Activating Survey

An activating survey is an open participation method in which residents are asked about their opinions, experiences, and attitudes. At the same time, they are encouraged to become actively involved and contribute to the development of solutions within their neighborhood or local environment.

Participation Depth	Inform
Project Phase	Onboarding
Goals	Understanding & Gathering Perspectives
Format	Analogue
Duration	1 - 3 Hours
Target Group	Directly Affected
Group Size	Small Group up to 15
Characteristics	Structured, Activating

GOAL OF THE METHOD

The goal is to identify residents' concerns, wishes, and needs while collecting concrete suggestions for improvement. The method also aims to encourage participants to represent their interests and become involved in future participation processes.

PROCEDURE

Preparation

1. Define objectives and framework
Clearly determine:

- Why is the survey being conducted?
- What information is needed?
- How will the results be used?
- Which topics should be discussed?
- Which people should be reached?
- Which groups are often underrepresented in participation processes?
- Which potential conflicts or sensitive topics exist?

It is helpful to decide in advance:

- Which questions can be openly discussed
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Which conditions, regulations, or limitations already exist

These aspects should be communicated transparently.

2. Define the area and target groups
Determine where the survey will take place.

The selected area should:

- remain manageable from an organizational perspective
- reflect a variety of perspectives
- include relevant places and affected groups

Consider:

- Where do people spend their time?
- Which locations are suitable for conversations?
- Which groups are difficult to reach?

Common approaches include:

- door-to-door conversations
- surveys in public spaces
- conversations near schools, supermarkets, or public transport stops

3. Gather background information
Before conducting the survey, it is useful to gain an initial understanding of the area.

Possible sources include:

- neighborhood walks
- conversations with local initiatives or community organizations
- existing data or planning documents

Pay particular attention to:

- meeting places

- conflict areas
- barriers
- different uses of public space
- social structures

4. Prepare an interview guide
Conversations should remain open and encourage people to share their experiences.

Suitable opening questions:

- “How do you experience this neighborhood today?”
- “What works well here?”
- “What challenges do you face in your daily life?”
- “What changes would you like to see?”
- “Are there places you avoid? Why?”
- “What should definitely be preserved?”

Avoid:

- leading questions (“Don’t you agree that...?”)
- technical jargon
- complicated wording
- yes/no questions as the main conversation format

Also prepare:

- a short explanation of the project
- answers to potential questions
- strategies for dealing with criticism or frustration

Execution

1. Written announcement
Inform residents about the survey in advance.

Important information includes:

- Who is conducting the survey?
- Why is it being conducted?
- How will the results be used?
- How long does a conversation take?
- Is participation voluntary?

Possible communication channels:

- letters
- posters
- social media
- local institutions

2. Personal approach
Conversations usually take place directly within the participants' living environment.

A respectful and open introduction is essential.

Example:

"Hello, we are currently speaking with residents about their experiences and wishes for the neighborhood. Would you have about 20–30 minutes for a conversation?"

Important considerations:

- be friendly and approachable
- do not pressure anyone into participating
- respect refusals
- communicate clearly and understandably

3. Conducting the conversations
Conversations follow the interview guide but should feel natural and conversational.

Interviewers should listen actively and allow space for personal experiences and additional topics.

Important principles:

- do not interrupt
- do not judge responses
- ask follow-up questions
- take uncertainties and concerns seriously

Helpful follow-up questions:

- “Could you describe that in more detail?”
- “How does this affect your daily life?”
- “How long have you experienced this situation?”
- “What would be a good solution from your perspective?”

Conversations typically last around 20–30 minutes.

Ideally, two people work together:

- one person leads the conversation
- one person documents the responses

4. Invitation to further participation

At the end of the conversation, participants should be invited to follow-up activities or future participation opportunities.

Important:

- explain clearly what happens next
- avoid creating unrealistic expectations
- communicate future participation options transparently

Example:

“The results will be collected and presented at a public event where the topics can be discussed further.”

Evaluation

1. Organize and cluster topics
After the conversations, statements and observations are collected and structured.

Possible categories include:

- mobility and transport
- safety
- quality of public spaces
- green spaces
- social issues
- accessibility and barriers

Important considerations:

- identify recurring themes
- preserve differing perspectives
- acknowledge conflicts and contradictions

2. Analyze the results
Consider:

- Which topics were mentioned most frequently?
- Which needs or conflicts became visible?
- Which ideas and suggestions emerged?
- Which groups or perspectives may still be missing?

3. Public feedback
The results should be presented publicly.

It should become clear:

- what was heard
- which topics will be addressed further
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what the next steps are

The event should encourage dialogue rather than simply presenting findings.

Source: https://mobilitaetsplanung-hessen.de/methodenkoffer-partizipative-planung/

WHEN USEFUL?

starting a longer participation process

planning changes in a neighborhood or public space

little is known about residents' needs and perspectives

different interests or conflicts need to be identified

people should be reached directly in their everyday environment

traditional participation events attract only a limited audience

WHEN NOT USEFUL?

only quantitative data is required

the study area is very large and resources are limited

there is insufficient capacity for analysis and follow-up

TIPS

- Make a particular effort to include people who rarely participate in public engagement processes.
- Allow sufficient time for conversations and follow-up work.
- Respectful and patient communication is essential.
- The method works best when participants see that their contributions are taken
- seriously and lead to further action.

NOT SUITABLE FOR

- decisions must be made very quickly
- there is no genuine scope for action or influence

View online: https://methoden.urbankit.de/en/methods/aktivierende-befragung