

THE SOUTHAMPTON COMPACT

Between the Public Sector and the Voluntary and Community Sector

GUIDE TO GOOD PRACTICE IN CONSULTATION

INTRODUCTION

This toolkit is based on the consultation toolkit developed by Community Involvement Service for Southampton City Council. It has been adapted for use by other statutory bodies and voluntary and community organisations and groups in Southampton to support the work of the Southampton Compact and to reflect the National Compact Code of Good Practice on Consultation and Policy Appraisal. It aims to ensure good practice in consultation between statutory authorities and the community and voluntary sector.

Staff should follow the guidelines in this toolkit when seeking the views of local people, Communities, groups or representative bodies.

Consultation is important because it:

- Symbolises the commitment of agencies to be open and accountable
- Leads to more realistic and robust policy that better reflects people's needs and wishes
- Helps to plan, prioritise and deliver better services
- Can create a working partnership and mutual understanding with those consulted
- Identifies problems quickly enabling matters to be put right before they escalate

This toolkit offers guidance rather than a strict checklist of things that should be followed when planning consultation.

The following information is designed to help ensure that in seeking the views of residents, local people and groups, all consultation carried out is of a consistent standard. If everyone undertaking consultation records their findings and uses all feedback effectively, the council, other public bodies and other agencies should then be able to reduce repetition and thus consultation fatigue.

WHY UNDERTAKE CONSULTATION?

There are a number of reasons for consulting the public and the community and voluntary sector:

- It may be a statutory or other legal requirement – see page 2
- To inform service providers about the quality of the services they are providing
- To identify the need for new services
- To identify limitations of current services

- As part of a wider initiative to involve users in the development of policy, strategy and/or practice
- As part of a move towards ensuring that services are provided in ways which better meet the needs of users

Consultation is an important part of many aspects of the work of statutory agencies. Increasingly consultation is required by government initiatives: it feeds into development of corporate objectives; helps in the improvement of services to meet targets; and determines how far objectives have been met.

STATUTORY AND LEGAL REQUIREMENTS IN CONSULTATION

This toolkit does not in any way seek to advise on, or alter, the conditions applicable to instances where there is a statutory requirement to consult, for example following a planning application. In these cases the legal requirements must be looked at and followed.

THE PROCESS OF CONSULTATION

When planning to undertake a consultation exercise there are a number of factors that need to be considered. Below are some hints and tips on how to get the best out of your consultation.

What we already know

Before undertaking any new consultation check what information is already known or if a similar piece of consultation has been done before (perhaps within the last 6 months). If so you may not need to repeat the exercise or you may be able to get ideas for questions, methodology or target audiences. Also consider opportunities to work jointly with other organisations that are planning a similar exercise to your own.

Who do you need to consult

Who it is appropriate to consult depends on the purpose of your particular consultation. Consider your objective(s) before deciding. Examples include:

- The community and voluntary sector as a whole
- Current service users
- Users of 'local facilities' (e.g. parks, patients at a particular clinic)
- Non-users
- Potential service users
- Internal customers
- Beneficiaries of services (e.g. parents as beneficiaries of the education system)
- A representative group
- A community with particular interests
- Staff
- Other agencies or businesses
- Councillors

Consultation should use existing networks, umbrella bodies and organisations, for example Neighbourhoods Partnerships and Southampton Voluntary Services.

When planning your consultation allow time to consider the diverse communities within the population in order to tailor your method(s) to suit their needs. For example, consider ethnic origin, employment status, age and disabled people. Please see page 6 for more information on consulting socially excluded groups.

You may want to find out about:

Quality:

- Standard of service
- Frequency
- Reliability
- Access
- Extent of customer choice
- Information available
- Helpfulness of staff
- Value for money

Behaviour and experiences of customers:

- Which services are used and how often
- How well do we communicate
- Would they be prepared to pay for different services

Wants and needs:

- What sort of service would they like
- What facilities do they want

Opinions:

- Satisfaction
- Perceptions of quality
- Views on customer service
- Appropriate service(s)
- Other issues

Be clear about what is it you need to find out and make sure your questions generate answers relevant to the proposal. Make sure the wording of your questions are tailored to the audience and are written in plain and simple language.

When

You should aim to consult as early as possible in the planning process. Where possible, build consultation into your regular planning cycle. People will be disillusioned if their views are sought when decisions have already been made and their views will not influence the outcome.

Time

The recommended response time is a minimum of 12 weeks. Where less than 12 weeks is allowed the document should specify the reason why a shorter time has been set. Remember the method/number of people you plan to involve will have a direct impact on how long the process will take.

Documentation

All consultation documentation should be concise, clearly laid out and written in simple language that will be understood by the intended audience, avoiding jargon. Consideration should be given to making the document available in accessible formats and different languages. Consultation documents will ideally contain or be accompanied by the following:

- A summary (ideally no more than one page)
- A description of the issue, proposal or problem being addressed
- The purpose of the consultation and, if appropriate, the objective which the proposal is intended to deliver
- The issues on which views are being sought
- An explanation of what decisions, if any, have already been taken and an explanation of why a particular option is favoured
- If relevant, various sources of opinion and information and factual statements that are properly referenced (for example, from academics or consumer groups)
- Where appropriate, an explanation of who is likely to be affected and how, including any impact on voluntary and community organisations
- Where appropriate, an invitation to respondent to submit their own ideas or assessment of how the proposals will impact on voluntary and community organisations
- The deadline for responses, and wherever possible an outline of the proposed timetable for the rest of the decision-making and implementation processes including a statement of how feedback will be given
- The name, address and, wherever possible the telephone number and e-mail address of a person whom respondents can contact if they have further queries
- A list of those being consulted; the document might also ask consultees to suggest any other organisations or individual who should be consulted
- A request that those responding should explain who they are and, where relevant, who they represent and specifically who they have further consulted
- A statement that responses will normally be made available unless the respondent has requested that they remain confidential
- An invitation to provide feedback on the consultation exercise itself and make suggestions for improving consultation in the future

Late responses

If a situation arises where someone claims inadequate time was given to respond, it is at the discretion of the Project Manager if the consultation period should be extended or the views of the late responder added to the overall consultation findings.

Analysis

When planning your consultation and its methodology you must consider the resources and time available to do the analysis – remember the more complex the methodology the more time consuming the final analysis is likely to be.

It is important to include a section explaining how non-responses were recorded i.e. were they taken to be a positive or negative response? Where possible, forward any views that are 'outside of the consultation scope' to the relevant service.

Feedback

It is important to provide feedback directly to the participants, either within legal time limits or eight weeks, and thank them for their contribution. You should publish the results in a suitable way that is accessible to all and written in plain language.

Be conscious of the implications of not being seen to take on board views expressed and include an explanation of why they were/were not acted upon.

Monitoring and Evaluation

If you have planned properly, identified what your success and failure criteria are and how you are going to measure them, then the evaluation process should be straightforward. However, there will always be unforeseen factors that influence results and your evaluation process should be flexible enough to take account of these.

It is important that once the consultation is complete the following analysis is undertaken:

- Hold a meeting to discuss the strengths and weaknesses of the consultation
- Analyse the information relating to those who participated
- Analyse feedback from those consulted on the methodology used
- Examine how effective the process was in obtaining the views of minority/socially excluded groups

Effective evaluation tells you what worked and what did not (and why). It helps to make sure that you get the best value for money from your efforts and time. If one particular method does not work, try to work out why. Problems are

always much clearer with hindsight. Evaluation can help you avoid pitfalls next time. Equally, if something works well, try to assess why it was successful, so that you can build on it.

Your analysis will help to improve any future consultation that you may undertake. If you are able to answer the questions 'what would I do differently next time?' your evaluation will have been valuable.

By recording the findings you will also help colleagues to repeat your successes and avoid your errors.

DECIDING ON YOUR METHOD

When deciding on your methodology you need to consider the following:

The objective – what do you need to achieve by undertaking this exercise? Ensure from the outset that your consultees are aware of the scope and limitations of the consultation.

Will it work for your target audience – your chosen method needs to be appropriate for those you plan to consult. You also need to consider how to involve socially excluded groups - see section on inclusion on page

The skills available in-house - ensure all staff are briefed on the purpose of the consultation and make sure they are appropriately trained to undertake your chosen method and analyse the results.

Time available – think about how quickly answers are needed.

How statistically accurate the information needs to be - If you require statistically accurate results you will need to undertake Market Research rather than consultation for further information see page

Cost and budget - all forms of consultation cost money. You must consider if you have the funds to undertake your chosen method and if your consultation were combined with that of another section.

INCLUSION OF MINORITY/SOCIALLY EXCLUDED GROUPS

It is essential that the needs of hard to reach and socially excluded sections of the city's communities are considered when planning and designing consultation

There are many factors to consider to ensure consultation is inclusive:

- **Language** – consider people for whom English is not their first language. Provide services for disabled people such as; sign language interpretation and written information in alternative formats for example Braille.
- **Presentation/information** - when preparing your presentation/information do not make assumptions about people's knowledge of the subject matter.

- **Accessibility** – ensure the chosen venue for your public meeting/event has access for disabled people and that it can be reached by public transport.
- **Parents** – consider arranging meetings during the school day or after children are in bed or if possible provide crèche facilities.
- **People on low income/carers/disabled people** - arrange for reimbursement of travel expenses and childcare costs.

CONSULTATION METHODS

The following pages contain a brief outline of a number of methods that can be used to consult on the services you purchase or provide.

All the methods have their pros and cons and a mixture of methods is likely to give the best results. What is perhaps as important as what method is employed is the way it is done. Consideration should be given to when it might be advisable to commission an independent body to undertake the consultation in order to ensure objectivity.

It is also important at the outset to explain how the information gathered will be analysed.

Methods can be divided into:

Market Research - statistically correct approaches that are more likely to be used where ongoing participation is not envisaged. Also used to address specific issues within a larger programme of consultation.

Methods include:

- Focus groups
- In depth interviews
- Citizen's panels
- Questionnaires
- Mystery customers
- Internet-based consultation

For more information - see page 10

Democratic approaches - based on the assumption that people have a right and responsibility to be involved in consultation and participate as citizens. Such methods may be used where the aim is ongoing involvement.

Public Meetings -

When planning a public meeting consider the following:

- **Publicity** - let people know you are holding a meeting by doing as much publicity as your budget allows, from posters in public buildings to advertisements in the local press. When publicising your meeting urge

people with special needs to contact you in advance so that provisions can be made to include them.

- **Timings** - the start and end times of your meeting will depend on the issue, local circumstances and availability of target audience. Ensure the meeting does not clash with religious festivals/observances, key local meetings or televised major events.
- **Choosing a venue** - consider its location, size and neutrality both politically and culturally. You also need to assess its accessibility for disabled people, check there is sufficient parking and that it is on or close to public transport routes. Also consider supplying refreshments.
- **Planning your invited guests** – when planning invited guests ensure representation from enough agencies, at a high enough level, to get things done and answer questions.
- **Chairing your meeting** – effective chairing of your meeting is essential. Less vocal/assertive people need to be given a chance to speak. You may also want to consider breaking into small groups for a discussion period.
- **Monitoring** – recording who attends your meeting is important; make sure you have a sign-in sheet for people to print their name and contact details (request printing of information as some handwriting can be difficult to read). It is also advisable to include a data protection statement on the sign-in sheet.
- **Minutes** - ensure detailed minutes are taken and published to all those who attended. Consider the need to make these available in large print, Braille, different languages or in an audio format.
- **Seating** - when arranging the venue for small numbers consider a circle of chairs and for larger consider four sides of a square. Try and avoid a panel of desks facing the audience.

Public Meetings	
<p>Pros A fairly quick and easy way of getting people together to listen to what you have to say.</p>	<p>Cons Tends to favour the few who are confident enough to speak out in front of large numbers of people they probably don't know. Many people whose views you ought to hear will leave having said nothing or will not attend at all. Such meetings need to be very well organised to try and address this problem (e.g. using carefully facilitated small group work). There is the danger the meeting will be a one-sided information giving exercise and not consultation. Can be confrontational and hard to control.</p>

Citizen's Juries

A group of people selected to be as representative as possible of the whole community in terms of, for instance, of the balance of men and women, ethnic mix and employment status.

- Typically involves between 12-25 people
- Usually meets over four or five days in order to hear/discuss all aspects of the proposal
- Requires an independent moderator

Citizens Juries	
<p>Pros Those involved have an opportunity to become very well informed on the issue. 'Evidence' can be given by a range of 'witnesses'.</p>	<p>Cons Due to the numbers it cannot be guaranteed that the views are statistically representative of the community as a whole. Can be expensive – room hire, refreshments etc.</p>

Meeting people in their own groups

Within communities there are often already groups of people, who have 'like' interests or needs, which meet on a regular basis. In some instances arranging to attend one/some of their meetings will give invaluable insight into how your proposal is/will be received by this particular section of the community.

Meeting people in their own groups	
<p>Pros No requirement to 'find a sample' as group already formed. Groups often welcome the opportunity to talk face to face with service providers. People who are unconfident of their views or feel isolated in their experience may be encouraged to share these when discussing such issues in a supportive group.</p>	<p>Cons May require an independent facilitator. Can be time consuming and expensive. Requires considerable work group skills on the part of those gathering information.</p>

Workshops

If carefully planned and run can be a fun and informative way to pass on information and obtain opinions:

- Large numbers of people are invited to a carefully planned meeting
- The meeting is designed using participative methods such as interactive displays and small group work

- Peoples' individual experiences and ideas are then drawn together to make more general observations on the services in question

Workshops	
<p>Pros</p> <p>Discussions start from people's own experiences rather than prescribing what issues are to be discussed or what questions answered. It does not require long-term commitment from individuals to take part.</p>	<p>Cons</p> <p>Takes time and skill to plan. Requires careful publicity to attract as many relevant people as possible. It will discriminate against those who are unable/feel unable to take part in such an event.</p>

Open Days and Exhibitions

This gives the public a longer period to choose when to attend and may be a more positive approach than a public meeting:

- Messages can be delivered in a number of ways – such as videos and slide shows
- Comments can be collected in a variety of ways – staff recording relevant points, graffiti walls, comment cards posted into a suggestion box

Open Days and Exhibitions	
<p>Pros</p> <p>Gives people a number of things to see and do when they attend. Less of a pressured environment for those less confident.</p>	<p>Cons</p> <p>Takes a lot of planning and may need to run over a number of days which can be expensive (although could be teamed with another consultation exercise which would save on expense).</p>

Questionnaires

Before designing your questionnaire you will need to consider a number of things: -

- Questions have to be clear, unambiguous and relevant
- Be careful not to include leading questions; or ones that influence the answers
- Frame questions so that answers can be easily recorded and processed. But allow for the possibility of answers you haven't considered
- As well as the design of individual questions think about, putting them in the most appropriate order and the number of questions it is reasonable to expect people to complete
- Personal information (e.g. age, ethnicity etc) is usually best left until the end of the questionnaire – once respondents have warmed to the subject and begin to understand why you are asking

- When asking for personal data always explain why this would be useful (eg so we can ensure our service is accessible to all) and word it in such a way that it is clear there is no compulsion to give a response
- Ensure you are abiding by the Data Protection Act. This should at least involve explaining the purpose of the questionnaire, how it will be used, who will see the data and whether or not it is anonymous. If names and addresses are taken it must explain how these may be used.

Questionnaires	
<p>Pros</p> <p>Allows you to track changes over time if you use the same questions in later a survey. A good method of getting the views of non-users.</p>	<p>Cons</p> <p>A poorly designed survey with poorly drafted questions can give misleading results. If only a small number of people respond, results will be unreliable.</p>

Internet-based consultation

Use of the internet should always be considered during the consultation process, and also as a means of giving and receiving feedback.

MARKET RESEARCH

Market research is one of the many ways that agencies consult their stakeholders. It is the more scientific side of consultation, involving very carefully selected samples of people to represent a specific stakeholder group. If it is important that you get a balanced, representative view of all users of a service, all residents in Southampton, all residents living in a certain Ward or even street or all businesses in an area then market research may be the tool you need. Examples of the appropriate use of market research are given below: -

Examples of the use of Market Research

- **To track changes** - in customer satisfaction over time. In this example it would be important to have large sample sizes that enable small percentage changes over time to represent statistically significant differences.
- **To measure preferences** - for different options or to a proposed change.
- **To explore the different elements of a service** - among users/non users, for example The Homes for Life project explored among tenants which elements of the Housing service they would put priority on improving (these are often NOT the same as those elements which users are least satisfied with).
- **To measure the difference in characteristics** - between users and non users of a service for example of a local leisure facility
- **To explore feelings and attitudes** - to a new service, such as with Smart Cities Card

- **To more fully explore reasons for dissatisfaction with a service**

In contrast, the following are examples where other forms of consultation would be more appropriate:

- The consultation is very small (e.g. there are only 5 users)
- The consultation is about a day to day type of occurrence, e.g. small planning applications
- The consultation is more about sharing and exploring ideas than measuring opinions
- The consultation is asking for comments about a document,
- You are trying to thrash out all the possible objections in order to decide viability
- The project is very community based
- The objective is to involve people in a two way process

Consultation Period

Whereas a 12 week period is recommended for most types of consultation this is not normally the case with market research. Market research involves recruiting specific people or types of people to meet certain criteria and so once the quota or agreed sample size has been met there is no need to continue. This applies to face to face interviews, telephone interviews, focus groups etc. Targeted market research postal questionnaires do need a longer period, to allow time for respondents to complete them, but one reminder, sent two weeks after the initial questionnaire should be sufficient. Very few questionnaires will be returned more than 5 weeks after the individual has received them.

Anonymity

Another big difference between market research and other forms of consultation is that, generally (but not always), market research is anonymous (i.e. name and address is generally not asked for and is definitely not linked to specific answers). The anonymity often helps respondents be completely truthful, as they know their responses will only be looked at alongside everyone else's. Clearly, however, this is not appropriate where you hope for a two way flow of information and it does affect your ability to give respondents direct feedback on the findings. Generally respondents to market research will not have an expectation of receiving direct feedback – they understand this is not the nature of the project. The important thing is to manage peoples expectations.

Can Market Research be combined with other types of consultation?

Sometimes a combination of market research and other forms of consultation may be the best solution e.g. when you need a statistical, robust sample of representative views, but are also keen to gather the opinions of other groups with an expert knowledge or a particularly strong view on the situation to ensure that all aspects and possible repercussions have been assessed.

Using a combination of market research and other forms of consultation is fine, so long as you have decided beforehand how you will use each type of result because they are unlikely to give the same answer e.g. you may decide to base a decision of which option to choose on a robust quantitative piece of research but will use findings from a public meeting to help overcome objections, ensure the message is communicated correctly etc. Where it becomes dangerous to combine market research and other consultation is to use what would appear to be a statistically robust methodology among a clearly non-representative sample. An example of this would be to hand out questionnaires at a public meeting, which people have elected to attend. The results would be representative of those who chose to come, but nothing more. If, however, the same questionnaire was used among a representative sample and a comparison of results made this could provide useful evidence of the difference or similarities between the two groups.

* Information provided by Southampton City Council's Market Research Officer.