How to Choose Consultation Methods

There are a wealth of methods available to consult people. Many of these methods - such as focus groups - are well established in the private sector and the public sector have started to use them more consistently in recent years. Others - such as citizens' panels and citizens' juries - tend to be used mainly in the public sector.

The aim of this guide is to provide you with an overview of the main consultation methods which are available - both qualitative and quantitative. It will give you information and advice on how to choose the most appropriate method(s) to use, depending on what you want to find out, and who you want to ask.

This guide is part of a wider toolkit which looks at managing and undertaking consultation in West Berkshire Council (WBC). It provides practical guidance on how to develop, conduct and commission consultation and assess the quality of any output that you produce. You can view the entire Toolkit on the Consultation area of the intranet.

This leaflet is an introduction to some of the main methods. The Consultation Toolkit (RESOURCE 10) available on the intranet provides you with more detailed information on each approach, as well details of where to go for more information.
Introduction to Qualitative and Quantitative Methods

Generally speaking, methods can be split into two types:

- **Quantitative** - i.e. surveys. These provide statistical information using samples of people. It answers "how many" or "what" type-questions. If the sample is drawn up using statistically reliable methods, then the results can be extrapolated out to the population as a whole.

- **Qualitative** - i.e. interviews and focus groups. These are more interactive and discursive in nature and are used to gain a more detailed understanding of issues - answering "how" and "why" questions. Because it uses smaller numbers of people, it cannot provide statistically reliable results although it allows us to better understand people's attitudes / opinions.

Qualitative and quantitative methods, although different, are complementary. Often, the best and most useful consultation is developed using a combination of the two.

For example, a consultation to test residents' views on a proposal to build, say, a new shopping precinct - could be done using a questionnaire. But more may be learnt if some residents are able to participate in, for example, a focus group so that hidden concerns and issues - not easily highlighted in the survey - can be discussed and considered. Similarly, a public meeting called to discuss the implications of a health authority's plans to rationalise services often attracts vociferous objectors. Only by supplementing such forms of consultation with a quantitative survey can you judge how representative these views are.

**Qualitative Methods**

Some of the main techniques in use are listed below, however this is not a complete list of qualitative or quantitative approaches available. See RESOURCE 10 on the Consultation Toolkit on the intranet for more information.

Focus Group

A group where specific issues are explored in-depth for 1-2 hours through a structured, but open ended discussion. Groups typically consist of 5-8 people led by a trained facilitator. Groups can be a sample of the population as a whole, or structured to test the opinion of specific communities of interest. Keeping similar types of people together helps reduce inhibition and promote discussion. Discussions may focus on the specific needs of that group, on the quality of a particular service, or on ideas for a broader policy / strategy.

Individual Interviews

One-on-one discussions, lasting for about an hour, framed around a particular topic area. Because only one person is being interviewed, you are able to spend a lot of time finding out what individual people think and developing a more detailed understanding of the reasons and rationale behind people's attitudes and opinions. Personal, face-to-face contact means that issues can be probed to a greater depth.

Paired Interviews

This is a useful technique with less confident groups of people. School children will come with their best friend when they might not turn up by themselves. This approach offers a degree of intimacy and privacy, but the respondent does not feel under the spotlight all the time. It is a technique that is not widely used enough. Often, more can be achieved in a 20-30 minute paired interview than in a drawn out focus group.

Service User Group

Regular meetings with users of a service, either with a fixed, or open membership - e.g. tenants' associations, sports and neighbourhood user groups. People discuss issues directly affecting them relating to the management and development of a particular service. The nature of the group and how representative it is will vary. Also, you will need to determine any rights of the group to make recommendations or share decision-making.

Citizens' Workshops

Group of 12-20 people who are brought together to learn about, discuss and give their
views on a particular issue. Typically meet for
1 day, either continuously, or for a couple of
hours spread over several days.

Citizens’ Jury

A panel of non-specialists who meet over 3-5
days to examine carefully a complex or
contentious issue of public significance. A jury
is made up of about 12 people and should
represent the general public rather than any
interest or sector. Supported by a facilitator,
jurors hear from and cross-examine a variety
of specialist witnesses and then deliberate to
reach a judgement. A report is drawn up
setting out the views of the jury - along with
any differences of opinion. It recommends
action to the Council which then takes the final
decision.

Mystery Shopper

Mystery shopping can provide you with very
specific and detailed feedback on areas of your service. Someone either commissioned or
recruited by you, tests the service, looking at a
number of predetermined areas, and then
reports back. This should give you a picture of
the type of experience a real user would have.
The process is relatively simple, although you
get more out of it if it is well structured.

Public Meeting

Meetings arranged for members of the public
to find out and express their opinion on a
particular issue. Meetings are usually held in a
public place convenient for people to get to.
This is a more traditional method of engaging
with people. The meeting can allow for
opportunities for small group discussions and
feedback.

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<th>Weaknesses</th>
<th>When to use it</th>
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<td>Focus Group</td>
<td>Specific interest groups can be targeted. People can feel more confident in groups. Discussion can stimulate thinking and spark ideas within the group.</td>
<td>May need an experienced moderator. Analysis is time consuming and complex. Dominant participants might shout other more inhibited members of the group down.</td>
<td>When you need to understand reasons for attitude, behaviour and generate new ideas. Before a survey to identify issues to quantify. After a survey to investigate results in greater depth. Test opinions of interest groups.</td>
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<td>Individual Interviews</td>
<td>In-depth and detailed, personal information. Can obtain a wider range of responses. Good for consulting excluded groups. Can identify new issues that may not have been thought of.</td>
<td>Expensive. Time consuming - especially the data analysis.</td>
<td>To get a feel for issues. To gain 'expert' views. Before a survey to identify issues to quantify. After a survey to investigate results in greater depth.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Paired Interviews</td>
<td>As per individual interviews. Good for less confident people - e.g. younger people. Offers people a degree of privacy to express views.</td>
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<td>Service User Group</td>
<td>Regular dialogue. Builds positive relationships with users.</td>
<td>Can become dominated by particular issues and groups. May not be typical of the views of users. Can become &quot;institutionalised&quot; to see the service from a provider's point of view.</td>
<td>To get regular feedback. To engage users in service development. To find out what people want / need; test options for change and views on conflicting priorities; and support bids for resources.</td>
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<td>Citizens’ Workshop</td>
<td>More fruitful in getting feedback than public meetings or written comments. Can identify issues that may not have been thought of. Mixing groups helps each to better understand the others’ point of view.</td>
<td>Success depends on whether participants can be considered representative, the terms of reference for discussion and abilities of facilitator to control the session. Analysing the discussion is time consuming.</td>
<td>Usually to explore issues on a one-off basis.</td>
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<td>Citizens’ Jury</td>
<td>Explore very complex issues. Participants become very aware of the topic. Opportunity to introduce new perspectives and challenge existing ones. Allows a high level of feedback.</td>
<td>Expensive. Time consuming. Limited numbers directly involved may reduce larger public ownership of the results.</td>
<td>When informed public input is needed. Where there is a specific, relatively small scale question to answer. When the will exists to action the jury’s recommendations.</td>
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<td>Mystery Customer</td>
<td>Precise and detailed feedback. Simple to implement. Flexible and immediate.</td>
<td>Suspicious staff. Only gives isolated instances and small samples. Regular shoppers could get to experienced / stale.</td>
<td>More applicable to front-line, person-to-person services. When you want to know how a service operates or how customers / clients are being dealt with.</td>
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<td>Public Meeting</td>
<td>Opportunities for people to comment on matters that directly or indirectly affect them. Can demonstrate public consultation / build up good relationships.</td>
<td>People may find it difficult to contribute through a lack of knowledge; greater interest in local, topical or personal concerns. Can be very complex and unpredictable. Can be intimidating and be hijacked by interest groups or vocal individuals.</td>
<td>Its most useful purpose may be simply to provide information rather than any more meaningful consultation per se.</td>
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**Quantitative Methods**

Surveys are designed to gather and compare information from a large number of people. They are not suitable for getting a detailed understanding of the rationale behind people's attitudes and opinions - you should use qualitative approaches described above for this.

Surveys are most commonly thought of as self-completion postal questionnaires, but can also be administered over the telephone, the internet or face-to-face in people's homes.

**Postal Surveys**

Relatively inexpensive and can be sent to a large, geographically-dispersed sample. As the questionnaires are self-completed, they must be relatively simple and short (15 minutes maximum).

They generally suffer from low response rates and can result in biased samples as certain types of people are more likely to respond. However, a lot depends on how much care is put into presenting and administering the survey. Better responses can be obtained by including pre-paid envelopes, posting reminders, offering financial incentives, or holding a prize draw.

They can produce poor quality data as respondents may misinterpret questions or not bother to fill out some sections (especially personal information, which limits the amount of analysis you can effectively do later). They also suffer from slow turnaround times.
Electronic Surveys
Similar to postal surveys, but are administered online so they can include some routing of questions - i.e. people who answer 'No' are taken straight to question 6, whilst those answering 'Yes' are taken straight to question 7.

They are relatively cheap, quick, easy to administer and analyse because all the data is gathered centrally. This approach is limited however since only people who have internet access can participate. Some people may feel daunted filling out online forms, especially if personal information is required.

Telephone Surveys
Less expensive than face-to-face interviewing. Has a high turnaround speed and is good to survey a geographically dispersed sample.

Drawbacks of this method are that it is easier for people to decline to respond and so response rates are lower than those for face-to-face interviewing.

Face-To-Face Surveys
These are usually undertaken in people’s own home. This is the most expensive but most effective method of survey data collection. Interviews can last up to 1½ hours and response rates are usually significantly higher than other methods.

The face-to-face nature of the survey allows interviewers to create a rapport with the interviewee, explore more complicated questions and show visual cues. Self-completion elements of the survey for sensitive issues are also possible by allowing the respondent to fill out a separate module of questions during the interview.

Comparison of Different Survey Approaches

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<td>Postal</td>
<td>Easy to administer and analyse. Can contact a large number of people in a short period of time. Have software and expertise in-house.</td>
<td>Can only gather a small amount of information. Low response rates. Limited length and complexity of questions. Easy to misinterpret questions. Cannot control who answers the questions.</td>
<td>Relatively cheap - although consider hidden costs such as printing, enveloping, postage, data inputting.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Electronic</td>
<td>Large numbers of people can be contacted at low cost. Relatively easy to conduct in-house. Easy to survey people over a wide area. Response rates are quicker and cut out postal and inputting costs.</td>
<td>Not everyone has access to the internet. People can find on-line forms daunting. Little control over who fills in the questionnaire. Need to publicise the survey more and maintain clear web links.</td>
<td>Relatively cheap. Some ‘off the shelf’ packages already available in-house - i.e. SNAP.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Telephone</td>
<td>Relatively quick and easy to conduct in house. More complex issues can be tackled. Easy to survey people over a wide area. Easy to reschedule interviews to more convenient times.</td>
<td>Biased sampling. Have high refusal rates and cold calling can often annoy the people.</td>
<td>Moderately expensive. If carried out in-house, think about the number of staff hours as well as the cost of telephone calls and data processing and analysis.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Face-to-Face</td>
<td>Longer and more flexible questionnaires. More complex routing of questions. Questions can be more probing and complex. More sensitive or difficult subjects can be explored. Can ensure you interview the right person. Can use visual aids. High response rates. Better data quality.</td>
<td>Expensive. Time consuming, labour intensive and require trained interviewers.</td>
<td>The most expensive. Trained interviewers are usually paid for each interview they complete - plus travel expenses. Very labour intensive and involves lengthy timescales for completing and analysing the interviews.</td>
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**How To Choose Which Methods To Use**

You should match your approach to suit your needs. Things you should consider when choosing the right method are:

1. What am I trying to do? Simply Provide Information or Engage people?
2. What kind of information do I need?
3. How much time do I have?
4. What resources do I have?
5. Who am I consulting?
6. What has been done before - has it been successful?

There is no 'right way' and the method / combination of methods you choose will be dependent on what you are trying to achieve, the type of people you are consulting, the level of detail and understanding you need.

Therefore, think about what sort of response you need for your exercise. Are you interested in finding out 'how many' or 'what proportion' of people agree, or do you need to find out 'why' or 'how' people agree. Do you want to be able to talk about people generally or do you want an in-depth, informed opinion from a smaller group of people? Do you want to understand personal experiences? Do you want to find out how or why people can change their views through discussion and debate?

The most important tip is not to rely on just one method. Using more than one increases the chances of better results, both in terms of quality and quantity.

Knowing something about the people you want to consult with helps you to choose the most suitable method(s). It can be useful to use one approach to develop another - i.e. use focus groups to inform a survey, or to investigate in more detail particular outcomes of a survey. If you are linking methods in this way, make sure that you are talking to the same audiences.

Think about the type of responses you are likely to get from different groups. Be prepared for different responses from people who are more expert in the field, than from those who are less familiar with it. Decide how you are going to weight views. Whose opinion is more important? Can you please everybody? How are you going to explain what decisions you have taken to different people?

It is important in planning any consultation that objectives and expectations are clearly set out from the start and that the approach taken suits these. Some factors to consider include:

**Who is Consulted?**

- **Representativeness.** Some approaches, such as a properly sampled survey, can ensure a representative section of views are gathered. With others, participation is much more self-selecting. Remember that qualitative methods do not attempt to be representative, but aim to gather a more detailed understanding of attitudes and views.
• **Accessibility.** Different approaches require different skills from participants, such as literacy and language skills, public speaking skills, confidence, ability to deal with complex written materials etc. Clearly, this can make some approaches unsuitable for some members of the community.

• **Particular Stakeholders.** Some consultations require the involvement of specific individuals or organisations who may be affected by the proposals and whose involvement is needed.

**What Resources are Needed?**

• **Cost.** Different approaches will vary greatly. You will need to consider what resources you have available.

• **Expertise.** Particular skills such as chairing, or facilitating meetings, designing questionnaires, interviewing, preparing exhibitions or working with different sections of the community are needed. Some of these skills you may need to get from outside WBC.

• **Employee and Member time.** Some exercises will be more time consuming than others. You will therefore need to consider what time people have available to devote to the exercise.

**Other issues**

• **Timescales.** Some consultations can be implemented in a shorter time scale than others. It will be necessary to identify how long specific methods take to plan, carry out and analyse, as well as to act on the information gained.

• **Snapshot or Flow of Information?** Some approaches will produce a large amount of information at one time - i.e. a one-off survey. Others produce a flow of information over time - i.e. forums - thereby enabling a dialogue and reporting back on developments.

• **Information giving and deliberation.** Some approaches focus on providing information and helping participants investigate the issue before giving their views. This requires much more time and commitment form participants which not everyone will be prepared to give.

**Devolving decision making.** Consultation may seek information which the Council will use to make its own decisions; other approaches may let participants make the decisions. It needs to be clear to everyone concerned, which of these is involved.

**Using The Internet For Consultation**

Use of the internet is growing very quickly. The development of new technology is making it possible to consult and involve users in new ways and making participation easier for people is one of the key ways to increase levels of involvement.

Many organisations now use the internet to streamline the work that they do and consultation is no exception. The website can be used for running online surveys, but also as a means of, distributing papers and receiving comments. Provided you have organisations’ / individuals’ email addresses, posting a document on the website and asking for replies by email will save you both printing and postage costs but also time in receiving, considering and replying to responses.

The internet is a useful tool, especially if you are asking for comments from specific groups and particularly organisations. However, there is a danger that significant social groups will be excluded if you rely too much on this media. Some lower income groups, or older people may not have access to - or regularly use - computers and the internet. There will always be some people who do not want to use the internet.

**Further Information**

We hope you found this booklet helpful. If you would like further information see the Consultation Toolkit on the intranet which will give a more detailed discussion and provide you with further advice, resources and pointers.

If you would like any further help and advice with your consultation please call Jason Teal (Consultation Officer) on x2102.