ABCD also supports the delivery of social value by ensuring that rail projects contribute to wider community wellbeing. When communities are actively involved in shaping rail services and infrastructure, they are more likely to feel a sense of ownership and pride, which in turn strengthens social cohesion and trust in the rail industry.

By embedding ABCD principles into engagement strategies, rail organisations can move beyond consultation to genuine collaboration, creating railways that are not only functional but also socially enriching and rooted in local communities.

You can find out more about the principles of ABCD **here**.

Various social value reporting tools now incorporate the function to complete detailed community needs analyses of areas as part of initial desk-based research. One such example is Impact Reporting, which is used by some community rail partnerships and station groups to record, monitor and evaluate their activities and impact.

The Impact Tool, using AI technology, allows you to select an area/location and then receive data on issues including health deprivation, accessibility of essential services, household income, educational attainment, living environment, and crime. Analysing this data, the tool provides a full report offering a breakdown of data sources, key findings, comparisons to national standards, key social, economic and environmental needs, and suggested activities to tackle the most prevalent issues.

You can find out more about Impact Reporting **here**.