

INTRODUCTION

It is difficult to develop effective and comprehensive policies without the direct involvement of the community whose responses, behaviour and attitudes will ultimately make Council Policies work. Consultation is not just a statutory requirement under Best Value. It is one of the prerequisites for good and smoothly implemented policy-making.

We at Waltham Forest recognise the need for more direct participation and involvement by the local community in the Council's decision-making. Accordingly, it is the policy of the London Borough of Waltham Forest to pursue and to promote effective consultation with its Citizens in the development of public policy and in the design of programs and services.

The following Guidelines are an attempt to ensure that Council Officers, who undertake consultation, do so in the best possible way giving detailed consideration to important planning steps for successful consultation.

THE BENEFITS OF CONSULTATION

Consultation enhances service to the community by involving members of the public in program and policy matters that affect them directly or indirectly. It also supports and strengthens the individual roles of Members' and the collective responsibilities of Committee Members in the decision-making process. In recognising the rights of the community to have their voices heard and their views carefully considered, consultation also provides Members and Officers with the ideas, input, opinions and options put forward by the local community for responsive and responsible policy and program decisions, and for the establishment of Council priorities.

Public consultation benefits both those in the Council and those served by the Council by:

- Creating a climate in which the community and the Council can exchange views, ideas and information that result in policies and programs responsive to public priorities, concerns and needs;
- Providing the community with a better understanding of policy and program options, and Council responsibilities and constraints;
- Broadening the decision-making sphere by engaging with all sections of the community in seeking consensus on policy and other initiatives; and,
- Promoting a more favourable environment for decisions, hence maximising the potential for agreement and minimising the potential for conflict.

WHEN TO CONSULT?

There is no set criteria as to when consultation is appropriate, necessary or even relevant, however you may consult when:

- there is a statutory or legal duty to do so;
- a new program or policy initiative is being considered;
- you want to evaluate particular services provided;
- you want to initiate new ideas;
- a Council service is to be altered.

It is paramount to the success of the consultation to be honest and transparent about why the consultation is occurring. It is not to be undertaken for the sake of it. If you do not need, and are unlikely to use the response, then ask yourself, if you should be doing it at all.

Indeed this is not an exhaustive list as to when one should undertake consultation, however, it does set out the likely circumstances under which consultation should or may occur.

WHO TO CONSULT?

It is essential that consultation is targeted to the right participants. Not all decisions made by the Council will affect every resident. In determining who will be involved in a particular consultation exercise involves deciding who will be affected by the outcome of the decisions to be made. This process usually involves the use of existing networks and channels of communication to identify who has an interest in the results of the consultation.

All departments will know who their Service Users are, however, it is important that all Service areas within the Council are aware of other key Stakeholders, when undertaking or planning to undertake consultation with a broader section of the community.

Key Stakeholders can include the following:

Residents

Service Users

Potential Service Users/Non-Users

Local Businesses

Council Tax Payers

Councillors

Council Employees

Trade Unions

Local Statutory Agencies (e.g. Health Authority, Police etc.)

Voluntary Sector Organisations/Community Groups

Social Justice Target Groups (Black and Ethnic Minority Groups; People with Disabilities; Women; People Affected by HIV/AIDS; Lesbians and Gay Men; Young People; Elderly People; Economically Disadvantaged Groups)

Central Government

In addition to the above groups departments should also (where appropriate) consult people who come into the borough to use a specific service, e.g. Leisure, Transport etc.

The Stakeholders identified at the beginning of the process will assist in developing a more comprehensive list of citizens who will be, or could be, affected by decisions to be made as a result of the consultation.

The strategies used to identify potential stakeholders could include:

- Letters to voluntary/community organisations, consumer/interest groups;
- Leaflets;
- Use of print media and internet

It is also necessary to ensure that the initial notification of the consultation process is adapted to the needs of all sections of the community. For example, notification and feedback may need to be translated into appropriate community languages, be made available in large print/tape format etc. to ensure the involvement of all.

TYPES OF CONSULTATION

Consultation takes many forms, it can be both formal and informal. Informal consultation can occur regularly and routinely, involving Council employees or Members in a variety of settings and circumstances. Whether the activity is a telephone call, a “coffee shop” encounter, an over-the-counter discussion, or a personal letter. We should take advantage of all situations to assure the community and all stakeholders that their ideas are important and their views valued. Informal consultation should be a regular part of all Service areas consultation activities. It is an important and personal means of relating to and obtaining views of members of the community.

It is possible to group the different types of consultation in the following way:

Informal feedback methods:-	complaints, suggestion cards, public meetings etc.
Deliberative methods:-	e.g. Citizens Juries. Designed to enable people to become better informed on an issue. Discussion of information presented before coming to a conclusion.
Participatory methods:-	develop ‘Social capital’ and involve in decision-making: neighbourhood forums, user groups, other forms of partnership.

In turn, mechanisms under these headings can be designed to achieve the following objectives: to inform (‘level the playing field’ by promoting access to Council services and relevant information); to consult (ask opinions about a range of options/to raise issues); involve (alter the balance of power and encourage participation in decision-making). The headings and the range of objectives above are neither mutually exclusive nor exhaustive lists. It merely serves as a guidance to show a number of possibilities.

Consultation exercises can broadly be split into qualitative and quantitative methods.

Quantitative: (typified by questionnaires). This method allows comparisons to be made over time (if the same questions are asked). Thus the information can be used as a performance measure. It permits a large number of people to be contacted and to respond. Quantitative results make for easier analysis. However, because the questions are predetermined, questionnaires miss issues outside this framework. Also methods focused on written materials assume people are literate.

Qualitative: This method explores motives/attitudes/views in detail. In contrast to quantitative methods it is more usual to involve small numbers of people. The mechanisms are more likely to be open-ended and to require a longer term commitment. Consequently, these tools can be time consuming and costly. Qualitative methodology has the broad advantage of being able to involve the more difficult to reach groups.

GUIDANCE ON METHODOLOGY

Key Stakeholders will include citizens from a range of special interest groups for whom consultation mechanisms will need to be adjusted to meet their specific needs. For example, people from ethnic minorities, people with physical and intellectual disabilities, older people, young people etc. Representation of relevant sections of the community is essential to ensure a comprehensive and inclusive consultation process. To achieve good representation of such groups, it may be best to consult via community based/representative organisations.

The method chosen and the amount of planning undertaken for the consultation will affect the outcome. Consultation methods need to be appropriate to the outcome, the various stages of consultation and the target group. The choice of methods should be made early in the process and be based on clear expectations of why particular groups are involved.

Methods chosen will take into consideration the answers to the following:

- ⇒ the timescale available for consultation
- ⇒ size of the target group to be consulted
- ⇒ understanding and taking account of the values/culture/needs of each stakeholder group and the potential impact on the choice of method
- ⇒ the need to tailor consultation to group/s who are the target of the consultation
- ⇒ the resources available

The provision of information is the first step in the consultation process. The initial information should outline the parameters of the consultation and provide any relevant background to the issues.

These should include:

- The aims of the consultation
- Methods of consultation
- Steps in the process
- Who will ultimately make the decisions as a result of the consultation
- The timescale

- How and when feedback will occur.

The information provided can take many forms, however, the most important element in deciding the method is an understanding of the target audience. It is also important to ensure that all information is provided prior to the next stage of the process to enable participants to be prepared, be fully informed and ensure that their time is used efficiently.

Methods chosen for consultation need to be flexible and efficient. It is usually necessary to employ models, which provide both qualitative and quantitative data about the issue. If the choice of method involves Public Meetings, Workshops or Conferences, then it is advisable, to involve stakeholders in the process of selecting a facilitator.

The process of gathering information is crucial in the process of consultation. The community will have confidence in the process only if they clearly understand that the information will affect the outcome and will not be used inappropriately. For this reason, consultees need to ensure a commitment to feeding back to participants as to how the information has been used.

There are a range of different methods of consulting and involving people which will help in delivering and developing services in partnership with local people. Of course it is not possible to recommend any one method to suit any particular situation. The key point is that different techniques will be appropriate for different circumstances. Outlined below is a useful guide on some of the key consultation methods available, highlighting relative advantages, disadvantages, situations in which they are most effective and an indication of possible costs.

Focus Groups

These are small groups (8-10 people) with particular characteristics, consisting of local people. Discussions tend to be informal and loosely structured, led by a trained interviewer on a particular topic, requiring qualitative responses.

Advantages:

Focus groups are easy to set up and can be used for consultation on a variety of topics/issues. Also effective in consulting with different sections of the community, or alternatively with a specific target group. Useful for complex issues as small groups tend to engender richer discussions.

Disadvantages:

Possibility that strong personalities may take over, so moderator must be strong to avoid dominance of individuals. Others may be inhibited to give opinions. Small groups means that the results will not be representative of the community, unless a large number of groups are set up.

Situation/Circumstances for which method is most effective:

Useful in tackling and discussing complex issues particularly in relation to policy issues. Also helpful for initiating new ideas.

Costs:

Moderate costs are involved, if carried out in-house then relatively inexpensive.

Citizens Juries

A 'jury' of 12-25 people representative of the local population meets over several days. It hears evidence from a range of 'witnesses' (Officers/Individuals with special knowledge of the subject in question). The jury weighs up the information and draws up conclusions and recommendations arising from the arguments. Although the end decision remains with the Council, there is a commitment to take full account of the recommendations from the jury.

Advantages:

Can be used for very complex or controversial subjects. Provides informed feedback as participants can be made fully aware of all the issues. Good for involving in decision-making process. Method works especially well where the Local Authority has made progress in consulting with the public.

Disadvantages:

Responses will not be completely representative, as the sample is very small. Will not be possible to involve all interest groups in the jury. Method is fairly costly. People may be inhibited to give opinions, also possibility of strong personalities taking over.

Situation/Circumstances for which method is most effective:

The technique is particularly good for service prioritising or strategic planning. Also issues over which it is difficult to reach a conclusion.

Costs:

This method is expensive and time consuming. Estimated costs are between £15,000 and £23,000 and can vary according to the amount paid to jurors and whether experts are bought in. Staff costs can also be quite high.

Mystery Shoppers

A simple technique where 'shoppers' are comprehensively briefed on a service and asked to note key aspects. Method can give good feedback on services and can also test whether e.g. correct advice/information is given. This can either be done by a researcher or in-house by a member of staff posing as the 'mystery shopper'.

Advantages:

Participants feel a real sense of involvement. The exercise can throw up issues other methods may omit. It ensures a consistent approach to testing service effectiveness and provides richer feedback than questionnaires.

Disadvantages:

The technique does not represent a broad form of assessment and does not provide quantitative statistics. It is only effective in assessing existing services, and does not explore alternative approaches to service delivery.

Situation/Circumstances for which method is most effective:

In assessing service quality, in particular for front-line services. It is also effective in assessing specific aspects of a service and may be able to identify problem areas.

Costs:

This method is very cost effective, especially if in-house staff are used to carry out the exercise. However, costs can fluctuate depending on the size and geographical coverage of the service to be assessed.

Public Meetings

An open invitation to residents (sometimes in particular areas) to hear plans and discuss specific services or issues. It provides a public forum for debate.

Advantages:

Public Meetings are adaptable to a large number of issues, and provides a mechanism for questioning and challenging. It tends to be more successful with area specific/planning proposals. Provides an opportunity for the Local Authority to put forward its side. Can also be effective in facilitating joint consultation with the Councils partners e.g. with the Health Authority.

Disadvantages:

Public Meetings generally have a low turnout. There is the danger of a single interest group monopolising the debate. Not everyone will have a chance to speak. Possibility that people may be inhibited to give opinions. A number of research studies show that this method can be one of the least effective methods if not carried out well. For example, not having sufficient representatives from key organisations, not publicising well enough, allowing some to dominate and not creating an informal atmosphere etc.

Situation/Circumstances for which method is most effective:

A controversial issue close to the public usually generates a very high turnout. Useful in addressing specific concerns which may have been raised by the community itself.

Costs:

This method is relatively low in cost, however, costs of publicity, room hire, refreshments etc. will need to be incurred.

Open Days/Exhibitions

Open Days and Exhibitions are often used by Local Authorities to provide information/advice on a wide range of services and obtain feedback on proposed initiatives from the public.

Advantages:

Open Days and Exhibitions have the advantage of being locally based e.g. on estates. Allows the provision of information on a wide scale. This method has the ability to raise awareness and the possibility of reaching 'hard-to-reach' audiences. It can potentially reach large audiences over a short period. It allows a longer period for the public to comment on proposed schemes than public meetings. Facilitates direct interaction with the public, and can collect wide ranging feedback. Particularly effective when combined with other participation techniques e.g. focus group or questionnaire.

Disadvantages:

It is quite difficult to quantify the feedback and identify comments in terms of target groups. If held on the 'wrong' site or venue, it will not yield good response. This technique may be seen as an information giving exercise only rather than direct consultation.

Situation/Circumstances for which method is most effective:

Suitable for obtaining feedback/views from the public on specific proposals/issues or projects. Also it is appropriate as a complementary method to other forms of consultation.

Costs:

The costs of such events are not usually high, but can vary according to the duration of the exhibition. Events will need to be staffed appropriately and costs of hiring a venue will need to be incurred.

Meetings with Organised Groups/User Panels

This is an issue or service specific discussion, which brings together groups of service users. The participants are often representative of a particular interest/group. It provides an opportunity for the Council to test out ideas, and obtain comment on Council services.

Advantages:

Can identify particular concerns about services. This method can also act as a pool of recruitment for other exercises. Such meetings or panels can be held away from Local Authority territory, thus removing faceless bureaucracy image. Smaller groups of between 6-12 people tend to engender richer discussions. Facilitates a channel for questioning and challenging and also has the potential of building good working relationships.

Disadvantages:

The panel or group may not necessarily be a representative sample. Possibility that strong personalities may take over and others maybe inhibited to give opinions.

Situation/Circumstances for which method is most effective:

Particularly useful when changes to services wish to be tested/discussed and for receiving feedback on proposed improvements to services. Also helpful for picking up particular problems and identifying areas for improvement.

Costs:

Moderate costs are involved, to include staff time, expenses to participants, hire of room, and publicity/advertising.

Self-Completed Questionnaires

Questionnaires on single issues or broad number of issues can be sent to a sample of the population. The format may be very rigid or with a mixture of open questions. They can be sent to respondents by post or to target groups in other ways.

Advantages:

Has the potential of revealing interesting information if the sample and response are broad enough. Solid, quantified results can justify the decisions taken from them.

Questionnaires are flexible and so can adapt to a large number of issues. The technique is relatively cheap and gives baseline data on issues you may wish to monitor again.

Disadvantages:

Not good for eliciting qualitative information. There is a possibility of a low response rate. There may be a biased response (e.g. those with an axe to grind!) therefore can skew the validity of results. Method also assumes a high degree of literacy.

Situation/Circumstances for which method is most effective:

Can be used for obtaining satisfaction ratings for services. Also useful for gathering information/views on straightforward issues.

Costs:

Relatively cheap method especially if carried out in-house. Costs are generally associated with printing and postage. Analysis does take up considerable staff time.

Citizens Panel

Representative and large sample of local residents, recruited in two stages. Firstly, people are contacted by telephone/in person/by post. Secondly, a representative panel is then structured from the respondents. The panel is contacted regularly either by post or telephone survey for their views on a range of subjects.

Advantages:

This method can be used as a basis for further consultation exercises. It is easy to select specialist samples e.g. gender, age, ethnicity etc. Methodologically sound as panel is representative.

Disadvantages:

Needs to be very well designed to meet objective. This method is not good for eliciting qualitative information. The panel members may have very different views, thus hard to see consensus from which to act. Cannot be used for complex issues.

Situation/Circumstances for which method is most effective:

Particularly useful for exploring issues which affect all residents in the borough. Appropriate for straightforward subjects which can easily be explored in a short questionnaire or by phone.

Costs:

The cost for the setting up and recruitment of the panel in WF was around £28,000. There are also subsequent running costs every year estimated to be between £6,000 - £16,000.

Neighbourhood Forums

Invitation to people in individual wards/neighbourhoods to discuss micro issues (of importance to that locality). Usually held regularly to build up channels of communication. Residents are given the opportunity to influence Local Authority policies.

Advantages:

Has the advantage of being held away from Local Authority territory and so removing faceless bureaucracy image. Small groups tend to engender richer discussion and feedback. Once set-up in can be used on a regular basis.

Disadvantages:

Method may yield a low turnout, which may also be unrepresentative of the community. Danger of single interest group monopolising the debate. Not everyone will have a chance to speak and may be dominated by strong personalities.

Situation/Circumstances for which method is most effective:

Good for routine and regular consultation covering a range of topics. In particular useful where a service/issue is relevant to a particular location.

Costs:

Initial start-up costs maybe high (to set up structure), however, once this has been incurred it is relatively cheap to run - staff resources will need to be considered.

Suggestion Boxes

This method is used to record the views/ideas of the public visiting locations or using services. It is a tool for drawing the Local Authority's attention to problems and suggesting avenues for improvements. These can also be used for complaints.

Advantages:

If strategically placed, they can provide additional information which may be missed by other consultation methods. There are no boundaries on comments, and so citizens are free to raise any pertinent issues.

Disadvantages:

Not all views would be taken on board (problem implicit in consultation exercises) therefore may raise expectations. Also cannot be taken as in-depth views on services.

Situation/Circumstances for which method is most effective:

Useful in obtaining direct feedback from service users on problem areas and as part of a continuous improvement mechanism to services.

Costs:

This method is extremely cheap to administer, however staff time will be needed to analyse.

General Survey

This can either be a postal or interview survey (face-to-face or on the phone) of a sample of the local community or service users.

Advantages:

This method has the potential of covering a wide range of subjects, and has the advantage of obtaining results from a random, direct sample of public opinion. Also face-face interviews are a popular method of obtaining the views of a representative sample of the population.

Disadvantages:

Cannot be used for complex or in-depth issues which cannot be answered through a short questionnaire. Questions need to be planned carefully to avoid the possibility of skewing responses. Personal interviews (face-face) can be resource intensive.

Situation/Circumstances for which method is most effective:

Useful for finding out general public opinion on broad issues or for satisfaction ratings on services.

Costs:

Postal or telephone surveys are relatively cheap, however face-to-face interviews are more expensive and trained interviewers will need to be used.

ENSURING THE CONSULTATION PROCESS IS ACCESSIBLE TO ALL

The consultation process aims at allowing maximum opportunity for the community to make their concerns heard and be taken into account, before a final decision is made by the Council. In order to allow the participation of all, we need to be aware of special needs. Once the needs of specific groups or hard-to reach sections of the community are assessed and known, it can then be possible to take measures to allow for the removal of some of the barriers which obstruct the participation of such groups.

There are a number of areas in which simple adjustments can make the process of consultation more accessible.

Communication is a key element, you need to think about the following issues:

- ensuring all documents are in plain English and also available in community languages
- avoid using complex written documents full of jargon
- will ethnic translators/interpreters be required?
- is there a need for a signer?
- are documents available in large print/tape/braille format?
- if using community/voluntary organisations - has enough time been allowed for them to contact and gain feedback from their members?
- is a hearing loop available?

You also need to think about physical access issues, for example:

- is the consultation venue accessible? e.g. wheelchair access; hand rails; accessible toilets etc.
- is transport available?
- will crèche services need to be provided?

Again this is not an exhaustive list, it simply provides the areas to which consideration should be given when planning to undertake consultation.

FEEDBACK ON CONSULTATION

It is essential that feedback is given on the outcomes of consultation and the resulting decisions. Participants should have clear timescales outlined as to when the outcomes will be known. Timescales should be developed in the initial planning process which have been agreed to by all participants. The planning process should identify which participants need feedback and how this will be given. There needs to be recognition that not all participants will require feedback on all issues.

Details of the outcomes of consultation should include the following:

- an acknowledgement of the participants' contribution;
- a record of the consultation process;
- demonstrated evidence that participants have been heard;
- an outline of the decisions made; and
- a record of how final decisions were reached.

A clear commitment is needed by all parties to complete the consultation before any decisions are made. This ensures credibility of the consultation process. The results of consultation need to be available to all participants, even when the consultation has resulted in no action.

EVALUATING THE CONSULTATION PROCESS

The evaluation of consultation methods and the outcomes of the consultation process are both important aspects of evaluation. It is important that the consultation process itself is evaluated to identify the strengths and weaknesses in the overall process. This will enable the aspects of the process which have not worked as well as others, to be modified for the next consultation. The evaluation needs to be identified at the beginning of the process and include mechanisms which will allow for review and improvements throughout the process.

Evaluation needs to aim at testing the achievements of the objectives of each consultation process, as well as assessing how citizens perceived the effectiveness of the process. This may take the form of an audit, assessment/review procedures, performance indicators etc.

A CHECKLIST ON CONSULTATION

To ensure consistent best practice in all consultation and community engagement exercises, Officers should follow the 10 point checklist below:

1. Always make clear why you are consulting.
2. Always make clear what you are consulting on.
3. Identify all the groups and individuals who are likely to be affected or concerned about the matters you are consulting on.
4. Tell people the timetable and allow sufficient time for people to be informed and to send back their responses.
5. Make it clear who will manage the process, and ensure contact details are available to the consultees.
6. Provide the necessary means for all to participate in the consultation (accessible media, community languages and accessible venues), and identify ways to actively encourage marginalised groups to participate.
7. Co-ordinate the consultation with any others taking place at the same time, or covering similar topics or sections of the community.
8. Tell people what you will do with their comments.
9. Decide how to publicise the results, so people affected know the outcome.
10. Decide how to evaluate the effectiveness of the consultation.