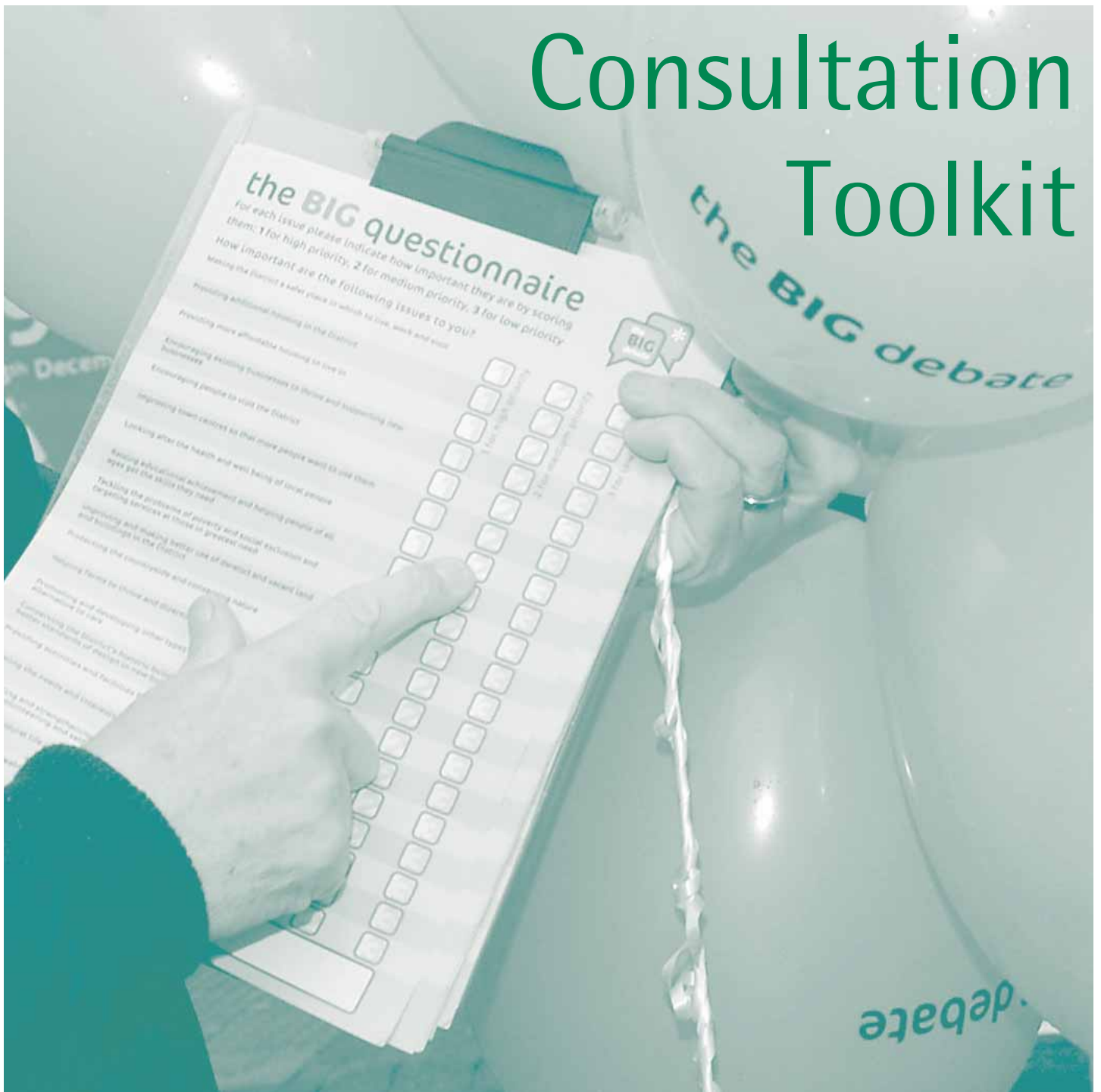




STAFFORDSHIRE
moorlands
DISTRICT COUNCIL
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Consultation Toolkit



The Council's Guide to consultation – how to consult for those wishing to undertake consultation and for those being consulted.

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Introduction



Welcome to the Staffordshire Moorlands District Council Consultation Toolkit. This toolkit is the Council's guide on how to consult for those wishing to undertake consultation. It is also a guide for those participating in consultation exercises in conjunction with the Council.

This document should be read in conjunction with the Staffordshire Moorlands District Council Communications Strategy and the Local Strategic Partnership's Community Engagement Strategy.

Within the Communications Strategy, the Council sets out its key objectives and policies in relation to its consultation activities. This toolkit effectively translates those principles into reality. The toolkit, therefore, draws on information, such as best practice and standards that will hopefully assist anyone involved in the planning or undertaking of consultation exercises and activities.

The toolkit does not presume to instruct people on what they should do in terms of consultation, rather it provides a summary of some of the approaches available and which can be considered by those undertaking consultation activities.

The intention of this toolkit is to bring to life the principles agreed by the Council. It is also intended for a range of audiences, including residents, stakeholders, partners, and employees of the Council. Different groups and individuals, therefore, will take different things from it, and some sections may not be relevant to everyone. It should, therefore, not necessarily be read cover to cover, but can be dipped into depending on the issue.

We hope it is useful and also that it assists you in developing robust and meaningful consultation processes, as well as providing information for those you are either consulting or hoping to consult.

Mark Bailey
Policy Manager

Why Do We Consult?

Consultation with the public and stakeholders is now an integral part of how local authorities operate. The concept of the autonomous local authority is now long gone. In its place is an organisation that aims to listen to the public it serves and take their views into account when making decisions or when making changes to the services delivered locally. The Government's developing agenda based on involving the community in the running of local government generally is a reflection of these changes – some of which have been around for many years now.

Staffordshire Moorlands District Council is no exception to this. Our aim as a Council is to gather the views of our residents and partners wherever possible when it comes to making decisions on behalf of the district. We also wish to engage fully with local people in a genuine two-way dialogue. To achieve these aims, therefore, we must have robust methods in place to both collect data and also to feed back our findings and allow further input from the public we both serve and represent.

To this end, therefore, we have set out our key aims and objectives for public consultation, together with a series of actions focused on improving the way we consult in the Council's Communications Strategy. In addition, we have played a major part in the development of the Local Strategic Partnership's Community Engagement Strategy, displaying our commitment to consult and work with our partners and the various communities of the Staffordshire Moorlands across a range of topics.

In short, we do not wish to impose our services on people and communities. Instead, we will always look to establish what it is that local areas want and need before embarking on any changes to how we operate. This is entirely in keeping with our commitment to place the electors and service users of the district at the forefront of what we do as a Council. Our five key priorities as a Council – improved community safety, improved health, a protected environment, a strong economy and decent and affordable housing – were chosen because they had been identified by the public as their priorities in a succession of consultation exercises.

What is Consultation?

Consultation is the mechanism we use to establish what the local community is thinking and what it wishes the Council to do on its behalf. Depending on the issue at hand, we can undertake consultation in a number of ways, and this toolkit covers the options available. Different methods are available to tackle different issues and to produce different data. It all depends on what the researcher is looking to find out.

In addition to different methods being available, the overall approach taken to public involvement will depend on what level of involvement from the public the Council is seeking. Based on Sherry Arnstein's 'Ladder of Participation', this involvement can vary from simply providing information on a particular subject, to asking for views or opinions on an issue or process, to actually involving members of the public and others in the decision making process itself. Consultation tends to focus on listening to the views of the public and shaping decision making based on those views, but this can vary depending, again, on the subject at hand.

A mix of approaches, both in terms of methods of consultation and also in terms of the level of involvement of citizens, is therefore often required, especially when dealing with complex issues or decisions.

Guidelines for Consultation

This toolkit provides a guide for those undertaking consultation on behalf of the Council, and it also provides information for those being consulted for them to see clearly what we do in terms of our consultation activities, and also what is expected of them if they are asked to participate. As said, it should be viewed primarily as a reference document, to be used as appropriate.

When we consult, we must also be aware of the guidelines in place within the Council. These guidelines exist to ensure that we consult effectively and that we do not produce findings that are either misleading or useless. In addition, we have to ensure that we do not consult the same people excessively, or, conversely, that we do not consult some people at all.

As a Council, we consult regularly on a range of issues. These may be more 'Corporate' issues, such as consultation on the budget process, or they may be service focused, such as consultations on the use of parks or other leisure facilities. Irrespective of the issue, however, we must seek to adhere to the processes set out in this toolkit, and we must also make sure that all consultations undertaken are known about across the organisation, so as to avoid potentially difficult issues such as duplication of effort or consulting the same people time after time (leading to 'consultation fatigue').

To this end, therefore, all consultation processes must be highlighted in advance and included as part of the Council's Consultation Diary. In order to be included in the diary (which will also be available online for public consumption), those employees embarking on a consultation exercise should inform the Policy Manager, in the first instance, of what they are planning to do. In

particular, the following information should be sent to the Policy Manager: -

- **Title of Consultation** - what is the consultation called?
- **Lead Officer** - name of the officer leading the consultation
- **Description of the issues being consulted on**
- **Timescale for the consultation (start date, end date, time given over for analysis, date when results will be published)**
- **Groups/individuals to be consulted** – we need to know what demographic groups are being consulted, so we have information on how old respondents are, what their background is, and where they live
- **Sample Size** – it may be necessary to detail how the sample was chosen
- **Methodology** (should include drafts of any questionnaires or interview questions)
- **How will the information be fed back?** - feedback is a vital part of the consultation process, and this should be set out clearly, together with any plans for an ongoing dialogue with those being consulted
- **Proposed outcomes for the research, i.e. what will it add to the organisation?**
- **Any other information you feel to be relevant** – this could include tips or advice for others to make use of when undertaking their consultation exercise(s).

This information will be of use for a number of reasons. We will store this information as part of the Diary and also we will include it on the Consultation Database, held centrally in the organisation. We can therefore easily see what is happening in terms of future consultations and also will be able to refer to previous consultations if necessary. This will avoid the possibility of duplication and will allow better co-ordination of consultation activities

within the Council. In addition, we can provide a resource that allows us potentially to learn from past experience, so that we can vary, for example, the methods we use if necessary, if it was found that certain approaches did not work in the past.

In terms of those being consulted, this information will lessen the possibility of over-consultation and also alleviate the danger of consultation fatigue (which occurs when the same people are consulted time and time again). Our overall aim for any consultation is to achieve the highest possible response rates, so as to secure representative and meaningful findings. Best practice dictates that over-consultation does not achieve good response rates over a period of time. In addition, we are seeking to consult as widely as possible with different communities in the Staffordshire Moorlands. Many groups and individuals, including young people, are not consulted as much as others. We are currently working on developing our links with these co-called 'hard to engage' groups, and tracking who we are consulting with in this way will allow us to identify where the gaps are in terms of our consultation work.

As well as informing the Policy Manager, those embarking on consultation exercises are also required to complete a Campaign Management form which can be found on the Intranet.

The importance of feedback in terms of the consultation process cannot be overestimated. This toolkit makes great play of feedback and sets out how it should be undertaken. Again, you are asked to provide a summary of your findings to the Policy Manager as soon as you have completed your analysis and written up the results. In this way, information can be communicated throughout the organisation if necessary and any implications can be fed into the decision making process.

In addition, feedback information should always be provided to those being consulted, so that they are able to find out about the results of the process they have been involved in, and also, importantly, they should have some idea of what impact the consultation had on the decisions eventually taken.

In terms of funding consultation activities, the Authority has taken the decision to set up a Corporate Consultation Budget. The reason for this was to better co-ordinate consultation activities by centralising the funding for these activities. Again, therefore, any consultation exercise should be highlighted with the Policy Manager before any fieldwork is undertaken. In the majority of cases, the cost of consultation will still be met by the relevant service area. In some cases, however, it may be that the corporate budget will have to cover the cost. Again, it does depend on the issue being consulted over. Advice on this can be requested from the Policy Manager.

Finally, public consultation, like any other activity undertaken by the Council, is subject to the performance management process. We have a target in place to track the attendance at public meetings. In addition, we are working with the LSP to develop community engagement and involvement strategies and procedures. It is vital that all employees comply with the guidance set out in this toolkit, so as to meet the performance management requirements set out in the service plans.

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The Toolkit

The Toolkit itself is divided into four main sections:

Section 1:
The Consultation Process

Section 2:
Consultation Standards

Section 3:
Consultation methods –
how to choose the best approach

Section 4:
Developing consultation and involvement

Section 1: The Consultation Process

Stage a:	Planning and Preparation
Stage b:	Providing information for consultees
Stage c:	Analysis of findings
Stage d:	Using the results of consultation
Stage e:	Providing feedback
Stage f:	Evaluating consultation



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Section 1: The Consultation Process

Stage a: Planning and Preparation

Planning and preparation is vital to effective consultation.

The following questions will help identify the right methods to use: -

- Why are we consulting – how will findings help to inform any decision to be taken, and, if there is no decision to be taken, what is the purpose of the consultation?
- Has there already been consultation on this issue?
- What status will the views of those consulted have in the decision making process?
- Who do we wish to consult with?
- What consultation methods will provide the information we are looking for?
- What information do we need to provide to consultees to enable them to participate effectively?
- What timescales are necessary for effective consultation, and how can our planning timescales accommodate these?
- What arrangements need to be made to ensure inclusivity?
- What resources and support are required for this consultation to be effective?
- How will the data be analysed and presented?
- How will the information be fed back to consultees?
- How will the consultation be evaluated?

What is the consultation about?

When planning consultation, it is useful to consider the idea that “all consultation should relate to a decision that you are intending to make, and that can be influenced by the result of that consultation” (the ‘decision principle’).

It may be that proposed consultations can be tested against this idea to make sure that:

- Consultation can be designed so that it will inform the decision to be made
- It is clear to consultees what they can change by responding to the consultation and
- Clear feedback can be given to consultees on how their views were taken into account.

Of course, not all consultations involve a decision – for example, routine surveys of user satisfaction with a service will not always result in major changes. In such cases, however, it should still be clear how the information will be used.

Being clear about why a consultation is taking place can also help to make sure that consultees’ expectations match those of this Authority. Consultees can see what is on offer and what can happen, or not happen, as a result of consultation.

Open-ended consultation can be used in some cases, especially when a local authority is interested in ideas from the public, as opposed to presenting them with a set of predetermined options. There is no right approach to consultation, in short.

Who do you consult?

Who are your users? What do you need to hear from them? It may be that the designer of a consultation approach could draw up a profile of respondents based on a series of factors, e.g. demographics, which may help to choose the best methods for the job in hand.

What methods are best?

Working through the checklist at the start of this section will assist in choosing the best method for the consultation being undertaken.

Stage b: Providing Information for Consultees

- Does a climate of trust exist between the service provider and its users, or does it need to be built up?
- Are consultative and representative networks available, or do they need to be established?
- How experienced are employees in consulting and involving users? Employees can quickly learn how to run effective consultative meetings if they have clear objectives.

All involved in consultation should be clear about what they are doing, but they should also communicate this to consultees. Users of services should be informed about what is going on from the off, so as to avoid possible cynicism or lack of interest. People are usually happy to take part in consultation processes, so long as they are kept in the picture about what is going on.

When talking to consultees, it is important to acknowledge the barriers to change, and clarify the non-negotiable issues and stress what can be influenced. This is a difficult thing to do – users are only likely to take part in a consultation exercise unless they believe that things will change or services will improve.

It may be necessary to develop ‘user champions’ within a particular community to help communicate messages.

Stage c: Analysis of Findings

Featured later in the toolkit.

Stage d: Using the Results of Consultation

Many local authorities have reported that much of the consultation they carry out is not used effectively. The main way in which authorities can use the results of consultation is to take consultees’ views into account when making decisions. These decisions vary into nature.

How easy it is to link consultation and decision-making will depend largely on the sort of consultation undertaken and the care which it has been planned.

It may sometimes seem difficult to link consultation directly to decisions, for example, when carrying out regular satisfaction surveys of services, but consultation can still be linked to decision-making so long as you work out at the planning stage how consultation fits into the bigger picture.

Often, when undertaking consultation, a range of views will be secured. On a controversial issue, views may be sharply polarised. When more than one consultation technique is used, it is particularly likely that conflicting views may be expressed.

In resolving these conflicts, authorities should take into account the different kinds of consultation used. When the subject is complicated, or needed more background information to understand it fully, the views of a small but well-informed sample (e.g. a citizens’ jury) may be more relevant than a larger, more uninformed sample.

Resolving these conflicts will always be a matter of judgement – there are no fixed rules about what kind of consultation should take precedence over another.

When consultees’ views diverge, it is particularly important to provide clear feedback – individuals who do not like the decision taken may at least feel that the overall process has given them a fair hearing.

Stage e: Providing Feedback

Providing feedback to vital – good feedback tells consultees what the overall findings of the consultation were, how these influenced the decisions made, and the reasons behind the final decision.

It is important for feedback to be honest, especially when consultees were critical or when you have decided to do something that the majority of consultees did not support.

By demonstrating that you have paid attention to what consultees have said, feedback can help strengthen the credibility of consultation work. It also helps to ensure that the public feels valued in the consultation process, and builds a trusting relationship, increasing the likelihood that consultees will respond to future exercises.

Stage f: Evaluating Consultation

It is good practice to undertake an evaluation of both consultation exercises and ongoing consultation work to measure the effectiveness of the methods used against the original consultation objectives.

This will provide information about:

- The effectiveness of consultation methods adopted, so that future consultation exercises can be improved
- How the views and priorities of local people have been taken into account in coming to decisions on service delivery
- The satisfaction levels of consultees with various aspects of the process.

Evaluating the effectiveness of your consultation should not be left to the end of the process. It will be much easier to do if you have included it in your initial planning.

There are many models for evaluation, but it should be kept simple, if possible. If you have planned properly, identified the objectives of the consultation and the success and failure criteria, and how you are going to measure them, then the evaluation process should be straightforward.

If you are able to answer the question ‘what would I do differently or the same next time?’ your evaluation will have been valuable.

Who you consulted – set specific targets for the level of response you want from different groups (e.g. users, potential users, representative groups, special groups). Information about which consultation methods worked for which groups will be useful for the future.

At the end, you want to be able to measure whether:

- You got views from those you wanted
- You were successful in consulting minority, disadvantaged or under-represented groups
- Different groups responded to different methods
- You gave feedback to those consulted and
- The people consulted felt that the consultation was worthwhile.

Methods – the methods used were right for your objectives.

Timescale – the timetable was clear and kept to – if not, why not; and that enough time was allowed for responses.

Information – the information provided should be easy to access, relevant to the consultation, produced in plain language and easy to understand; and available in other languages and other formats where necessary.

Effect of the consultation – has anything changed as a result of the consultation?

At the end of the consultation process you need to be able to measure whether:

- You got views that you could use
- You have actually used those views
- The consultation has led to some identifiable change in your service or policy
- The consultation has changed the relationship between you and the public.

Costs – that you budgeted adequately and correctly, and that the source for your budget was checked out.

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Section 2: Consultation Standards



Standard a: Openness

Standard b: Timeliness

Standard c: Inclusion

Standard d: Training, support & resources

Standard a: Openness

Consultation should be open and transparent to consultees about the reasons for consultation, the decision to be made, and the way in which the consultation will influence the decision.

In order for users and others to have a real opportunity to influence the decision making and ultimate outcome, the need good quality information, in accessible formats, about

- What services offer (in order to know what they can expect)
- Their 'rights' as service users
- Information about the issues being consulted on, and their context
- What is on offer in terms of consultation and involvement in decision making, any issues that are not open to consultation, and the reasons why.

This applies equally to day to day consultation about personal decisions, and to participate in service planning.

Standard b: Timeliness

It is important to ensure that timescales will accommodate good quality consultation, and enable all stages of consultation to be adequately addressed.

Consideration should also be given to how consultation fits in with the Corporate Plan, service plans and also personal development plans.

Standard c: Inclusion

It is important to ensure that consultation is inclusive, and recognises that some people may be less accessible to consult with than others.

Such people have been termed 'hard to reach', although, in reality, it is the organisation's job to make sure that consultation is inclusive.

People with whom a more tailored approach may be appropriate, both in terms of finding them and entering into a dialogue, include:

- People who may feel culturally isolated from the mainstream activity of the organisation
- People from minority ethnic communities, who may require interpretation, translation and recognition of cultural norms
- People with sensory impairment, learning disabilities or illnesses, and may require special methods to facilitate communication
- Those members of the public who may feel alienated from, or even suspicious of, the organisation that is consulting them
- People who for a range of reasons, have difficulty in accessing services
- Some groups, such as working single parents, have less spare time than others – they may also have little energy to engage in consultation, and may require additional resources to enable them to take part
- Geographically isolated communities, perhaps based in rural areas
- People who have no permanent address
- Non-users of services, or potential users
- People who may just not be interested in being consulted by public bodies.

Making consultation inclusive is important because:

- Consultation exercises often need to find out the views of an accurate cross-section of the population as a whole; and
- Different sections of the community, particularly minorities, may have needs or views that are different from those of the majority, and if they are not consulted effectively, these needs or views may remain invisible.

Below are some ways that obstacles to inclusive consultation can be overcome. Access to meeting places is a vital consideration in conducting inclusive consultation, e.g. times of meetings, sitting services for carers, transport considerations. It has to be recognised that there will be extra resource considerations when it comes to addressing these issues.

Consulting Young People

Young people do not readily respond to general consultation, so their views are not often taken into account. However, children of all ages do have views about the way that they are cared for or educated, or on other more general issues. Some local authorities have set up special consultative forums for young people, either as a way to consult about a particular topic, or as permanent panels that can be used for consulting young people about a range of issues.

Consulting People with Disabilities

Some people with disabilities may find it difficult to participate in consultation exercises, unless they are planned with them in mind. Various organisations representing the needs of people with disabilities may be able to consult disabled people on behalf of a local authority, or to identify disabled people who can participate in panel surveys or other consultative groups.

These representative groups can be very valuable, but it is also important to make sure that their consultation processes are designed so as not to exclude people with disabilities.

Ways of doing this include:

- Making large-print or taped versions of questionnaires available for survey panel participants
- Making sure that public meetings are held in accessible buildings with induction loop systems, and that lifts to the venue are offered to those who need them
- Printing Braille and large-print messages on postal consultation forms telling people with poor eyesight how they can participate
- Making sure that face-to-face interviews are carried out in a way that enables people with hearing difficulties to participate and
- Carrying out consultation exercises within services that are used by disabled people.

Consulting Minority Ethnic Communities

The Staffordshire Moorlands district has a relatively low proportion of black and minority ethnic residents, estimated at 0.7% of the total population. Despite this fact, it is important to ensure that the design of any consultation exercise undertaken by the local authority is appropriate so that black and minority ethnic communities are enabled to participate as fully as possible.

Some communities may not want to be involved in any exercise directly organised by the statutory agencies, trusting and engaging with those organised by their own community organisations.

Local authorities can consult with community organisations through their representatives, but this should be done in conjunction with consultation with individuals where possible.

There may be other cultural issues which need to be taken into account when undertaking successful consultation exercises – for example, issues of language, or time of day – these should be at the forefront when developing consultation.

Consulting socially excluded people

Some people may be hard to consult with because they have too many problems with their day-to-day lives to take notice of attempts to consult them.

These problems may have arisen due to poverty, poor education, poor health, or more likely a combination of factors.

Socially excluded people do not form an identifiable group – there are few representative organisations for them, and they may lack the skills to articulate their needs effectively.

It is, however, vital to consult with socially excluded people, as they tend to be heavily dependent on public services, and are major users of services.

There are many difficulties in consulting with socially excluded groups. Some local authorities have made some progress in this area, however, working with specific geographical communities. This is more likely to have happened in relatively small consultation projects, where the public in areas have become part of the consultative structure and can identify and involve socially excluded groups or people within their own community.

People who do not want to take part in consultation

Like it or not, some people never want to take part in consultation exercises, no matter what you do.

If people resist getting involved because they are suspicious of the organisation's motives or feel that their participation will have no impact, then agencies may need to try again, particularly when people are heavily dependent on local services or would be likely to benefit significantly from using them.

But if individuals who do not need to rely heavily on local services genuinely have no interest in getting involved in consultation exercises, there may not be much benefit in continuing efforts to encourage them to do so – a proportionate response and approach should always be pursued, it is not recommended to devote resources when it is obvious that results will be forthcoming.

Standard d: Training, Support and Resources

A commitment to high quality consultation includes a recognition of the resources, skills and expertise required.

This recognition may include investment in:

- Staff training and awareness raising of the issues involved in enabling real user participation;
- Access to expertise within the Council to advise on consultation methods;
- Support and training for service users and others, to enable effective participation and increase the number of users and others becoming involved;
- Ensuring consultation is accessible, e.g. accessibility of methods and meeting places, time of meetings, baby sitting and child minding services and transport.

Training for Employees

There is little or no point in consulting unless the exercise is designed and carried out in such a way that the results will be valid.

Indeed, poorly designed or executed consultation exercises can be actually harmful if decisions are then made on the basis of misleading results.

If the staff undertaking consultation lack appropriate knowledge and skills, they may make mistakes that will undermine the credibility of the results.

Common problems include:

- Using a method not appropriate to the topic for consultation
- Designing surveys in ways that do not address all the relevant questions
- Phrasing questions in ways that are likely to skew the answers given
- Using a sample that is too small to give reliable results
- Using samples for surveys or panels that do not accurately reflect the make-up of the population.

It is equally important to analyse the results properly. Staff undertaking surveys should have a good understanding of the margins of error relating to survey results, for example, and should be able to explain their significance to non-specialists.

When consultation results are presented to members or senior managers, it is vital that they are given sound advice about how to interpret them.

Skills and experience to carry out consultation can be developed, as long as employees are committed, and can seek advice when they need it.

Training and support for users and others

For effective consultation, many of those being consulted will need support to be able to participate.

Service areas should encourage users, and particularly

the most vulnerable users, to get involved in decisions affecting their lives – older people and others tend to be ‘satisfied’ with a service, as they feel grateful for receiving help and assistance. In fact, however, users should be empowered enough to say what they think, and be able, therefore, to make a significant contribution to the consultation process.

Training should therefore be offered on a range of areas to ensure full involvement, particularly in ongoing decision making processes, where users and others are members of planning boards or the Citizens Panel. Skills may be developed in public speaking or how meetings work.

In addition, some consultees may want administrative or policy support in order to prepare for meetings, such as advice on resource or financial constraints, while others may want to be provided with an advocate. Addressing these issues effectively will prepare participants well and increase their confidence to perform and take part in consultations.

Resources

Allocating resources to consultation work is an essential part of the commitment to effective and inclusive consultation.

Funds therefore need to be provided for:

- Travel expenses (paid on the day) and substitute care to enable members of the public to attend events and meetings
- A range of media, interpreters and accessible venues to ensure the process is inclusive
- Employees to build relationships and trust and hence good quality consultation.

Section 3: Consultation Methods - how to choose the best approach

Levels of involvement

Consultation methods

Choosing your approach: -

Open/public meetings

Inviting written comments on draft proposals and reports

Open days, roadshows and exhibitions

Piloting changes

Face-to-face interviews

Questionnaire based surveys

The Citizens Panel

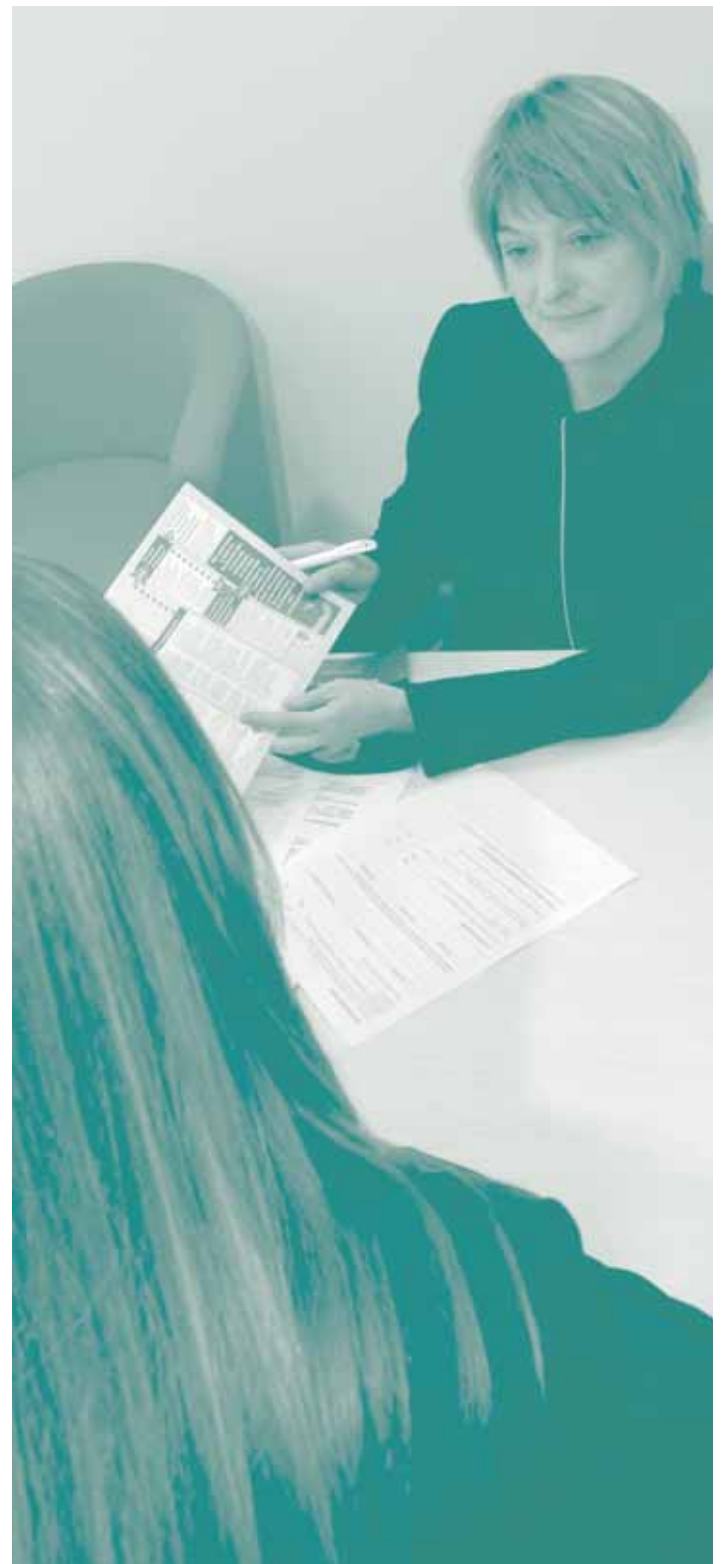
Focus groups

Information technology

Involving users and others in decision making

User and other representatives on planning and steering groups

User panels



Levels of Involvement

The Council has made a broad commitment to 'actively involve and consult' with users, potential users and others in the community. Under this commitment, those organising consultation work will need to decide on the exact level of involvement on offer for a particular piece of consultation, depending on any special requirements or constraints.

The different levels of involvement that might be offered are presented below: -

Information – sharing ideas and plans about services, ensuring relevant information reaches users and others, without having a dialogue with those receiving the information.

Consultation – entering into a 'two way dialogue' with people, asking their views and advice on plans, policies and services, and taking them into account, but not necessarily acting on the comments received.

Participation – inviting people to have some impact on decision making processes, or giving delegated power to make decisions on specific issues.

Partnership – working as equals to set goals, make plans and decide funding priorities, including representation on public committees and planning groups, and involving people in an authority's way of working as a general feature rather than as a special arrangement.

Delegated control – giving authority and money to users and others to plan and manage services.

Consultation Methods

There are a wide range of methods available to involve people in decision making, using the level at which they are involved as one of its dimensions.

The other dimension is the distinction between the involvement at an individual level, and consultation about changing or designing services (which tends to be consultation with a whole user or service group).

At the level of consultation in designing services, there is a distinction between consultation within an individual service and at a strategic district-wide level. The exact position of each method is to some extent open to interpretation, and also can vary depending on the agenda being offered. It will not vary a great deal, however, and an ongoing user panel, for example, will always allow greater participation than, say, a satisfaction survey.

Different methods are needed for different purposes, and it is really important to pick the right methods for each situation, and the following section provides advice on doing this.

Using a range of methods will also help ensure views are representative of the population they are designed to canvass.

There are broadly two types of consultation:

- Direct consultation with a sample of people
- Consultation with delegates, such as members of user panels or groups.

Direct consultation provides the opportunity to find out people's views at first hand, but people may not feel involved in the decision making process.

Using forums or panels enable people to become more involved in the decision-making processes, but run the risk that they may not be truly representative. This provides a useful illustration of the need to use a range of consultation methods.

Choosing Your Approach

In choosing your methods, it is essential to clarify the purpose of the consultation and the intended outcome. Having answered the questions presented in Stage 1 of this toolkit, the most suitable method can then be identified.

The cost of different consultation techniques varies significantly, and this should be taken into account when choosing a method. There are ways in which costs can be reduced or spread and these may be particularly valuable where the most appropriate tool for an exercise is one of the more expensive types.

1 Open/Public Meetings

Open meetings are meetings arranged for members of the public to find out about and express their views on a particular issue.

Public meetings often have very low attendance, and those people who do attend are often not representative of the population as a whole. More people will come if they are directly affected by or concerned about the issue, or where their interest is attracted.

Good publicity that will reach your intended audience is therefore important. As well as posters, leaflets and invitations, word of mouth is an effective means of advertising.

Open meetings offer a convenient and transparent way to demonstrate public consultation and build up good relationships. However, attendees' ability to contribute to a discussion about service-wide, strategic priorities can be limited by a lack of knowledge and possible lack of interest. Used carefully, they can complement other forms of consultation.

Tips

Be persistent in contacting those that you want to take part. Enlisting the support of contacts who are trusted and respected by participants will help here.

Careful thought should be given to the venue to ensure that the consultation takes place somewhere accessible to those you want to take part, and where people will feel comfortable.

Going out to venues that people use anyway will attract higher attendance, and be relatively easy to organise. Resist the temptation to bring disparate groups together to seek their views.

Think about how the meeting will be structured, and everyone's role. Make sure that the Chair is well briefed and is able to control any more vocal members of the audience and limit repetitive discussion.

It may be useful to break the meeting up into smaller workshops or discussion groups to give more people the chance to participate.

Recording views and reporting back can be difficult in open meetings. Make sure that someone takes a note of the points raised, or tape-record the proceedings.

Make it clear to participants how their opinions will be taken forward.

2 Inviting Written Comments on Draft Proposals and Reports

This is a formal means by which people can be invited to comment on policies and proposals. The key is to get the best spread of views from those most likely to be affected, and from those with most to contribute.

All consultation documents should be concise, clearly laid out and written in simple language that will be understood by the intended audience, avoiding jargon.

They should make clear:

- The purpose of consultation and, if appropriate, the objective of the proposal
- The issues on which views are being sought – wherever possible they should take the form of clear questions and/or options
- An explanation of what decisions, if any, have already been taken and an explanation of why a particular option is favoured
- The deadline for responses, and wherever possible an outline of the proposed timetable for the rest of the decision-making and implementation processes
- The name of a person whom respondents can contact if they have further queries.

Tips

Publicity - publicise the existence of the document (e.g. through a press release) and wherever possible use the internet to publish and receive replies.

Format – be ready to deal sympathetically with requests for documents in other formats/languages. If necessary, consider other ways of consulting ethnic minority groups or people with special needs, for example, through face-to-face discussions.

Timing – allow people consulted enough time to reply, making allowances for holiday periods and other potential timing difficulties. Decide in advance how to acknowledge responses.

Reporting – the results of all consultation exercises should be carefully analysed. Once a decision had been taken on the way forward, let respondents know promptly how the work will proceed, and explain how the decision reflects the results of the consultation.

Feedback – produce and make available a summary of views and information collected from the consultation exercise.

3 Open Days, Roadshows and Exhibitions

Open days can be structured, with formal presentations and discussions.

Roadshows are similar, except that you go to communities rather than expecting them to come to you.

They are probably most useful if you want to get across the message that you are approachable and want users to be involved in what you are doing. They provide an easy way to publicise your services and provide information to users and gives users a chance to become familiar with your premises and meet employees, so promoting good relations. They are also a good way of talking to people who do not currently use the service but might in the future.

Messages can be got across in many different ways – can use stands or displays, or use videos and slide shows.

Tips

Venue – if it is an open day you will probably want to hold it at your own location so that users can see your services for themselves. If your own venue is unsuitable or a roadshow is being planned for the area, make sure that the location chosen is suitable for the purpose, that there is good access for your users and potential users.

Timing – important, in that is it a weekday, evening or weekend, and what is going to be most convenient for those you want to reach? Do school holidays need to be considered and can you offer alternative times and dates?

Publicity – you will need to publicise the event well to get good attendance. Use of variety of methods to let people know what is happening. If you want to attract particular groups of people, think about ways of targeting them particularly.

Feedback – try to get as much feedback as possible from those who attend. As well as the specific comments of those who do come, it can be very useful to collect demographic information to show you who has not come. Comments can be collected in a variety of ways.

Representativeness – do not use an open day or roadshow as your only method of consultation. The views you get are unlikely to be representative.

4 Piloting Changes

Trying out changes on a small area of your service is a useful way to test whether those changes are going to work for the whole service. It is difficult to predict all the issues that will arise when you introduce something new. The information you give people about how planned changes will impact on them may lack detail, and prevent them from providing informed comments on your proposals, so piloting the changes can provide real material to consider.

Tips

Pilot area – the area you are going to pilot your changes in needs to be as typical of the rest of the service as possible, so that the lessons learned are relevant.

Evaluation – the pilot is to test out how well something works on a small scale so you can decide whether to extend it or not. In evaluating it, you need to establish what you are measuring (what constitutes a success/failure); how you are going to measure it, and what the aim of the whole process is.

5 Face-to-Face Interviews

Interviews can tell you what people think and why, allows more exploration of details of their views, attitudes, behaviour or motives. This method may also help you to decide what needs to be covered in quantitative research or provide views on a service being proposed. It will not provide, however, accurate statistics on users' opinions.

These interviews are flexible enough to allow users' own priorities and new issues to be raised that the organisation may not be aware of. They can also gather the views of individuals excluded from mainstream consultations (e.g. from disadvantaged groups) and may explore more sensitive issues. They are, however, time-consuming and difficult to analyse.

Tips

People with experience are needed to run in-depth interviews and analyse results.

Careful consideration should be given to what the interview will cover and a framework for the interviewer should be drawn up.

Feedback from the interviews may not be typical of all users.

The right venue is important to hold the interviews in and incentives may be needed to encourage people to participate.

6 Questionnaire-Based Surveys

Quantitative research gives you statistics in response to set questions. For example, it could tell you what proportion of your users would like opening hours extended to 6pm. It allows you to get views from a widely representative group of users, and is a good method of getting the views of non-users. It can, however, be difficult to get the views of disadvantaged minority groups.

It can give statistically reliable information (i.e. you can be reasonably certain that the answers given by a sample are broadly representative of the entire group or population) – providing, that is, that you have sampled correctly.

Quantitative surveys can be conducted face-to-face or via postal surveys.

Quantitative research will tell you what proportion of people think something, but it will not always tell you why. It can also fail to pick up what might be significant problems for users, ones which you may not have considered when drafting your questions to them.

Tips

Questions – ask the right ones! Discussion groups can help find out what you should be asking, or talking to local organisations who represent users. A poorly designed questionnaire can give misleading results and a self-completion questionnaire will not be suitable for complex questions. Don't ask a question if you cannot act on the result, or if you have decided on a particular course of action beforehand – people will often see through this.

Testing – pilot the questionnaire on a small group. Can they understand the questions? Do you get meaningful results? Avoid leading questions, and ask only one question at a time.

Satisfaction surveys – be wary of simple satisfaction surveys – they are relatively unsophisticated and can provide misleading information.

Design - the layout of forms is important. You need a large print-size, plenty of space for people to write, clear instructions and questions, a logical order and ask for personal information at the end of the questionnaire, rather than the beginning. People may also be put off by a very long questionnaire.

Removing barriers – think about how to remove barriers for users – translate questionnaires, or use an interpreter, use an interviewer for people who might have difficulty reading, use Braille or audio with visually impaired people; include a reply-paid envelope for postal surveys.

Confidentiality – allow people to remain anonymous – make it clear that people will not be identified in publications.

Responses – response rates may be poor – as low as 5-10% for postal surveys if sent 'cold'. This can be improved by designing the questionnaire carefully, personalising letters, offering prize draws etc. but a 60% response rate would be classed as very good. If only a very small number of people respond, the results can be unreliable. You may want to get professional advice about sampling and sample sizes to ensure statistically reliable findings.

Expertise - there may not be sufficient internal expertise to design and carry out large-scale surveys involving face-to-face interviews by trained staff. Using specialist research organisations (like MRUK, with whom the Council has had a partnership agreement to carry out research) clearly has a cost, but it also brings confidence that exercises will be carried out properly.

7 The Citizens' Panel

Inclusion of questions about your service in one of the Citizens' Panel surveys will provide information about the views of the public in general. It will not give specific information about the views of service users or others, but they may be represented within the sample.

8 Focus Groups

Focus groups are normally made up of about eight to ten people led by a trained facilitator in a one-off discussion on a particular topic. Like individual interviews, focus groups allow you to explore issues in considerable depth, and have the advantage that people can bounce ideas off others.

Focus groups are particularly useful if you want to find out what specific groups of people think about your service, and to understand why they hold the views they do. It does not provide statistical information, and the views expressed will not be typical of the views of all users.

It is a particularly useful method for accessing potential and non-users of services, or minority ethnic groups. Users may feel more or less confident in groups and say they wouldn't say on their own (although the reverse can also be true).

Tips

The more similar the group is in terms of gender, age and social class, the easier it is for them to communicate effectively. You will need more than one discussion group if you want to investigate the views of more than one part of the community. The timing and venue of your focus groups will need to fit in with the needs of the members, or potential members of the group. People generally do not like to travel too far, especially at night.

It is important to use a skilled facilitator to run focus groups, and this can be expensive. MRUK will assist with this part of the work, if required. It is important to remember that, whilst anyone can theoretically run a focus group, few people can actually do it well.

Participants need clear information about what their role is, in terms of the groups.

An offer should be made to pay travel expenses. You might also wish to give a small additional financial incentive for attending.

Draw up a list of questions for discussion or areas that you want to be covered. Although the groups should be flexible and informal, a structure that makes sure that the significant areas are covered, and that other issues do not take over the discussion, is important. If there is more than one focus group held as part of the consultation process, this will also provide for some consistency, allowing results to be compared between groups.

It is useful to tape record sessions to allow more detailed analysis afterwards. You may also wish to transcribe the results of the discussions, and so you need to have a system for identifying who is who on the tape. You may also need help in transcribing, or specialist equipment to carry it out.

9 Information Technology

The opportunities offered by information technology and the Internet, in terms of consultation, can make it easier to take part in a consultation exercise (although this is not true for everyone). Although Internet usage is spreading rapidly, there will always be some people who do not have access, or will not want to use these methods. You will inevitably exclude significant groups of people if you rely too much on this method of consultation.

You can put draft documents, (e.g. questionnaires, forms etc.) on the Internet, and comments can be returned by e-mail. This can be much cheaper and less problematic than printing and distributing lots of material, and information can be quickly updated and amended. For people who have access, responding to invitations for views online is very quick and easy.

10 Involving the Public in Decision Making

The importance of consulting the public is now widely accepted by public sector organisations, but the next major challenge is to actively involve users in making decisions. There are a number of ways in which the public can be directly involved in decision making processes, rather than simply consulted. Generally, the best way to ensure active community involvement and consultation is to embed the expectation into the everyday work of the Council.

To play a greater part in actually making decisions, the public will need more information about the issues involved, and may also need additional support and training.

For example, the users of a particular service might be involved in the drafting of certain documents. A useful method to assist this process might be for Council employees to write a first draft of the document based on priorities identified by users, which the latter would then comment on. Offering at least two separate opportunities to comment, in this way, will potentially increase the users' sense of 'ownership' of the document.

11 Public Representation on Council Working Groups

This is an important method of enabling small numbers of members of the public (usually one or two) to become highly involved in real decision making processes. However, meaningful participation on planning and working groups can be difficult for users, as they may have a different knowledge base from other members, and be unaware of wider issues impacting on decisions.

Tips

To use this method effectively and enable the public to make a useful contribution, there may need to be some work to support users to participate equally.

With such small numbers involved, other methods of consultation will need to take place additionally to ensure views are representative.

12 User Panels

A user panel allows a small group of users and senior managers to discuss user concerns. Whereas focus groups may only meet once, or very rarely, a user panel will meet regularly over a long period.

User panels can be a useful (and relatively cheap) way of focusing on user issues, developing ideas for improving services, as well as providing a useful sounding board on which to test plans and ideas. It is a method of involving users in decision-making processes.

User panels can help you concentrate on issues from the user perspective; create a continuing dialogue with users; can give you relatively quick feedback; and adds credibility to your consultation process.

Tips

Composition – need to consult employees, other users and representative groups about the proposed brief, membership, terms of reference etc. User panels are not fully representative, but include as wide a cross-section as possible. The maximum size for effective functioning is 12, including managers.

Purpose – need to have clear objectives for the group, for example, 'to make the service more friendly and easy to use'.

Access to decision makers – to make sure that the group has access to managers to make things happen. The more commitment shown by top management the greater the chance that the panel will be effective in influencing decisions and strategy. You need to treat the panel seriously. Be prepared to listen, learn and act.

Skills - draw up a clear 'job description' and list the main qualities and experience you need before starting to select members.

Length of appointment – you should appoint members for a fixed term. After a while, members will get to know your business so well that they may start to feel part of your organisation, and so lose credibility with other users.

Facilities - provide support for members: give them access to information, somewhere to meet, expenses for attending meetings, photocopying and secretarial facilities.

Representativeness – do not use the panel as your only means of consultation, or think that once you have a user panel, that is all they need to do. The group will not necessarily be representative of the views of all users, especially of disadvantaged minority groups.

Timing - allow time for representatives to refer back to user groups or to consult others – this can help increase their accountability and credibility.

Section 4: Developing Consultation and Involvement

Encouraging participation

Balancing "top down" and "bottom up" consultation

Multi-agency consultation



Encouraging Participation

Getting people to participate in consultation can be difficult especially where there is no history of public involvement.

Some authorities have rejected public meetings or similar kinds of open-invitation consultation as ineffective, because so few people attend. It can also be difficult to recruit people to user panels or to find volunteers for other forms of direct participative consultation.

Overcoming this initial reluctance cannot be achieved simply by advertising events and expecting people to attend, unless the issue is of such local significance that it has already aroused local passions to fever pitch. This issue is especially important where you are looking to develop an ongoing relationship through which to involve people in decision making, rather than a one off consultation.

There are ways to encourage participation.

Tips

- **'Taking the consultation to the people'** - talking to people at venues that they already attend rather than expecting them to come to the authority's chosen venue
- **Direct incentives** – for example, offering modest prizes or gifts
- **Recognising the importance of the social dimension** - seating people at round tables where they could talk to each other over a cup of tea, organising an awayday at an interesting venue, providing refreshments, particularly proper meals rather than just tea and biscuits.
- **Providing childcare facilities** – this can help to create more of a 'community event' atmosphere
- **Making the event more entertaining** - using participative consultation methods, rather than just having speakers 'talk at' those who attend

- **Acknowledging some users may be reluctant to contribute if they have to identify themselves** - it is important to give a prominent guarantee of anonymity.
- **Using face-to-face contact** - relying on the written word excludes many people.

Getting people to participate in user panels can also be initially difficult although it is possible to encourage them, perhaps by offering payment in kind or entering panel members in a regular prize draw.

Panel members can be encouraged to stay on the panel by making them feel a part of a 'club', for example, through regular meetings of local members. The experience of most authorities is that, as panels become more established, more people volunteer to join them. In some cases, the flow of volunteers more than keeps pace with those dropping out of the panel and means that recruitment costs can be restricted to ensuring that the panel continues to represent all sections of the community.

If relationships are to be successfully developed, trust needs to be built up. Employees may need to nurture this role as well as developing new ways of working with people themselves.

Many people worry that consultation raises public expectations unrealistically. However, experience shows that while some users have high expectations, low expectations are far more common and harder to overcome. They can be addressed only gradually by action, not words. The best way of addressing unrealistically high expectations – where they exist – is to talk about them, openly and honestly, and seek users' ideas. It is also vital to be clear from the outset about the limits of the consultation.

In those areas where public consultation is already well established, it is easier to get people to participate, because there is more of an expectation among local people that they should be consulted.

Building this expectation can be hard work and will be based on trust that consultation is worthwhile, and this can be nurtured through:

Ensuring there are early successes such as service change (however minimal) or funding for specific initiatives, so that people feel that services improved as a result. This will instill confidence in people's contributions to the process. Their involvement will therefore be seen to have been positive and useful, and will encourage participation in the future.

Providing thorough and honest feedback of the results of consultation, and making it clear how those results have been used to change things. Consultation has been hampered by the scepticism of consultees who have taken part in consultation previously and heard nothing more; a failure to provide feedback can increase a sense of isolation and alienation.

Carrying out consultation in such a way that consultees feel that their views are valued. Users want to be consulted and involved in decisions about how services are delivered – but it needs to be done on their terms.

Balancing 'Top Down' and 'Bottom Up' Consultation.

When the public is consulted on some issues it is hardly surprising they sometimes appear to be disinterested or uninterested. Experience has shown that the public is keener to have its say when asked about things which matter to them (and when barriers which prevent them from getting involved are removed).

In practice, this may mean recognising that users may not be interested in the same agenda as the Authority. For example, they may be more interested in the quality of services affecting them personally, than involvement at a strategic level.

It is therefore important to ensure that wherever possible, consultation brings out what is important to users and carers. A real commitment to this requires service providers to start with a blank sheet of paper and allow users to set the agenda. This may, however, clash with the organisation's need to consult on particular issues within particular timescales.

A critical success factor here is timescales. One of the main impediments to this way of working is allowing sufficient time for 'blank sheet' consultation, as opposed to checking out the content of a draft plan. The other main impediment is that the Authority will not, of course, have a blank sheet but will have a number of constraints and imperatives to work within.

The earlier consultation takes place, the greater chance it will have to influence plans. It could take place as part of a regular planning process, through a number of consultation methods, e.g. focus groups and interviews, or user panels and representatives on planning groups.

Multi-Agency Consultation.

In developing consultation and involvement, it will be useful to consider the work of other agencies, and wherever possible to work together to develop a co-ordinated approach. This will have advantages not only for the agencies, but also for service users, who often may not be interested in who provides which service:

A co-ordinated approach to consultation between agencies across the District will:

- Provide consistency for the public
- Address perceived fragmentation and 'consultation fatigue'
- Avoid duplication of resources (both time and money)
- Provide integrated results and responses for a 'seamless service'.



This document is available in alternative formats on request



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