



What is consultation?

Consultation is the process of gathering information, opinions and advice from individuals or groups. Put simply, it means asking people something. It moves beyond *informing* to actively seeking views, and therefore has a key role to play in involving communities.

Local public services consult people on a range of issues, from general attitudes to views on more specific proposals for new initiatives.

Why is consulting important?

Consulting communities about the development, delivery and performance of services that affect them is an important part of involvement activity because it helps to shape local services and decisions – ultimately leading to an improved quality of life.

Good consultation can also help pave the way for a more ongoing dialogue between communities and local public services. This emphasis on dialogue and influence is reflected in the [Consultation Institute's](#) definition of consultation:

The dynamic process of dialogue between individuals or groups, based upon a genuine exchange of views and with the objective of influencing decisions, policies or programmes of action.

How do I consult?

The process of consulting people often makes use of research methods (such as surveys, interviews and focus groups) as tools for gathering views effectively. Further 'how to' guides, each exploring a different aspect of research, are also available as part of this 'help with involving communities' guidance set.

Ten top tips for consulting...

1. Plan ahead

- Effective consultation takes time to develop and deliver, so it is essential to plan it in advance.
- ⓘ See our '[getting started](#)' guide for a summary of what you need to think about when planning.

2. Be clear about your purpose

- You can only consult effectively if you are clear from the outset about what you are trying to achieve and how you intend to use the findings – this will help you to identify the right approach and the right people.
- You should only consult where there is an identified need and a genuine commitment to listening to people's views – it's not good practice to consult if the same thing has been done before or if it is just being done to 'tick a box'. There must be a genuine opportunity for people's views to make a difference.

3. Use resources efficiently

- Your first step here should be to check [Involve](#) for details of any similar consultation activity (past, present or future) and speak to the relevant services and/or partners – you may be able to collaborate or share information.
- You should allow sufficient time for the consultation to be carried out and allocate enough people with the appropriate skills to do the job effectively.

4. Target the right people

- You need to be clear about your target group(s) – are you seeking the views of the whole population, particular geographies or specific communities of interest?



- You should ensure that, as far as possible, all relevant groups are included in your consultation activity and that 'seldom heard' or 'harder to reach' groups are not excluded.

5. Use the right methods

- *Quantitative* methods (for example questionnaires) seek to make measurements and provide numbers. *Qualitative* methods (for example focus groups) are designed to seek insight and understanding. Choose the right method or combination of methods to meet your aims.
- You should also use methods that are appropriate to your target groups and the topics you are consulting on. For example, if an issue is particularly sensitive or personal, it may be better to discuss one-to-one in a depth interview rather than as part of a focus group discussion.
- ⓘ Our 'how to' guides explain more about some different methods.

6. Ask the right 'about you' Qs

- Asking these types of questions (age, gender, ethnicity etc) can help us better understand the different views and needs of different communities.
- ⓘ Our 'how to' guide (asking 'about you' questions) provides further advice on how, when and why to ask these types of questions.

7. Think about your analysis

- The analysis stage of any consultation is extremely important and should not be overlooked. Give some thought to your analysis *before* starting to consult – deciding what you want to get out of it can help you to think more clearly about the type of data you need to collect.
- Be honest in reporting back the findings – they should be presented as objectively as possible, tell the whole story and not be used to mislead.
- ⓘ Our 'how to' guides on analysing and reporting quantitative and qualitative data provide further advice.

8. Respect people's time and opinions

- You should always make the purpose of the consultation clear to participants and explain the extent to which their views will influence decision-making.
- You should also make it clear how much time is involved in taking part, that it is not compulsory and that people have the right to withdraw at any time.
- Show that you are listening. This means both actively listening to the views of individuals at the time of consultation (i.e. taking an interest, showing empathy and giving them respect) and listening at an organisational level to the overall response.

9. Remember to feed back

- You should always share the findings and how you have used these with participants (and the wider community) – this will help to demonstrate that you have listened to people's views and taken them seriously. If you are not able to act on the findings, then tell people why.
- ⓘ Our 'how to' guide (feedback) provides some further suggestions on how to feed back.

10. Ask for support if you need it

- The council's Corporate Research and Consultation (CRAC) team are a source of advice and support for research and consultation activity.

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