



Equality Toolkit Consultation



Equality and Policy Development



## 1.0 Background

Consultation is a major component of the equality agenda. These guidelines have been designed to assist the Council and its departments and services when undertaking consultations. The intention is to provide clear assistance to those who are consulting about new policies, strategies, plans or codes of practice.

Whilst the guidelines have been developed with a focus on equality they are also adaptable to all consultation processes including best value, policy development, performance management, customer satisfaction and future planning.

## 2.0 Principles of Consultation

### Planning

The timing and resourcing of consultations should be built into the planning process from the outset, so that it has the best prospect of improving the proposals concerned, and so that sufficient time is allowed for each stage of the consultation process.

### Who, What, When and Why

It should be clear who is being consulted, about what issues, in what timescale and for what purpose.

### Format and Layout

Any consultation document should be as simple and concise as possible. If written consultation it should include a summary, in two pages at most, of the main issues on which it seeks views. It should also be as easy as possible for consultees to respond, make contact or complain. Consultation can take the form of an exercise which does not rely on written communication e.g. through seminars, focus groups or conferences.

Where these approaches are used consideration should be given to the physical location of the event, its accessibility and neutrality, any necessary visual or sound requirements and possibly childcare arrangements depending on the target audience.

### Availability and Accessibility

Documents should be widely advertised and made available and make the fullest use (although not exclusively) of electronic means. They should also be accessible to all. Physical and sensory accessibility should also be ensured at all public consultation events.

### Timescales

Sufficient time should be allowed for considered responses from all groups with an interest in the issue. Twelve weeks should be the standard period for a consultation and eight weeks the minimum in normal circumstances. More time should be allowed at holiday periods e.g. Christmas and Summer breaks.

### Responding

Responses should be carefully and open-mindedly analysed and the results made widely available with an account of the views expressed and reasons for decisions finally taken.

### Monitoring and Evaluation

It may be useful for Departments and/or Services to designate a consultation coordinator who will monitor and evaluate consultations and ensure the lessons learned are disseminated throughout the service. This coordinator would also be responsible for minimising duplication and ultimately reducing the risk of consultation fatigue.

### Contact

If you have any queries regarding these guidelines please contact the Equality Officer on Ext 2612 or e-mail: [gilmartins@belfastcity.gov.uk](mailto:gilmartins@belfastcity.gov.uk)

Belfast City Council would like to acknowledge assistance and advice in the compilation of the consultation guidelines from OFMDFM, Cabinet Office and Greater London Authority





### 3.0 Planning Stage

1. Create a consultation team - identify purpose, assign tasks, draw up procedures.
2. Identify issues, decide on questions, decide on outcomes –
3. Consider all available data and research previously gathered.

#### Questions to consider before consultation

- Who is likely to be affected by the policy (procedures, programme, strategy, plan, and committee decision)?
- What relevant groups have a legitimate interest in the policy?
- How do we consult meaningfully with the affected groups?
- Is there a possibility to work in partnership with a particular group?
- What are the pre existing levels of knowledge and awareness about the issue?
- What methods of consultation will be used and at what stage of the process?
- How will information be made available to those being consulted with?
- Will the information be accessible to minority groups such as people with disabilities and ethnic minorities?
- Identify possible barriers to effective consultation and take measures to minimise them.

### 4.0 Consultation Stage

Manage expectations: make clear to everyone the parameters of the consultation. For example what are you asking, what can be changed and what cannot, what will happen to results, how long will the process last and when and in what format will feedback be provided.

Consider response options, written, telephone, website and email, face to face meetings with interested groups/relevant groups.

Collate, analyse and summarise results. Present feedback in plain English/other language or format as necessary.

#### Evaluate and Follow up

Communicate decisions widely.

Always report results of the consultation and any subsequent reports or actions to those consultees who participated.

Evaluate process and outcomes: feedback from participants, costs of process, check if any relevant Section 75 groups did not respond. Explain reasons for this and consider steps to be taken in future exercise to prevent the same thing occurring again.

Record the lessons - what worked well and what did not, include ideas about possible improvements in the future.

Reassess consultation procedures in view of evaluation.

## 5.0 Consultation Process and Good practice

- Consider deploying a range of consultation methods – use the most appropriate methods for your exercise.
- Be creative - written consultation is only one method.
- Develop personal contact with relevant groups but consider people who are not part of the mainstream
- Approach external groups early in the formulation of policy.
- Ensure specific needs are met e.g. information in alternative formats, interpreter service, provision of childcare facilities, travel assistance and targeting of groups.
- Show willingness to visit consultees in their own environments.
- Consultation that is more focused on users who are directly affected by services is most useful.
- Consultation using existing links with service users, voluntary and community groups is likely to be more effective.
- Send letters to ascertain level of interest before the exercise and follow up with telephone calls to consultees to encourage participation/attendance.
- Provide brief focused documentation with use of plain language to better prepare participants.
- Help inform the discussion with information sent in advance.

- Consider face to face focus groups that allow some informal discussion and questioning.
- Provide details of responses to consultees (show where comments were taken on board and explain why some views could not be incorporated).
- When there is a poor response send a reminder and consider extending the deadline.
- Publicise a summary of responses.
- Finally check that the venue is suitable (see checklist for venues).
- Finally check that the document is in an accessible format.

### Written Consultation

Written consultation has traditionally been the most common way of engaging with consultees. Although written consultation may remain the principal method it should no longer be viewed as the only way and other forms of consultation should be considered. The method adopted for a particular consultation exercise will depend on the issue and the target audience to be addressed.

One or more methods may be used during the consultation process. The Council's aim is to work with representative groups to remove barriers to proper consultation ensuring information is timely and available in accessible formats.





## Consultation Methodologies

Consultation may involve using one of the methods described below to consult the public generally or to engage the views of employees or both. The range of consultation methods available include:

1. Questionnaires or Surveys – These may be Service specific or Corporate. They may be conducted at the point of service or elsewhere. Examples include – postal, telephone, face to face, in the home, on the street. Where this method is used expert advice should be sought to ensure reliable and valid results.
2. Citizens Panels/Standing Research Panels – These are ongoing panels of 1,000 to 2,000 people representative of the community.
3. Focus Groups – Representative Groups of 8-10 people discuss a particular topic. Keeping similar types of people together helps to reduce inhibition and conflict and promotes discussion. A trained facilitator should lead the focus group.
4. Deliberative Opinion Polls – These are groups of participants who are both geographically and attitudinally representative. They are comprised of groups of between 250-600 people who meet over 2-4 days with polls taken at the beginning and end of the event.
5. Comments and Complaints Schemes – Comment cards or suggestion boxes, placed in reception areas or at the point of survey.
6. Invitations for Written Inputs – This is a general request for comments from the public at large or from users of a particular service. It can be distributed to households in the Council area or it can take the form of a publication of a consultation document on which people are invited to comment.
7. Public Meetings – These are one-off events inviting oral input.
8. Area/Neighbourhood Panels – These meetings invite citizens in a particular geographical area and can involve officer and/or Member representation.
9. Service User Groups – These are regular meetings of service users. Users may be self selected and/or selected by the Council. The nature and representativeness of the groups will therefore vary.
10. Other Interest Fora and Panels – These are ongoing panels established by the Council focusing on particular issues or citizen groups. Membership may be fixed or open.
11. Existing Interest or Specialist Groups – These are regular consultations with public sector bodies, private sector organisations, specialist groups, voluntary groups etc.
12. Citizens Juries – Groups of 12-16 citizens representing the local community who take evidence and deliberate on an issue over 4/5 days and present a recommendation.
13. Visioning Exercises – These enable communities to establish a vision of the future for their area.



14. Samoan Circles – This is a method of managing participation in a large group. An inner circle is formed of five to six chairs, the rest of the chairs are arranged in an outer circle. To speak, the speaker moves to one of the chairs in the inner circle, standing behind one of the chairs, awaiting his/her turn to take the chair to speak. He/she then returns to his/her original seat.
15. Participation led sessions/facilitated workshops – A range of techniques are available. Examples are ‘whole systems’ and ‘open spaces’ events. The process allows participants to write their concerns on post-it notes, sticking them onto walls and arranging them in themes. Individuals then select the most important and rank them. Workshops are then organised around the themes.
16. Exhibitions, Road Shows, Open Days – These offer an opportunity to participants to receive and to give information. Information can be collected through self-completion questionnaires, comment cards, informal discussions etc.
17. Electronic Communications – These can involve online discussion groups / e-mail surveys etc and involve the use of IT or the Internet.
18. Video box, Video links – Opportunities for the public to leave messages or make direct contact with the Council by recording a video or audio message or through video conferencing.
19. Use of front line staff – Systematic collection of information from those who have direct contact with the public.
20. Informal Contacts – Making use of information arising out of informal conversations by officers or Members with the public and feedback from Members about their involvement in outside bodies (ethical considerations are important if this method is used).
21. Desk research/other documentary sources of information – Involves collation of information relevant to a particular area/issue.
22. Mass Media/Specialist Press – Mass Media can be used to get messages to a vast number of people through TV features, radio items, newspaper adverts etc. Specialist Press can be used to target particular areas or groups i.e. ethnic minority groups or the gay, lesbian and transgendered community etc.
23. Piloting Service Changes – This involves making changes to a service or parts of a service and surveying users on their views.
24. Direct User Involvement – User management of services e.g. community-run nurseries or youth clubs, increased choice in service, citizen street monitors reporting on litter etc.
25. Involvement in Council, Committees and Business – This involves public question time at Councils and Committees and is not uncommon in UK Councils although it would require amendments to our current Standing Orders.

It should be noted that this list is not exhaustive and we will continue to research alternative methods of effective consultation, to review these guidelines and their effectiveness and to update the guidelines as appropriate.





### Special Circumstances

Where a consultation is complex, we need to 'capacity build' with the consultees. Pre-consultation with relevant groups and individuals will help to avoid confusion and misunderstanding between those carrying out the consultation and those being consulted.

### Confidentiality

It is important to consider the need for confidentiality with regard to views expressed by certain groups and/or individuals. It is the onus of the consultation co-ordinator to determine whether confidentiality or anonymity is required and to communicate this to participants.

### 6.0 Channels of communication

- Notify potential participants about the exercise
- Provide advance information
- Publicise – in a range of venues
- Use most appropriate format considering (a) the subject and (b) the audience
- Use techniques likely to maximise responses e.g. freepost, accessible neutral venues, plain English etc

Notification of the consultation exercise provide information and arranging responses, such as publicity, press and other media outlets, circulation of written documents. Formats for responses, freepost, role of the website, telephone and email responses, If long documents are generated have they been converted to easy to read documents such as executive summaries.

We can produce the document in alternative formats (disc, Braille, audiotape, and languages for those who do not speak English fluently.)

Timescales require attention. The minimum time for a document to be considered in the equality arena is 8 weeks, this depends on the document we wish to consult on.

Evaluate the process as you go – where possible adjust as deemed necessary.

Agree the process of writing up the consultation and reporting to consultees – consider seeking views of respondents on how best they wish to receive feedback.

Decide who is carrying out the consultation: in house or external consultants and what impact this will have on the success of the exercise e.g. in-house staff are more likely to have best subject knowledge but external consultants are likely to be experts in 'consultation'.

### Consulting with Section 75 Groups

Belfast City Council places a high priority on consultation with Section 75 groups; we hope that you have found the guidelines helpful. If you have any difficulties please contact the Equality Officer at your earliest convenience.

