

B R I E F I N G

listen up!

effective community
consultation



AUDIT
COMMISSION

Promoting the best use of public money

Summary

Consultation is a process of dialogue that leads to a decision. It can be a powerful tool for improving the quality and cost-effectiveness of services, and for ensuring that policymakers stay in touch with citizens. Consultation is not new, but its importance is growing.

- under best value, councils, police and fire authorities will consult about each of their services at least once every five years, and about overall priorities more frequently
- primary care groups in England and local health groups in Wales are expected to increase public involvement in health decision-making

Nor is consulting communities easy...

- authorities need to get a cross-section of people involved, not just narrow, self-selecting groups
- consultees often disagree, so interpreting the results can be tricky
- what consultees say must be balanced with other factors that affect decisions, such as resources and statutory requirements

- direct community consultation must be squared with members' decision-making role

...and many authorities do not manage to overcome barriers to effectiveness.

- a majority of authorities do not consistently use consultation results to inform decisions
- the quality of individual consultation exercises is patchy
- few authorities evaluate their consultation programmes

Innovative authorities are responding to the challenge by...

- linking consultation to the decisions that members need to take
- taking a strategic approach to planning consultation programmes, often jointly with partners
- designing and carrying out individual consultation exercises to high standards
- involving all sections of the community
- reporting the results to members so that consultation can directly inform policies and decisions

- letting consultees know how their contribution has influenced policies and services

...but others need to catch up with best practice.

To meet new requirements, many authorities will need to strengthen their consultation programmes, develop new skills, and improve joint consultation arrangements with their partners. All authorities should consider how they will use new communication technologies, alongside the best of traditional consultation techniques. As local consultation programmes grow, especially under best value, the Commission will continue to review the extent to which authorities are consulting effectively and achieving value for money.

What can consultation achieve?

1. Councils, police authorities and health authorities already have statutory duties to consult the public on some issues, but having a statutory duty to consult is not the only reason for doing so. Where authorities – both here and abroad – have embarked on successful consultation programmes, they have found that:
 - services can be targeted more closely at providing what people want and avoiding what people do not want;
 - take-up of services can be improved, making unit costs lower, especially where there is a charge for services;
 - user satisfaction with services can be monitored over time, providing a useful performance indicator on improvements in the quality of services;
 - problems arising from proposed changes to services can be pinpointed in advance, and so avoided;
 - the results of consultation can be used to help to make decisions about policies, priorities and strategies;
 - local people can be involved more in decision-making, rejuvenating the local democratic process; and
 - authorities, particularly councils, can strengthen their role in community leadership.

Consultation techniques

2. Authorities already use many different consultation techniques. Some of these are appropriate for one-off issues, whereas others are useful for broader consultation across a range of issues. Many authorities are moving away from so-called traditional methods such as consultation documents, opinion polls and public meetings, with growing numbers using panel surveys, citizens' juries and interactive websites. Nonetheless,

a technique is not necessarily better simply because it is new: the key to success is matching the methods used to the purpose of the exercise and the service in question, and then carrying out the chosen methods competently.

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The role of members

3. It is rarely possible for members to be aware of the views of all the people whom they represent on every local issue. Effective consultation can therefore help members make good decisions by giving them a detailed, balanced view of local people's views on a particular service or policy.

4. Authority members need to consider a range of factors when making decisions, and the outcome of consultation is only one of these factors, albeit an important one. It is members' role to decide:

- how to respond to conflicting views when consultees disagree;

- what weight to give to the results of consultation alongside other factors, such as available resources, statutory requirements and the views of partner organisations.

5. Members are not bound to go along with whatever the majority of consultees want. Nevertheless, when members feel that the right decision differs from what the majority of consultees want, they do need to consider carefully whether there are sound reasons for this, beyond consultees' views not being what members wanted to hear. It is particularly important in

these circumstances to explain to the public what the results of the consultation were and why the authority has made a decision that differs from consultees' views.

6. As well as using consultation to inform decisions, members can also play an active role in the consultation process. It can be particularly valuable for members to be seen to be involved in consultation on controversial issues.

Overcoming barriers to effective consultation

7. Some authorities worry that consultation will raise public expectations to levels that cannot possibly be met, but if it is properly designed and organised, this should not happen. Authorities do need to make it clear what is on offer, and what people can influence by responding. If there are constraints on what can be done, it is important to say so at the start and explain why this is so.

8. Getting people to participate in consultation can be difficult, especially where there is no history of public involvement. To encourage participation, authorities may initially need to provide incentives. Incentives that have been tried and have worked are:

- 'taking the consultation to the people', talking to people at venues that they already frequent;

- offering modest prizes or gifts for participants;
- providing refreshments and childcare facilities, which can also help to create more of a 'community event' atmosphere; and
- making the event more entertaining, by using participative consultation methods, rather than just having speakers 'talk at' an audience.

9. Some agencies, particularly smaller bodies, are expressing concern about the cost of meeting new, more extensive duties to consult. This is a valid concern, although consultation can help to improve value for money or even to save money. Ways in which agencies can make the cost of consultation more manageable include:

- avoiding duplication of consultation exercises;
- making the widest possible use of consultation results;
- spreading costs by consulting jointly with other agencies;
- incorporating public consultation with other initiatives; and
- using members of the community to carry out consultation.

10. Consultation can produce results that do not represent the views of local people as a whole: there is always a risk that articulate, well-educated people will be better able to use consultation mechanisms than other sections of the community. To prevent this, authorities should avoid relying on methods in which consultees select themselves. Any method that uses a statistically representative sample of

the population (or the service user group, where this is appropriate) reduces the likelihood that the loudest voices will be the ones that are heard.

11. Some consultation techniques may not be suitable – at least, not on their own – for tackling issues where strong feelings already exist in potential consultees’ minds. Holding a public meeting about the siting of a bail hostel may be essential for giving local people a chance to let off steam, and for convincing them that those making the proposal are willing to hear people’s concerns, but it is unlikely to produce a considered debate.

12. Techniques that are participative and deliberative – such as citizens’ juries – can be much more useful for tackling thorny topics. Deliberative techniques usually take time to set up, so may not be appropriate if a controversy blows up suddenly. However, authorities are often aware well in advance of decision-making that they will need to consult on regarding a potentially controversial issue, such as a school or hospital closure. It should therefore be possible to plan appropriate consultation in time.



Planning consultation programmes

13. In a few services, such as development planning, there is a statutory requirement to consult all those who will be directly affected by each decision before it is made. However, in general, it is not realistic for authorities to consult continuously about every service they offer, so it is important to identify priorities. These should be selected to address the issues that are particularly important to the whole organisation, as well as to individual services.

14. Traditionally, authorities have been most likely to consult on issues that do not require specialist

expertise to understand. Nonetheless, it is possible to consult on some complex issues. Many of the simpler techniques – such as questionnaire surveys or public meetings – are not useful in these circumstances, but techniques such as health panels or citizens' juries can be used.

15. It is possible, but not easy, to consult effectively on priorities between services. If simplistic approaches are used, popular or widely used services may be given priority over specialist services used by only relatively few people, but

which may be vital to those who need them. This risk can be reduced by:

- providing information to consultees about the impact of services that they do not use themselves;
- using deliberative consultation techniques that allow consultees to appreciate the consequences of their choices; and
- making it clear to consultees that decision-makers, while taking account of their views, will also consider other factors.

Joint consultation

16. Many members of the public do not know which organisations provide which services. Even when they do, many problems that they have with local services do not fall neatly into the remit of a single organisation. So, consultation plans need to consider services as they affect local people, not as authorities provide them, and some exercises will therefore need to be carried out jointly. Consulting the

public together can encourage officers and members from different organisations to accept joint responsibility for problems and to break down traditional professional barriers.

Consultation plans need to consider services as they affect local people, not as authorities provide them

The principles of good practice

17. Individuals can be consulted as consumers, as taxpayers and as citizens, but the main elements of good practice remain the same. There are four principles of good practice.

Relating consultation to decisions

18. Consultation exercises should relate to a decision that an authority is intending to make and that can be influenced by the result of that consultation. This ensures that:

- it is clear to consultees what they can change by responding to the consultation;
- consultation can be designed specifically to inform the decision being made; and
- feedback can be given to consultees on how their views were taken into account.

Carrying out consultation competently

19. As authorities respond to increasing statutory requirements to consult, there is a risk that some – particularly those with little experience – will do so ineffectively. There is little point in consulting unless the exercise is designed and carried out in such a way that the results will be valid. It is equally important to analyse the results properly. Staff involved in this work 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. Many smaller authorities may not historically have employed anyone with this type of expertise. Growing statutory consultation requirements may make it more cost effective in future for them to do so, to work in partnership with other bodies to share expertise, or to form consortia of neighbouring authorities.

Making consultation inclusive

20. Making consultation inclusive is important because:

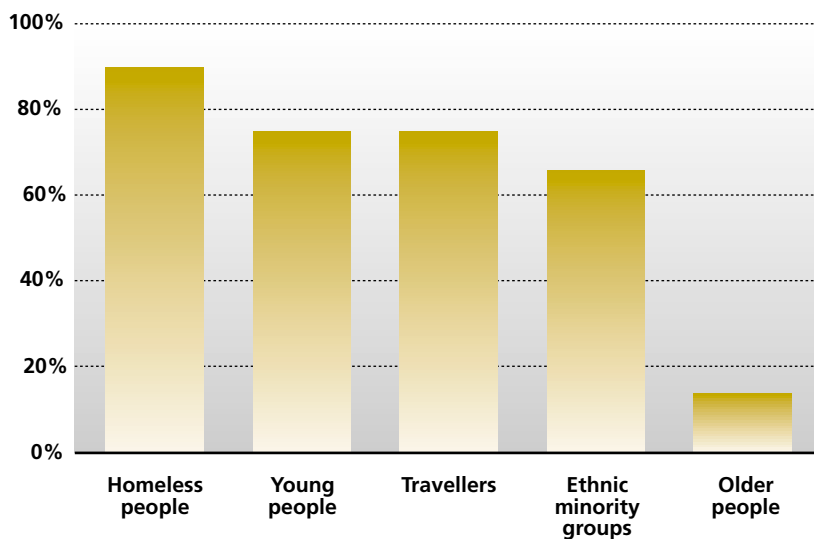
- consultation exercises often need to find out the views of an accurate cross-section of the population as a whole; and
- different sections of the community, particularly minorities, may have needs or views that are different from those of the majority and, if they are not consulted effectively, these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

21. Even authorities that are enthusiastic about consultation say that they find that it is easier to consult some groups than others. These groups are sometimes bundled together and termed ‘hard to reach’, but it is an authority’s job to make sure that its consultation exercises are inclusive. It is often assumed that the groups that authorities struggle to consult effectively are made up of people who are disadvantaged, but the picture is more complex than this [EXHIBIT 1, overleaf].

EXHIBIT 1

Authorities find some groups harder to consult than others

Percentage of authorities reporting difficulties



Source: Audit Commission

22. Some authorities have made consultation inclusive by:

- using important rural events as a focus, and using panel surveys and the parish council structure to consult sparsely populated rural communities;
- using youth forums and play-based techniques to consult children and young people;
- working with non-statutory organisations to encourage members of minority groups to take part in consultation;
- carrying consultation exercises out in minority community languages;
- making consultation exercises accessible to people with disabilities;

- making specific arrangements to consult on issues of concern to particular communities of interest; and
- involving minority groups and socially excluded people directly in carrying out consultation.

Using consultation in practice

23. If consultation is to be useful and cost-effective, the results must inform decisions, yet nearly three-quarters of authorities surveyed for this paper failed to link the results of consultation with decision-making processes. A separate survey found that failure to link consultation with decisions was particularly apparent in resource allocation. Ensuring that consultation results are used should therefore be a high priority for members.

24. Deciding how to take consultation results into account involves making judgements. Local communities are not homogenous, so consultees will frequently express a range of views. On a controversial issue, views may be sharply polarised. In resolving these conflicts, authorities should take the nature of the different kinds of consultation used into account.

If, for example, the subject was complicated, the views of a small but well-informed sample (such as a citizens' jury) may be more relevant

than a larger uninformed sample. When consultees' views diverge, it is particularly important to provide clear feedback: individuals who do

not like the final decision may still feel that the process has given them a fair hearing.

Feedback

25. Providing feedback is a vital part of the consultation process. Good feedback tells consultees what the overall findings of the consultation were and explains how they have been taken into account.

It does not have to be costly: existing communication mechanisms, such as council newspapers, can often be used. It is important for feedback to be honest, especially when consultees

were critical, or when the authority has decided to do something that the majority of consultees did not support.

Evaluating effectiveness

26. At the moment, few authorities attempt to evaluate the effectiveness of their consultation programmes and relatively few know how much they even cost. But, evaluation can help authorities to:

- know whether consultation is genuinely helping them to listen to the public;
- plan how to improve future consultation exercises; and
- use resources that are spent on consultation wisely.

27. Evaluation is not something to think about only at the end of an exercise: it should be a fundamental part of consultation design. Judging whether an individual exercise has been a success depends largely on its objectives, but there is a framework of core questions that authorities should ask [BOX A, overleaf].

Feedback tells consultees what the overall findings were and explains how they have been taken into account

BOX A

Evaluating consultation

Authorities need to consider both the outcomes of consultation and the process

OUTCOMES

- Did consultation directly inform a decision, or shape policy or service delivery arrangements?
- Were the consultation results used to set local performance standards and targets?
- Has the exercise helped to improve the cost effectiveness of a service by making it match users' needs more closely?
- Over time, has consultation resulted in an increase in the percentage of local people who say that the authority listens to their views?

PROCESS

- Did the exercise reach a representative sample of the population or, where this is appropriate, all the target groups?
- Was the response rate high enough to give reliable results?
- Were the results disseminated to consultees, the wider public, relevant staff (including front-line staff) and partner organisations?
- If the exercise did not meet its objectives, why was this, and what steps can be taken to prevent similar problems in future?
- What did the exercise cost, both directly and indirectly?
- What proportion is this of the overall cost of the relevant service?
- How does the cost compare with other similar exercises in the authority or other similar authorities?

- Has the cost been shared by designing the exercise to be valuable to more than one service or organisation?
- Has the programme been planned to cover both corporate and service area priorities?
- Has the programme been planned jointly with partner or neighbouring organisations?
- Is information held corporately about consultation exercises that are either planned or underway across the organisation and, where appropriate, across partner organisations?
- Is consultation being carried out to a consistently high standard across the organisation?
- Are organisation-wide standards for consultation in place and being met?
- Are the results of exercises made available to other services or organisations that might find them helpful?

Consultation and best value

28. Under best value, auditors reporting on best value performance plans will be looking for evidence of a strategic approach to consultation. Inspectors reporting on specific services will be looking for evidence that individual consultation exercises:

- fit into a broader consultation framework;
- have been carried out to a high standard, using appropriate methods;
- have been used to inform relevant decisions.

29. Authorities will be consulting on each service at least once every five years, and about corporate priorities every few years. They will be free to choose how to consult, except where there is already a statutory consultation requirement. Some statutory requirements dictate the point at which consultation takes place. However, in most best value reviews, this is for authorities to decide. Although the 4Cs (challenge, compare, consult and compete) are usually referred to in this order, nothing compels

authorities to tackle them this way. The Commission's best value inspectorate will be more interested in whether it has been carried out at the most appropriate point in the review process.



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**Listen Up!: Effective Community
Consultation** looks at all these issues
in more detail and includes background
information, case studies and specific
guidance.*
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