Local Government Association

Research

# Understanding the views of residents: An introduction to surveys and consultation

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# Introduction

## Why conduct a residents' survey?

Do you know what your residents think of your council? Are they happy with the way you run things, the value for money they receive, and do they think you keep them well informed?

The answers to these questions are vital for councils wanting to understand their communities, improve their services and direct their resources at the issues that matter most– factors that are increasingly important as councils try to balance reduced budgets with greater responsibilities as leaders and shapers of place. This resource has been developed to help you understand what your residents think of your activities, priorities and services and outlines how the Local Government Association can help you conduct valuable and informative surveys and consultations.

The extent to which residents feel informed and engaged by their council, and the trust that they place in them, directly affects their views about their council and the services they receive. This in turn impacts on their levels of satisfaction and ultimately, a council's public reputation. Conducting a residents' survey provides an opportunity to understand what your communities think and offers you valuable insight into how your organisation is perceived by your wider community. It also helps you to demonstrate your transparency and accountability to the people you serve and helps you to monitor, and address, any changes in satisfaction levels over time.

Surveying your residents is also important to help shape strategy, messages and channels. Understanding how residents consume information, and more importantly would like to, enables you to develop messages that resonate with your communities – something that is critical for building trust and confidence in your organisation. It also helps you to make sure that the way you communicate about your services is reaching the people you need to - opening up the opportunity for residents to help shape how you as an organisation improve services, change lives and create places that people want to live, work and invest in.

## Getting started on a residents' survey

Before you start any survey or consultation process it is useful to ask a few key questions:

- Is the information we need held anywhere else in the council? Do we need to conduct a survey or consultation exercise at all?
- What changes or decisions do you want to be able to action or inform as a result of the survey?
- Do other parts of the council or partners have an interest in this work and have they been consulted?
- Are there survey, research, consultation or analysis experts within the council who you can go to for advice or assistance?
- What budget do you have available, if any? Should you commission an external research company or undertake the research in house?
- What method do you want to use? Postal, telephone, face-to-face or online surveys are all possible, and this document discusses the approaches that are best suited to specific local situations.
- Who do you want to survey and do you have contact details for them? Ensuring a high quality contact list can often be a challenging aspect of a survey, but it is important to ensure that you are targeting the right groups to gain maximum value from your survey.

- When do you need the results? It is easy to underestimate how long it takes to conduct a survey – you need to ensure sufficient time to consult internally on the questions, conduct the fieldwork (at the LGA we prefer to give at least four weeks for respondents to complete our surveys) and undertake the analysis.

# Section 1: Our survey support

The LGA provides a range of different support services to help you understand resident satisfaction in your area and compare results at a regional and national level.

## At a local level

To help you understand the views of your communities we have developed 'Are You Being Served?' – a set of free, high-quality guidance notes and questions that all councils can use. Are You Being Served? has been developed in partnership by the LGA and Ipsos MORI and includes questions on six key themes, all of which can impact a council's reputation. The six themes are:

- satisfaction with the local area
- satisfaction with the way the council runs things
- trust in the council
- responsiveness of the council
- how informed residents feel
- their perception of the value for money the council provides.

The questions have designed to be flexible to suit local circumstances and reduce the cost of collecting data. You are free to use all of the questions or just those that are of interest locally. You can download the questions for your own use here.

If you use the Are You Being Served? questions and follow the methodology set out in the guidance notes, you will be able to benchmark your results. This means that you will be able to compare your performance against other councils who have also followed the Are You Being Served? approach. You will only be able to accurately compare your results with other councils if you follow the guidelines exactly.

To see how your results compare you will need to upload your data to LG Inform – the LGA's online performance database. We can accept data collected by telephone, post, online or face-to-face, as long as your survey has followed the Are You Being Served? guidelines. Once your data has been uploaded you will receive your benchmarked results in a ready-made report.

You may not always have the time or resources to run a resident survey in line with our Are You Being Served? guidelines, or may want to ask different questions. You can of course still do this, but you will not be able to accurately compare your results to those held on the LG Inform database.

If you are using another survey method or question set, we would still advise you to survey a large enough, random sample of people to represent your diverse population. We recommend a minimum of approximately 500 people to give you an effective perspective of

the overall views of your general population, while also still providing you with the opportunity to conduct some more detailed analysis of the different groups within that population (for example analysing results by gender or broad age brackets). Your in-house research team, or survey supplier, will be able to offer advice on how best to get a random, representative sample for your area.

There may also be occasions where other types of sampling are more appropriate. For example, you might want to survey a particular group of residents. You can find advice on how to target your surveys to specific groups in section 2.

If you need to conduct a survey quickly, or with limited resources, you may wish to consider a less representative method of finding out resident views, such as conducting face-to-face surveys in town centres. It is important to note that the results from this survey work may not be statistically robust and will not be fully comparable to other surveys, but may provide a snapshot of how a selection of people surveyed at that time feel about specific issues.

**To find out more about benchmarking local resident satisfaction survey results please visit: http://lginform.local.gov.uk/about-lg-inform/resident-satisfaction.**

**Commissioning local resident satisfaction surveys**

If your council is looking to conduct a resident satisfaction survey we can help you to find polling companies that are familiar with our Are You Being Served? guidance and will be able to run surveys that comply with our benchmarking criteria. You can visit our list of research companies here.

### At a regional and national level

Three times a year, the LGA runs a national poll of 1,000 British adults to track resident satisfaction with councils. This is designed to complement councils' local work to provide a quarterly picture of residents' views across the country.

The national polling uses the same questions that are in the Are You Being Served? guidelines, meaning that councils who adopt this same approach will be able to directly compare their results to the national picture.

We publish the results of the national polling three times a year, but you can read the full set of national results recorded since September 2012 here.

Regional data is also available, so that you can see how your results compare to councils within your specific part of the country. Regional data is available for the most recent financial year and is made up of three waves to provide adequate regional sample sizes. Regional results are then weighted to bring them more in line with what is known about each population in terms of gender, age and social economic status.

## Section 2: Targeted surveys

Some council departments already conduct targeted surveys, for example in adult social care or social housing. If you are interested in conducting an ad hoc, or targeted survey, you may want to consider speaking with colleagues in departments who already conduct this type of survey to benefit from their experience.

Above all, it is important to make sure that when you undertake any targeted or ad hoc survey work that you are clear about why you are conducting this survey and understand which group of people you need to speak to. It is also important that you make your survey as representative of your target group as possible and present your results clearly.

## Ways to make sure your survey is as representative as possible

If your survey is not representative, then the findings it generates will not give you a fully accurate picture of people's views. You will have the views of only some, not a representation of all of the population, which will be less useful to you. The first step is to identify your population, and ensure that you understand their characteristics. This means that, at the end of the survey, you will be able to check the extent to which your achieved sample reflects the real make-up of that population.

For geographical areas, the Census is a good option, and data can be obtained here. The characteristics that it will be useful to look at will vary depending on the subject matter but age, gender, working status and ethnicity can be a good starting point. If you want to target your survey at particular service users you should speak directly to colleagues in that service area as they may already hold data and information that can be used for this purpose.

Importantly, in the survey itself, you will need to ask respondents to provide a small amount of information about themselves (their age, gender etc) to enable you to make this judgement about representativeness.

The second step is to think about the most appropriate way to contact your population. An important factor in this is to think about what sections of the population may be excluded by your chosen method and take steps to address this. For example:

- Online methods may exclude some people. Community centres or community groups could be targeted to include a wider sample.
- A face-to-face town centre survey conducted on a weekday may exclude younger residents and those in work, so one step to mitigate this would be for data collection to take place on evenings and weekends as well.
- A survey on views of a community facility that is conducted at that facility will give a picture of the views of service users but won't give any insight as to the reasons why people don't use that service (perhaps it is not accessible enough for them or they are unaware of its existence). Service user profile statistics could be used to see which groups are underrepresented, and their views could be sought separately.

Where you have been able to identify contact details for the population you want to survey you will also need to decide whether to go for a census approach, where you invite everyone in the given population to participate, or to select a sample to invite. The census approach is often appropriate where the given population is small, and it is important to get as many responses as possible. If the population is large, a randomly selected sample will be more cost effective. A sample should be selected randomly as a simple and free option, and Excel has functions available to help with this. This blog post outlines one way of doing this.

**A note on using personal details**

When using email addresses and other contact details to survey residents, it is important to make sure that people gave consent for their contact details to be used for this purpose when they provided the information to the council.

A survey can be greatly affected by the quality of the contact list. You should make sure that your contact list is up to date.

When you collect survey data, you must make it very clear to respondents how their data will be used and who will have access to it. Providing respondents with a confidentiality statement alongside your survey may assist. You will also need to make sure that any data collected it is stored securely and in line with the General Data Protection Regulation . Further details about data protection can be found here.

## When it is appropriate to conduct ad hoc surveys that may not be fully representative

There are two common situations where ad hoc surveys could be appropriate. The first is where the population is not easily defined or contact details do not exist.

The second is where you need a rapid and low cost indication of the views or priorities of a particular group. This is often used when you need to get a broad steer, rather than make high profile statements or take important policy or spending decisions based on the results.

## How the results should be presented

It is really important that you provide the results to everyone who took part. Results should always be presented with a full, plain-English description of the method that was used to collect the data. You should also make sure that your results clearly explain that the findings are not statistically representative of your entire population, and are instead a sample. The results will reflect the views of the people who were surveyed rather than the wider population.

To avoid any confusion and to make sure that your findings are not misinterpreted you should consider using phrases such as “50 per cent of respondents strongly agreed with the proposal” rather than, for example, “50 per cent of service users strongly agreed with the proposal”.

## Further guidance and resources

The Local Area Research and Intelligence Association (LARIA) runs a Knowledge Hub group which is a useful place to seek advice from fellow researchers on methodological challenges. Knowledge Hub is a social networking site for local government and it is free and straightforward to register.

The Social Research Association also runs regular training courses on various aspects of research practice, including running a survey.

The Market Research Society has produced a range of useful guidance, including ten tips for DIY surveys (see link annex)

The Government Social Research Service has produced guidance on undertaking evaluations, which includes some pointers on conducting surveys.

Ipsos MORI has produced a guide to conducting surveys of tenants of social housing, and the tips will also be of use in a range of other scenarios.

For advice on how to evaluate and measure the effectiveness of your communications activity visit the International Association for the Measurement and Evaluation of Communication.

# Section 3: ‘Who reads what?’ surveys

Communicating with residents is an important council responsibility. To make sure that we are fulfilling this responsibility, it is important that we understand not only how our residents consume information, but also how they would like to. Delivering the right messages through the right channels is a vital part of building trust and engagement within our communities, and we need to make sure that we have the right data to support our communication decisions and activities. It also helps to make sure that we direct our resources into activities that will have the greatest impact on the communities we serve.

To help address this challenge we have developed Who Reads What? – a set of survey questions designed to help councils gauge their residents’ communications needs and interests.

Questions cover a range of topics from how satisfied residents are with council-wide information, what they think about their council’s website or magazine and opportunities to suggest how communications could be improved in the future. There are also questions focused on how engaged or digitally aware local residents are to help council communication teams to target their messages more effectively.

As with Are You Being Served?, our Who Reads What? questions can be used in their entirety, or adapted to fit local need. We do not currently offer a benchmarking service for our Who Reads What? surveys.

When conducting a survey of this sort, it is advisable to include some demographic questions, to understand the needs of your different audiences.

The demographic breakdowns you choose to use will depend largely on the make-up of your local area and any priority groups you wish to have information about (for example, Black, Asian or Minority Ethnic residents, council tax payers, council tenants, older residents, parents). An example of the standard demographic questions used by the Office for National Statistics can be found here.

## Who Reads What? – example survey questions

## Overall satisfactions levels with council-wide information

This question is taken from the LGA’s ‘Are You Being Served?’ guidance for councils that are carrying out general population surveys and would like to include questions on resident satisfaction and benchmark these results against other councils. Councils wishing to conduct a resident satisfaction survey should review this guidance; more information can be found here.

1. **Overall, how well informed do you think [name of council] keeps residents about the services and benefits it provides?**

Very well informed
Fairly well informed
Not very well informed
Not well informed at all
Don’t know

*Possible additional question asked only to those who answered 'not very well informed/not well informed at all'*

2. **Please explain why you think [name of council] doesn't keep residents well informed about the services and benefits it provides.**

Free text

## How residents get information

3. **How do you currently find out about [name of council] and the services it provides?**

Council website
[Council's publication]
Printed information provided by the council (e.g. leaflets, flyers, public notices)
Council texts, emails and e-newsletters
Direct contact with the council (e.g. contact with staff, public meetings and events)
Council's social media sites (e.g. Facebook, Twitter, YouTube)
Social media outside the council (e.g. Facebook, Twitter, YouTube)
Council noticeboards in council buildings
Advertising on billboards/buses etc.
From your local councillor
Local media (e.g. newspapers, TV, radio)
Word of mouth (e.g. friends, neighbours, relations)
Do not find out any information
Other (please specify)

*Possible additional question for those who identified at least one information source. Ask scale for each information source selected above.*

4. **How useful do you find each of the sources that you use to find information about [name of council] and the services it provides?**

Very useful
Fairly useful
Not very useful
Not at all useful
Don't know

5. **Have you ever wanted to make contact with the council and not been able to?**

Yes
No
Don't know

**IF YES [unable to make contact]**

6. **And, for which of the following reasons, if any, were you unable to make contact with the council?**

No access, or limited access, to the internet
Language barriers
Difficulty reading or writing
I have a physical disability or illness
The particular person I wanted to speak to was not available
Unable to find the correct department responsible for the service
Unable to travel to the council offices

The council's website is difficult to use

## Digital skills

7. **Do you use the internet, at least occasionally?**

Yes
No

**IF YES [use the internet]**

8. **How confident are you with using the internet to do the following?** Very confident/Fairly confident/Not very confident/Not at all confident/Not applicable

Using a search engine to look for information online
Downloading/saving a photo you found online
Finding a website you have visited before
Sending a personal message to another person via email or online messaging service
Carefully making comments and sharing information online
Buying items or services from a website
Buying and installing apps on a device
Solving a problem you have with a device or digital service using online help
Verifying sources of information you found online
Completing online application forms which include personal details
Creating something new from existing online images, music or video

## Views on council's website

9. **Have you ever visited [name of council] website?**

Yes
No

**IF YES [visited website]**

10. **How satisfied or dissatisfied were you with the website, overall?**

Very satisfied
Fairly satisfied
Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied
Fairly dissatisfied
Very dissatisfied

11. **And, for which of the following reasons did you visit [name of council's] website?**

To get information or advice (e.g. waste collection, school term dates, local events)
To make a payment (e.g. council tax, business rates, penalty charge notice)
To apply for a service (e.g. joining a library, requesting a parking permit)
To make a booking (e.g. bulky waste collection, registering a birth, hiring a sports pitch)
To comment on a consultation/planning application
To apply for a benefit (e.g. housing, council tax discount or exemption)
To find out about your councillor
To view committee agendas, minutes and reports
To report a problem
To make a compliment/comment/suggestion about the council
To make a complaint about the council
Other (please specify)

*Possible additional question for those identifying at least one reasons for visiting council's website:*

12. **How well did this/these aspect/s of the council's website meet your expectations?**

Better than you expected
About the same as you expected
Worse than you expected
Didn't know what to expect

13. **Which of the following ideas, if any, would make you more likely to use the internet for council services?**

If it meant your concern or issue was processed more quickly
If there were Apps for completing transactions easily on-the-go
If it was clearer that online contact was cheaper for the council to run than offline contact
If the council website was better designed and easier to navigate

## Views on council's magazine

14. **Have you heard of [insert name of council's magazine], the council's magazine delivered to homes by the council [X] times a year?**

Yes, I have heard of it and always read it
Yes, I have heard of it and sometimes read it
Yes, I have heard of it but don't read it
No, I haven't heard of it

**IF ANY YES [have heard of council's magazine]**

15. **How well informed, would you say, [name of magazine] keeps you about [name of council's] activities?**

Very informed
Fairly informed
Not very informed
Not at all informed
I don't read it

## Overall engagement

16. **Overall, how satisfied or dissatisfied are you with the level of engagement your council offers to local residents?** *By engagement we mean giving local people information about the council, asking them for their views and giving them a direct say in decision-making.*

Very satisfied
Fairly satisfied
Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied
Fairly dissatisfied
Very dissatisfied
Don't know

**IF NEITHER SATISFIED NOR DISSATISFIED, FAIRLY DISSATISFIED OR VERY DISSATISFIED THEN [with level of engagement]**

17. **Which three things do you think your council could do better to engage with local residents?**

Make it clearer how residents can get involved in decision-making
Be more visible in the community
Make more use of existing community networks
Further improve its customer service
Make more use of jargon-free and plain English
Demonstrate more clearly how it is acting on residents' feedback
Increase residents' access to local councillors
Explain more clearly its decisions when they affect you
Explain more clearly how it is using your money
Encourage more people to vote in local elections
Don't know
Other (please specify)

18. **How likely would you be to use the following ways of engaging with your council in the future?** Very likely/fairly likely/neither likely or unlikely/fairly unlikely/very unlikely/

Ordering a service/paying a bill/reporting a problem through the council's website
Ordering a service/paying a bill/reporting a problem through an App on your smartphone or tablet
Signing up for text alerts on relevant services on your mobile phone
Signing up for email messages and alerts on services that are relevant to you
Contacting the council through social media
Getting information about the council from its website
Reading the council's residents magazine in print or online
Attending a local public forum to ask questions about the council

## Ways to improve

19. **I'd like to ask you some questions about the sort of information you might be interested in receiving from your council. How interested would you be in receiving information about:** Very interested/Fairly interested/Not very interested/Not at all interested

Council events
Council tax and spending
Community consultations
Council services available for residents
Decisions from council meetings
How well the council is performing
Licensing and planning applications
Sports and leisure activities
Voting and elections
Waste and recycling

20. **Please select your top three choices for receiving information about [name of council] and the services it provides, in the future:**

Council website
[Council's publication]
Printed information provided by the council (e.g. leaflets, flyers, public notices)
Council texts, emails and e-newsletters
Direct contact with the council (e.g. contact with staff, public meetings and events)
Council's social media sites (e.g. Facebook, Twitter, YouTube)

Social media outside the council (e.g. Facebook, Twitter, YouTube)
Council noticeboards in council buildings
Advertising on billboards/buses etc.
From your local councillor
Local media (e.g. newspapers, TV, radio)
Word of mouth (e.g. friends, neighbours, relations)
Do not want to find out any information
Other (please specify)

## Further information

Additional questions about internet access and use are available via the British Population Survey.

Ipsos Connect runs a quarterly 'Tech Tracker' to measure the emerging trends and developments in technology.

# Section 4: Consulting residents

In the first three sections of this guide we explored how residents' surveys can be an effective way of understanding what communities think about your organisation, including what they feel about the quality of services that you provide and the messages that you communicate to them.

There are, however, many occasions where you need to know more detail about what your residents, partners and wider communities think about specific issues that affect them. This is known as consultation.

## What is consultation?

Consultation is technically any activity that gives local people a voice and an opportunity to influence important decisions. It involves listening to and learning from local people before decisions are made or priorities are set. Resident surveys and Who Reads What? surveys would fall under the heading of consultation, but the term is usually applied when talking about activities where different parties are trying to reach an agreement or for more formal or detailed pieces of work aimed at finding out what residents think about significant changes or proposals that affect them, such as plans to close schools, regenerate or redevelop a local area, or planning applications.

Councils sometimes have a statutory requirement to consult their residents and this is especially true for issues such as planning, or redevelopments. Statutory consultations are bound by legal requirements, such as Best Value legislation, and can have strict rules surrounding how they should be conducted. If you fail to run a statutory consultation in line with those rules you could be liable for a judicial review so it is important to make sure that you check the guidelines surrounding your specific consultation plans.

Regardless of any legal implications, consulting with residents is simply the right this to do, but you can find out more information about consultations and judicial review in 'New Conversations' – the LGA's guide to effective engagement (page 51).

There are also a range of other non-statutory reasons that you might want to run a consultation exercise. These include:

- to improve planning, policy and decision making
- to make better use of resources
- to access new information, ideas and suggestions
- to encourage greater participation in the activities of the council
- to govern by consent (a full and fair consultation, with careful consideration of all views, can strengthen the legitimacy of the prevailing view among those people not in favour of the final decision)
- to measure residents' satisfaction with the council
- to shape council activities around residents' needs and aspirations

Non-statutory consultations have no legal status but do enable councils to hear from a representative cross-section of the population. A Government Code of Practice on Consultations is available online.

## Is consultation always necessary?

Before you run any consultation exercise, it's important to make sure that it is a necessary activity. Consultations can be time-consuming for organisations to run, while asking residents for unnecessary information can be a waste of time and resources, as well as being annoying for the people asked to take part.

Before you start, you should check whether the information you want to find out is already held by the council or available elsewhere. Have colleagues or your partner organisations carried out similar consultations recently, or has similar work been done nationally? People can get confused and frustrated by organisations undertaking apparently similar consultations at, or near, the same time. You are likely to increase the number of responses you receive if you reduce 'consultation fatigue'.

It is also important to make sure that you inform your councillors, senior officers, partners and communications team of your plans to run a consultation exercise. Not only will this help to create advocates across your organisation (and beyond) who can promote the opportunities for residents to have their say, it will also help you organisation to establish a culture of using data and insight and of involving residents in decision-making, as well as reducing the chance of duplication, managing risk, and helping to make sure that the council is coordinating its activities in a strategic way.

Even if the data you need is not already held by your organisation there are still a number of situations where a consultation is probably unnecessary. These include if:

- a decision is subject to strict direction from Government
- a decision on the matter has already been made and nothing would be gained from further work
- there are more efficient ways of gathering the data you need
- you already know the answer (and consultee' comments will not add to the process)
- the council's room for manoeuvre is so limited (for example by statutory or budgetary restrictions) that any consultation would be meaningless.

'New Conversations' – the LGA's guide to achieving more effective resident engagement, provides a useful tool (page 35) to help you decide whether you need to undertake a formal consultation of not. Click here for more information.

## How long should consultation take?

If you do decide to go ahead with a consultation exercise, it's important to make sure you give people enough time to respond. You also need to make sure that you have allowed sufficient time to analyse the results, evaluate the process and consider their views before you make any decisions about the next steps.

Think about when a decision is needed, and work backwards. The length of time needed will vary depending on:

- the consultation channels you have selected
- the ability of consultees to participate (for example, if they have specific needs)
- the time of year (for example school holidays) – election periods should be avoided
- the level of response you are seeking

- if other local events are taking place (can you use this to your advantage, or is it likely to dilute the level of interest in your consultation)?

Best practice suggests you should plan for up to six to 12 weeks for a consultation exercise. You should also be aware of the legal requirements for your specific consultation topic (statutory consultation has specific rules). If you are embarking on a major consultation, you should plan this well in advance of when a decision is needed. Stakeholders who meet infrequently might need more time to discuss their reply. You may need to allow extra time to publicise and promote your consultation in order to raise awareness. Consultations can take longer than expected, so make sure you build in sufficient time.

## Whom to consult

If you decide that a consultation exercise is the most effective way of seeking input from local people, you will need to identify the people or groups who are likely to be affected by, or have an interest in, the focus of the consultation. Will the exercise be an open to lots of different people or will it be restricted to a certain group (e.g. service users at a day centre)?

It is unrealistic to think you can consult everyone about everything, but you should strive to achieve a representative cross-section of views to ensure that you understand differing views within the community. If you have a target group in mind, it may be possible to consult with this entire group depending on its size. See section 2 for more information on how to do this.

When selecting whom to consult, think about the type of information that you can expect to receive. For example, individual users can give a snapshot of the service as they have experienced it, while non-users might give a relatively impartial but possibly uninformed view. Representative groups can offer good knowledge about a service, and their views might be stronger than those of the general public who might offer more general perceptions about service provision. You may want to set a target number of responses you wish to reach, broken-down by certain characteristics (e.g. gender, age and ethnicity). This will be beneficial when evaluating the effectiveness of the consultation exercise.

It is important that your consultation is representative of your communities. There will be many local variations but some of the groups you may wish to consider are:

- older people
- young people (consent may be required from a parent/guardian)
- people from different ethnic backgrounds
- people with disabilities (steps may need to be taken to gain informed consent)
- people on low incomes
- faith groups
- Lesbian, Gay, Bi-sexual, and Transgender people
- migrant workers
- travellers
- homeless people.

You may need to ask participants to provide a small amount of information about themselves (their age, gender etc.) to enable you to make a judgement about representativeness. You should be sufficiently aware of the Data Protection Principles of good information handling. Do not disclose personal information about people without their consent or share data that would lead to them being identified. Consultees need to know how their data will be used and who will have access to it. If confidentiality cannot be guaranteed, you must warn consultees in advance of their participation. You always need to store data securely.

## Ways to consult

There are lots of ways you can consult local people; the scale of which should be proportional to the potential impacts of the proposal or decision being taken. Some methods are 'quantitative' and others are 'qualitative'. Each has advantages and disadvantages. The method you chose will largely depend on the type of questions you want answered (and the subject matter, if it is a sensitive subject, for instance).

Quantitative methods tend to answer the 'how many?' or 'what?' questions, whereas qualitative methods tend to answer the 'why?' and 'how?' questions. You may want to use a combination of both, particularly if you are trying to engage with a range of different groups. Table 1 gives details of some of the methods you might want to use.

**Table 1: Possible consultation methods**

| Method | Channels | |
|---|---|---|
| | | |
| **Self-completion surveys** | Post | Social media |
| | Text messaging | Online |
| **Telephone interviewing** | Telephone interviewer | Computer-aided |
| **Face-to-face surveys or interviews** | Door knocking | Citizens' panel/jury |
| | On the street | Service user panels |
| | Focus groups | Workshops |
| | Sounding boards | |
| **Feedback forms or comment boxes or show of hands** | Open days or drop-in events | Community forums |
| | Consultation days, exhibitions and roadshows | Public meetings |
| **Online venues** | Chat rooms | Online forums or discussion groups |

When thinking about what method to use it's important to think about what you want the exercise to achieve, the resources you have available to conduct the consultation, and whether you have all the data that you need to be able to conduct a statistically robust consultation.

You should also make sure that your consultation is accessible to all those who wish to participate, which might mean identifying and overcoming any barriers to their involvement. For example, offer a range of dates and times of day for events (some older residents may not wish to be out at night and working people might not be able to get to a daytime event). Remember that different groups will have different and specific needs depending on language barriers, literacy ability, access, cultural differences and different levels of understanding.

You can find more information on how to decide which consultation channel is best for you on page 37 of New Conversations.

## Communicating the results

When your consultation has finished, it's important to communicate the findings to your internal and external audiences. Developing a set of clear key messages to summarise your findings will help your stakeholders to understand the outcomes of the consultation and what the next steps will be.

When communicating your results, it is important to clearly articulate whom you consulted, the methods you used and how the information gathered will inform your future work. If possible you should show that all opinions and suggestions have been taken into account and explain if there are reasons why it hasn't been possible to address all of the issues raised by the people you consulted.

The results and the outcomes of your consultation should be published as soon as they are available and you should make sure that the format you present your results in is suitable for all your audiences.

You should also tell people about any changes made as a result of the consultation. It is also good practice to have a consultation section on your website.

## Evaluating your consultation

Evaluation is an important aspect of any consultation. At the end of each consultation you should consider asking yourself:

- did your consultation achieve its objectives?
- did you use the right methods?
- did you reach your required response rate?
- did you reach all your desired groups?
- how did consultees contribute to the outcomes?
- did they understand why they were involved?
- did they receive adequate feedback?
- were there any unexpected outcomes?
- was the process cost-effective?
- what has changed as a result?
- what would you do differently next time?
- who might find what you have learned useful and how can it be shared with them?

Evaluating your consultation exercise will help you to measure how effective your organisation is at running consultations and assess whether you need to make any changes to your processes.

## Further guidance and resources

This document has drawn upon information published online by various councils. You may want to refer to some of these guides as they contain detailed information about undertaking consultations in a community-based context.

- Aylesbury Vale consultation toolkit
- Dover District Council consultation toolkit
- Gateshead Council consultation toolkit
- Milton Keynes Council consultation toolkit
- Northampton Borough Council consultation toolkit
- St Helens Council consultation code

## Consultation check list

Here is a quick overview of the typical stages of a consultation and the things you should keep in mind when conducting a consultation:

- **Make sure the consultation is necessary:** Before starting any consultation exercise it is vital to make sure that it is necessary. Make sure that you check with colleagues across the organisation that the information you need isn't already available or held elsewhere in the council. Making sure your activity is necessary and valuable will also help to reduce consultation fatigue and encourage residents to engage with the process.
- **Set clear objectives**: Be clear about what you are trying to achieve. What do you want to find out? What information is already available (check your council's consultation database)?
- **Co-ordinate the exercise**: Work in a joined-up way within your council to avoid duplication and over-lapping activities. Gain the necessary approvals from senior management and relevant boards.
- **Allow sufficient time**: Allow adequate time for consultees to respond and for their views to be fully considered before any action or decision is made.
- **Document the costs**: Anticipate how much your consultation will cost, how much capacity is needed and the resources needed to implement any changes following the outcomes of the exercise.
- **Select and recruit participants**: Identify the people or groups who are likely to be affected by, or have an interest in, the focus of the consultation. They will need to know what the consultation is about, what is being asked of them and the potential outcomes.
- **Select an appropriate method**: Choose the most appropriate way to consult depending on the type of questions you want answered – and the subject matter at hand.
- **Promote the exercise**: Request support from within your council to increase awareness of the consultation. You will want to post details of the consultation several weeks prior to it commencing.
- **Gather and input data**: Record the views of participants in a transparent and accessible way. This may be easier for text-based methods such as surveys, than face-to-face methods, for instance.
- **Monitor the responses**: Keep track of the number of responses you receive so action can be taken to improve response rates if necessary. Check the responses being submitted to get an indication of the issues arising.
- **Analyse the results**: Consider what story the data are telling and what this means in terms of the questions asked. Calculate how many people gave certain answers and look for any variations. You should also seek to identify any patterns, trends or themes to help identify key issues.
- **Determine your outcomes**: Your council should decide what it is going to do as a result of the consultation and why. You should explain how consultees' contributions have informed the decision-making process.
- **Feedback to relevant parties**: Ensure that the results and subsequent actions are communicated to participants and other relevant parties.
- **Evaluate your consultation**: Consider if your consultation has achieved its objectives. How have consultees' views affected the council's decision? What has changed as a result of the consultation? What lessons that can be learned?

# Section 5: New Conversations - engaging residents

In section 4 we explored how consultation can be an effective way of involving local people in decision-making. There are also a range of other ways that councils can explore the views of their local communities and involve them in decisions and activities.

To help you understand the different options available we have created New Conversations – a guide to more effective engagement. The guide covers a range of topics from how to build trust within communities, how to adapt your engagement style to suit your role and how to ensure that you follow the rules governing formal consultation processes.

You can access the full text of the guide here.

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