

Consultation Toolkit

How to consult and involve people in what the council does

Contents

Welcome to the consultation toolkit	3
Time for action	3
The five stages of consultation	4
Stage One: Decide who to consult with.....	4
Tool 1: Mapping stakeholders and consulting the hard to reach.....	5
Tool 2 - You may have to make special arrangements and extra efforts to find out some peoples views	7
Stage Two: Deciding what to consult on	8
Tool 3: Think about your objectives for consulting. Which of these do you want to do? .	9
Tool 4: Here are some ideas of the type of questions areas you might want to think about.....	10
Stage 3: How to consult	11
Quick method selector	12
Tool 5: this table shows the more usual consultation methods. The further up the chart, the higher the level of public involvement. This is sometimes known as the Ladder of Consultation:.....	12
Tool 6: Research has shown that different types of people prefer different consultation methods. Here are a few clues:	13
Tool 7: All consultation methods have strengths and weaknesses. Some are more representative than others, some get a more in depth response, and some are best if you want a quick response:	13
Tool 8: The answers to the following questions will also help guide you to choosing the right method:.....	13
Tool 9: Different types of consultation methods are available.....	15
Which group and how many? Sampling frames and confidence intervals	17
Timescales.....	17
Resourcing.....	18
What if I need to use external consultation providers?.....	18

Sustainability and climate change.....	18
Statutory requirements.....	18
Communication	19
Analysis	20
Stage Four: Start the consultation.....	20
Examples of real comments:.....	21
Tool 10: Ensure that people know:.....	21
Tool 11: Final checklist before consulting.	22
Make it short and sweet:	22
Stage five: evaluating and using the results	22
Findings	23
Tool 12: what happens after the consultation?	23
Balancing conflicting demands	23
Changes to service as a result of the consultation exercise	23
Other uses for results.....	24
Reporting	24
Providing Feedback	24
Evidence trail	24
Tool 13: Evaluating consultation	24
Reviewing	25
Final tips.....	25
Useful contacts.....	26
Community Engagement Officer	26
Partnerships and Organisational Development Team.....	26
Communications Team	26
Publications and websites:.....	26
Toolkit Appendices	26

Welcome to the consultation toolkit

It will help us to consult and involve customers and other stakeholders in what the council does. Anyone who wants to involve people more in what they do can use it. It's designed to lead you through what you will need to do and contains the tools you will need to consult effectively. **It is the agreed South Lakeland District Council (Partner) approach.**

Over the past decade there has been a growing awareness that community involvement and active participation are a key part of improving the quality and delivery of services. It is not always easy to get communications between the council and the communities, which it represents and serves, right.

We must constantly seek to improve ways in which we communicate and involve people whenever the council is informing people about what is going on, seeking their views on proposals or involving them as partners in the decision making process. When consulting on your service or any other issue you will probably need to focus on finding out about the needs, concerns, priorities and satisfaction levels of your current and potential service users. The aim of consultation should be to find out how we can improve quality of life for all our stakeholders. It should be a genuine two way process which gives people an opportunity to influence decisions.

Everyone's different. Everyone has a unique set of needs and views – It's your job to understand and respond to them. This toolkit will help you to put customers at the heart of everything we do.

Time for action

The need to consult people on what we do for them is increasing because:

- The Council has adopted a new approach to be customer focused and needs led
- Local people are less likely than ever to accept poor quality services or decisions they disagree with
- The government's Public Involvement in Health Act (2007) means all councils have a duty to consult and involve local people.

All this is quite a challenge. More than that, we must also demonstrate that we have acted on what we have found out and that we've improved our services as a result.

The approved Consultation Strategy sets out how consultation will be embedded through service plans and the application of the consultation principles and Community Engagement Standards. The Annual Consultation Programme will determine what is consulted on each year. This toolkit with its appendices will guide those leading on consultation to undertake this work effectively.

All consultation undertaken must be in the Annual Consultation Programme (appendix 1) and the details of the consultation added to the Consultation and Community Engagement

Database on our website. The Consultation Planning Template (appendix 2) should be used to register your consultation and will assist with completing the database entry. The guide for the database entry is appendix 3.

The five stages of consultation

Stage 1: Decide who to consult with

Stage 2: Decide what to consult on

Stage 3: Decide how to consult

Stage 4: Start the consultation

Stage 5: Evaluate and use the results

These five stages are the agreed framework for consultation at SLDC. This toolkit will give you tools to work through the key stages.

Stage One: Decide who to consult with

The geographical area that the service covers will affect who you consult and the method you use. Is the service aimed at everyone universally, or at specific groups of the population? Universal services include, for example, street cleaning and leisure services (although different groups of the population will have different experiences and views), whereas services like housing provision and tourism are aimed at particular client groups.

Everyone involved in your service has a view on how it could be improved. Non users, staff, councillors, suppliers, local people, agencies and organisations as well as your key customers will all be full of ideas on how to improve the service.

You will need to work out who your stakeholders are and plan to consult them all. You should start with the main customers or users of your service. For example if you were to consult on making improvements to a local park, you would probably need to consult with park users, people who live nearby, the wardens, local agencies or voluntary groups, businesses, the contractor and people who don't use the park (to find out why not).

You can start here by thinking what the service, issue or challenge is that you want to consult on. Try to think in terms of the smallest service unit that's appropriate.

Tools 1 and 2 below should help you map out who your stakeholders are. The first is a checklist to give you some ideas of who your consultees should be and the second is a reminder to make special efforts to listen to certain groups of people who are sometimes harder to reach.

Remember:

- Use a phased approach – who will you listen to first?

- Pilot things – learn and improve as you go
- Keep a record of who you are going to consult and why.

You cannot consult with absolutely everyone about absolutely everything – do whatever you feel an objective observer would think reasonable and appropriate focusing on your stakeholders.

Tool 1: Mapping stakeholders and consulting the hard to reach

Use this checklist to draw a simple map of you stake holders

Key customers

- People who pay directly
- People who pay indirectly (eg. through Council Tax)
- Users of services
- Internal customers (eg. other staff)

Non-Users

- People who are unaware of the service
- Dissatisfied or ex-customers
- People who might need the service at a later date.

Others

- People we enforce against or who are regulated (eg. landlords)
- Citizens/local people
- Businesses
- Interested agencies – voluntary, private, public sector
- People affected by policies or development (eg. planning)
- Local councilors, neighbourhood forums, parish councils, MPs, carers or advocates, Local Area Partnerships, Local Strategic Partnership etc.

If you have a complex set of stakeholders it may be useful to use a Stakeholder Matrix to assess the level of importance and support relevant and your approach to consulting with each stakeholder.

When do I need to inform councillors?

If the proposed exercise is area and/or issue based you must ensure that the relevant portfolio holder and ward councillors are informed about it before it proceeds. Councillors can then answer local peoples' questions and can encourage a higher response and increase participation rates. Elected members often have a wealth of knowledge about groups or agencies that are active in their area or on particular policy issues. They may, therefore, be able to provide you with useful suggestions on who should be consulted and the best approach to be used.

The staff who deliver the service

Along with customers, staff are one of the richest sources of ideas about how the service can be improved. People working in the service can often be aware of barriers to performance that may not be apparent to managers or outsiders. Changes and improvements that are generated in consultation with those who have to deliver them are usually more realistic and have a better chance of being achieved.

Existing mechanisms for consultation networks, partnerships and other organisations

There are hundreds of community and voluntary organisations through which you may be able to consult with particular target audiences, the Community Engagement Officer can advise you on the groups, organisations and forums which may be able to assist you.

Town and Parish Councils

The Parish Charter advises how consultations with town and parish councils should be undertaken, it recommends:

- The use of Plain English
- Cumbria Association of Local Councils (CALC) advice is available where required
- Information is available to assist comment
- 6 week minimum period
- A summary document
- Easy to use response form
- Provide freepost/ prepaid envelope
- Consultation copied to CALC
- Make available, where possible on the website.

Third Sector Organisations

The Cumbria Compact is an agreement between the Statutory Sector and Third Sector Organisations in Cumbria. The Compact sets out how statutory and third sector organisations in Cumbria want to work together to improve services for local people.

The Planning and Consultation Code of Practice Aims to make a positive impact on the way in which statutory organisations plan and consult on their services in respect of the third sector. It gives good practice guidelines for both statutory and third sector organisations and then outlines the structures that exist to support this process in Cumbria.

Contact the community Engagement Officer for a copy of the Planning and Consultation Code of Practice.

Equality and Hard to reach groups

Tool 2: You may have to make special arrangements and extra efforts to find out some peoples views

For example:

- Single parents, particularly those who work, may have less time
- Some groups may feel culturally isolated from mainstream activity
- Some communities are geographically isolated
- Some people have no permanent address
- Some people who are generally 'too busy'
- People on low incomes
- Young people
- Disabled people
- People from ethnic minorities
- Some of the people you want to consult may require alternative formats such as:
 - Translations
 - Braille, large print and audiotape
 - Format for people with learning difficulties - Easy Read format is an accessible way of conveying information to people with learning difficulties via pictures and ready to read English.

You may need to find innovative ways of consulting with these people.

The Single Equality Framework requires services to monitor their service users to establish which different groups of people are using the service and to compare this with local demographic data. Where there are gaps between the profile of the local population and that of service users, consultation exercises can be used to help develop a better understanding as to why some groups are not using the service to the same extent as others and to devise actions to address this.

Effective consultation is an essential element of the framework and we are required to assess our methods of consultation and involvement with the community to ensure they are inclusive. We also need to evidence that we have used feedback to improve services and measure satisfaction levels with our service users.

You should refer to the **Equality Consultation Protocol Document** which has further detailed information about consulting with equality groups.

The details of organisations in contact with, or representing, community groups including equality groups is held on the **SLDC website**.

South Lakeland District Councils' Policy and External Funding Officer can advise on appropriate approaches and the current Equality Impact Assessments, as well as the service level agreements held with local equality groups.

Equality monitoring

To help you to show that you have a representative sample of opinion, you should ensure that all consultation exercises include the standard corporate equality monitoring categories. You need to ensure that you are proactive in targeting seldom heard groups and aim for a representative sample that includes people from all of the equality strands, which are age, gender, race, disability, sexual orientation, rural areas and religion/belief.

All consultation materials should include the corporate alternative formats box, shown below, which is available from the Policy and External Funding Officer.

Stage Two: Deciding what to consult on

Once you have identified the people you need to consult with, you can start thinking about what questions to ask. Consultees need to know that their views have been used to inform proposed changes to services in order to feel that the exercise has been worthwhile, so make sure you:

- have a clear reason for consulting, and a clear understanding of what information you wish to gather to inform changes/decisions
- limit your consultation to a specific, achievable purpose and inform consultees about this
- explain:
 - The different options available and their pros and cons

- The decision-making process and what considerations and evidence will inform it
 - How consultees views will be taken into account
 - How they will be informed of the findings, actions/decisions and any relevant means of appeal.
- It is unlikely that any exercise will start from scratch. What do you already know? What has been done before? What was the outcome?
 - Members, officers and the public will all have different expectations about the outcomes of any exercise. If it is to be successful you must think about these before you start
 - Don't just ask about things that you think are appropriate - think from the customer's point of view. What do they want to tell you about?
 - Think clearly about your objectives for consulting with people - why are you doing it? What decisions will it influence? How does it link with the work of others?
 - Best value means we have to challenge the way the service is now and question if the need could be met more effectively. Involve people in exploring this key issue.

Avoid asking about things that are just interesting to know - focus on issues that you can change or strongly influence. Thinking about the points above should lead you to some ideas about what questions to ask.

Tool 3: Think about your objectives for consulting. Which of these do you want to do?

- Challenge the existing service
- Look for unmet needs
- Shape the way your service is delivered
- Measure satisfaction with the service
- Prioritise future spending
- Set targets for the service
- Check out reaction to new ideas or initiatives
- Look for quality improvements
- Check opinions, view, and attitudes
- Assess potential interest in something
- Improve customer relationships

- Other issues: what are they?

Tool 4: Here are some ideas of the type of questions areas you might want to think about.

- What do people like most and least about the service?
- Is the frequency of the service acceptable?
- Is the service reliable?
- What takes too long?
- What about comfort, convenience, safety factors?
- How good is your customer service (eg Helpfulness, friendliness)?
- Is the range of services available appropriate?
- Is there enough information available about the service?
- Is the service good value?

It may also help to try defining your overall purpose. Some additional issues, depending on the service might include:

- Do the public actually want and value the service? Are current /potential/former users and others satisfied with the service? Are there specific aspects that they are more satisfied with than others? It may be useful to find out why non-users do not use the service or why previous users have given up. Perhaps there are more attractive non-council alternatives or perhaps quality has recently deteriorated. You may wish to find out the specific aspects that would make people return to a service – this could be price, quality, speed of service etc
- Is the service accessible to those who want it? Is the service sufficiently well publicised? Are there any barriers in the way the service is delivered? For example, is physical access (stairs, location etc.) appropriate, and are any other access, cultural or special communication needs taken account of?
- Is the service delivered equitably? Are there unjustifiable differences in the way the service is delivered to different groups of people or in different parts of the district? For example, do some locations receive a less frequent service or do some groups of people feel excluded from the service by virtue of gender, race or other characteristics? It may be, for example, that the manner of service delivery, or the type of language used in publicity, favours some groups more than others
- Service standards –are there current service standards, and if so, do people know what they are and consider them appropriate? You may wish to use the consultation process to establish standards for service delivery. Remember to ensure that standards are demanding, but deliverable

- How much would people be willing to pay for the service? This may be difficult to establish and specialist advice should be sought on how to do this and how it can help in deciding on the best value option for the service.

Piloting

Ideally questions should be piloted. This will allow you to check that people understand your questions and are interpreting them in the way that you intended. If respondents interpret questions differently to you, then the data you receive may not actually tell you what you think it does.

Stage 3: How to consult

By now you should have identified the key stakeholders for your service and thought about what to ask them. You will now be able to decide how to go about it. Some key points are:

- Use the method chart (tool 5) and tool 9 below to select some possible consultation methods (e.g. focus group, survey etc)
- Think especially about the different needs of different people you wish to consult with (use tool 6)
- You should use a range of methods for each consultation - one focus group will not do
- You should custom build a consultation process for each service or issue
- Look for opportunities to join up with other services or outside agencies and conduct joint consultation where possible
- If you are asking about satisfaction with your service, it is usually best to do this as soon as possible after the service has been delivered (e.g. do a follow up phone call or survey card a few days later)
- You will probably need to use a mix of quantitative methods (e.g. where we can measure a satisfaction or opinions numerically surveys for example.) and qualitative methods (e.g. where we look for more in depth opinions or quality improvements – focus groups for example.)
- Build on what consultation you already have in place
- Try where possible to get a representative sample of different types of local people.

Quick method selector

Tool 5: this table shows the more usual consultation methods. The further up the chart, the higher the level of public involvement. This is sometimes known as the Ladder of Consultation:

Users on committees/panels

Neighbourhood appraisal

Large scale community events

Policy conferences

Community associations

Involving Round tables/users forums

 Citizens juries

 Deliberative focus groups

 Residents forum

 Tenants associations

 Focus groups

 Referenda

 Simulations

Consulting Residents panel

 Neighbourhood forums

 Public meetings

 Specific surveys

 Ongoing surveys

 Residents surveys

 Video box

Informing Quality check phone calls

 Complaints and suggestions

 Mystery shopper

 Advice leaflets

Newspapers

Reports

What methods to use and when

Different types of people prefer different consultation methods and some methods work better for some things than others. The tools below should give you some ideas.

Tool 6: Research has shown that different types of people prefer different consultation methods. Here are a few clues:

- The most popular methods for all types of people are 'having the information sent to them' and surveys (i.e. home based consultation)
- There is much less support for public meetings or anything that involves leaving the home
- People on higher incomes are more likely to favour being on panels or groups etc
- People on lower incomes are generally less keen on getting involved and feel information poor
- Younger people like focus groups and street interviews
- Older people often like Neighbourhood Forums.

Tool 7: All consultation methods have strengths and weaknesses. Some are more representative than others, some get a more in depth response, and some are best if you want a quick response:

- **Postal Surveys** often get a limited response (20% or less) but can be good for when you want to give information as well
- **Focus Groups** explore issues in detail from the customers point of view. They are good for getting common sense opinions on complex issues
- **Telephone Surveys** are great when you need a quick response and have simple questions
- **Personal Interviews** are often the most statistically reliable method because you can control the number and type of people that you ask.

Tool 8: The answers to the following questions will also help guide you to choosing the right method:

Do you need your response to be representative?

- Sample Survey

- Representative Focus Groups.

Is the issue complex?

- Focus Groups
- Surveys
- Regular Meeting
- Travelling Exhibitions
- Planning Days
- Citizens Juries.

Do you need to get a response from as many people as possible?

- Newsletter or leaflet with a
- Response form
- Free phone line
- Door to door surveys
- Radio interview and phone in.

Do you need to include groups that are often excluded?

- Involve community organisations
- Surveys
- Focus Groups
- Meetings with existing groups
- Drama workshops.

Do you need to review or improve your service or test new approaches?

- User and Nonuser surveys
- User and Nonuser focus groups
- Quality circles
- Stakeholder meetings
- Staff feedback
- Effective complaints system.

Do you need to have a regular dialogue with the same people?

- Newsletter with feedback
- Regular Meetings or Mailings
- User forum.

Tool 9: Different types of consultation methods are available

This chart shows the main methods of consulting and involving people you could use.

Method	Description	Pros	Cons	Costs
Users on committees/panels	Stakeholder involvement in decision-making bodies	Has real power. Shows user perspective of service provider	Users may get too close to be representative	Low
Neighbourhood or participatory appraisal/audit	Local people conduct own study and prepare analysis and plan	Involves residents in whole process. Builds skills and local pride	Needs bid input in training and support	Low
Large-scale community events	Various. Bring together locals to give views/produce plan	Can take very full view. Can build consensus and pride in result	Also needs much pre work and balancing ideas	Medium/high
Policy conferences	Extended large meeting, including key stakeholders breaking into smaller workshops	Gets key people focused clearly on issue. Improves partnership and joined-up working	May be too big to achieve consensus or decision. Raises expectations	Medium/high
Community associations	Management committee for community centre	Builds local partnership, skills and involvement	Asks a lot from people. May miss majority view	Low
Round tables/user forums	Groups of stakeholders meeting regularly to discuss issues	Bring in important variety of views, knowledge etc. Can build consensus	Need to be well prepared and supported	Low

Method	Description	Pros	Cons	Costs
Citizens' Juries	Extended group discussing issue and hearing/seeking evidence	In-depth look at complex issues. Shows how evidence affects views	Small selected group may lack credibility. Much work	High
Deliberative Groups	Participants gather and have information and chance to discuss before giving opinion	Gets various points of view. Allows in-depth consideration. Shows how views change	Requires quite skilled preparation and facilitation	Medium
Tenants or other Stakeholders Associations	Body of tenants (or other stakeholders) meeting formally	Very self-led, strong local involvement	May be a minority. May get adversarial	Low
Focus groups	Group of people talk about issues and share views	Goof in-depth look includes feelings, responses and results of discussion. Can look at certain types of people	Views of just a few may be misleading. People can change when in groups	Medium
Referendums	An open vote on a particular issue for all the public	Easy to understand. Gives a clear message. Open to all in theory	Big effort to set up. Usual turnout worries	High
Simulations	Proposed arrangements or ideas are tried out in role-play with stakeholder representatives	May get good idea of complex and unpredictable possibilities. Shares points of view	Needs good facilitation and running. Can only involve a few people	Medium

The Community Engagement Officer can also advise you as to the most appropriate method to use to achieve your purpose.

Which group and how many? Sampling frames and confidence intervals

One of the difficulties in carrying out sample surveys is trying to establish who all your users are. Such a list of users will form the sampling frame, from which your sample is selected and it is very important to ensure it contains all the users of the service who you are interested in. If this is not the case, a representative sample of users is unlikely to be achieved.

You should be mindful of the Data Protection Act (see below) when you draw up your sampling frame as this requires the consent of individuals to be approached for research purposes. If you intend to analyse the responses of small groups, then you will require a proportionately larger sample size to ensure that a sufficient number of each group are included. For example, you may wish to survey a sample of people from across the whole district, but you may also wish also to know the views of adults aged under 25 who live in a particular area. Your sample size will need to be above a certain number to ensure that there are enough people in this group to provide you with statistically valid results. If there are only a small number you will not be able to draw robust and valid conclusions with the required degree of certainty.

Specialists refer to confidence intervals, a statistical formula that measures how representative the sample is likely to be of the larger group. The smaller the sample is as a percentage of the sampling frame, the bigger the confidence interval, and the larger the confidence interval, the less statistically reliable the results. The Community Engagement Officer and the Research and Intelligence Manager can advise on sampling, confidence intervals and booster techniques to help ensure research validity.

Timescales

Ensure that you give yourself/your team and the people you are consulting enough time:

- To plan and prepare your approach
- For your consultees to respond (take account of holidays etc)
- For the results to be produced
- To feedback the results to those consulted and let them know what will happen next
- To incorporate conclusions into any reports or task documents you need to complete.

The Cabinet Offices and Cumbria Compact both recommend twelve weeks as a standard minimum. The parish Charter states a minimum of 6 weeks; this is also a realistic timescale for parish councils. You may find it useful to draft a formal timetable with the key milestones identified. Contingency plans are helpful, for example, how will a low response rate to questionnaires be overcome – will more time be needed to accommodate this possibility?

Note: that if any of the people you are consulting need alternative formats such as large print or translations, you will need to build in extra time for these to be prepared.

Resourcing

Whatever approach is adopted, it has to be fit-for purpose using an appropriate methodology to gather a representative sample of opinion, which is rigorously analysed, to produce valid and actionable research conclusions. Resources need to be dedicated to the consultation process as effective consultation involves expenditure of time and money. So, you should be clear from the start as to the resources you will need to ensure your exercise is effective and value for money.

What if I need to use external consultation providers?

Where internal capacity is limited, it can be tempting to assume that appointing a contractor, such as a consultant or a market research company, will solve the problem. However, it should be borne in mind that this is a specialist purchasing function and requires some expertise in briefing and managing contractors in order to get the best value for money. If you are considering the appointment of a contractor to carry out the exercise, you must do this in liaison with the Community Engagement Officer and the Procurement and Contracts Manager.

Sustainability and climate change

Be aware of sustainability and climate change issues when planning your consultation. Try where possible to limit the number of hard copies of consultation materials, use online consultation methods, use local providers and try to plan venues which are near to public transport links. However sustainability issues must be balanced with and not exclude hard to reach and equality groups where possible. You may find it useful to conduct a Sustainability Impact Assessment, the Policy and External Funding Officer can offer support.

Statutory requirements

Freedom of information

Service managers should note that the Freedom of Information Act empowers citizens and consultees to receive any materials relating to consultation exercises. In those instances where consultation has been undertaken to inform a contentious decision these materials may well be used in an attempt to show that the decision-making process was in some way flawed. To avoid such legal challenge, the authority must be able to demonstrate that it has done all that can reasonably be expected to comply with its own procedures and guidance. Managers should, therefore, ensure that they maintain an evidence trail which demonstrates that their consultation exercises have complied with this strategy.

Data Protection Act

Managers must ensure that information used to support or conduct consultation exercises is used in accordance with the Data Protection Act 1998 (DPA).

In essence, this has two primary implications for the way in which consultation exercises are conducted.

Firstly, in those instances where a service is provided to named individuals, you must ensure your service has explicit consent from individuals stating that they can be contacted for the purposes of consultation.

Many services obtain this consent on the initial documentation used to register the individual as a service user. Managers should check whether their service's documentation includes this request for consent and whether the individual who is to be approached has given consent. If service documentation does not include a request for consent, managers may wish to include this when new forms are being designed.

If you wish to consult about a service provided to named individuals and consent for this has not previously been requested or given, you must issue a 'fair processing notice', which includes a request for consent to the prospective consultees. You should ensure that any material sent out to people who have not previously given consent begins with this request notice and that consent has been positively given before you include the response in any analysis. If you are conducting a telephone survey the request for consent must be made at the start of the call and the call must be recorded. The Councils Research and Intelligence Manager, who has responsibility for ensuring compliance with the DPA and FOI can assist you in framing the fair processing notice.

If you intend to consult about services that everyone receives, such as the street cleansing or environmental services, you can consult anyone who is on the electoral register, as their listing on this indicates that they may be approached without specific prior consent.

Secondly, you must ensure that you anonymise all data collected so that no individual can be identified from any material you may publish when reporting on the findings of the exercise.

Communication

How are you going to let the general public know about your consultation? Key to this is using the SLDC website, ensure the Consultation and Community Engagement Database is updated with all the information and visible at the consultation launch. Consider using press releases at significant point of the consultation, i.e. at the launch of the consultation, before public exhibitions, before closing as a reminder etc.) Where possible use South Lakeland News and any relevant newsletters, i.e. Trade Talk which goes to the majority of visitor attractions and accommodation providers. The Communications Team can help with your communication needs for the consultation and are currently working on ways to use social media sites such as twitter to communicate with the public.

IT can also help with providing a dedicated email address which can be used on all materials, any enquiries will go directly to those who need them. For example, the talk toilets email address talktoilets@southlakeland.gov.uk was directed to the Community Engagement Officer but also went directly to the consultants who were leading the consultation. This made logging and responding to emails easier, as well as helping when reporting. Email could also be sent from this email address maintaining one central contact point for all consultees

Analysis

How will the data be analysed? This often requires specialist expertise and software. For example, you may want to compare responses to two different questions or the responses of different sub-groups. Simple counts of how many people gave a particular response to each question may provide you with some interesting information, but more complex analysis of individual groups will often reveal more.

All results of consultations should be sent to the Community Engagement Officer and the Research and Intelligence Manager, who may also be able to help with and advise you on analysing the results.

Stage Four: Start the consultation

You should now be at the stage where you can actually implement some consultation. It is important that we all stick to some basic standards. Use tool 10 below as a checklist.

Has your consultation been included in the Annual Consultation Programme and your Service Plan? (Appendix 1)

Has your consultation been entered on to the Consultation and Community Engagement Database? An easy guide to this is available as appendix 3. Contact the Community Engagement Officer to set up a log on.

Some local authorities ask peoples views, then:

- Don't tell them what will happen with the results
- Don't do anything with the results
- Don't tell anyone the results
- Do what they planned they were going to do anyway
- Ask them the same things again next year.

We must make sure that we don't do the same. You could form a team of users & nonusers to work with you to oversee the consultation process and use of results.

Examples of real comments:

"You send us plans that are already sewn up and ask for our comments in two weeks"

"Don't expect to get a few of us together and suddenly represent the whole community that'll never happen"

Tool 10: Ensure that people know:

- Who is being involved and why
- What decisions will be influenced
- Who will take these decisions
- When the decisions will be taken
- How the results will be fed back to people
- That anonymity will be respected if requested
- Who they can contact if they are unhappy about the exercise.

Ensure that you have:

- Used plain English and no jargon
- Avoided any leading or ambiguous questions
- Thought about different peoples preferences in terms of methods
- Offered a choice of consultation methods to suit preferences
- Thought about involving 'hard to reach people'
- Planned for how the views of different stakeholder groups will be balanced against each other
- Given people plenty of time to respond
- Decided who will do the consultation, in-house or an agency
- Successfully built consultation into your service review and planning process.

There are, of course, lots of risks when involving people. Some pitfalls to think about are:

- By consulting, you can easily raise expectations that things will change overnight, they won't. Be careful. Be clear
- If you consult on a decision that has already been taken, it will come back to haunt you. People know when we are doing 'token' consultation

- Expect some conflict and pain - if you consult with a range of stakeholders, they may have opposing views. It's the members role to decide how to respond - bearing all these views in mind
- Don't just put on an event (e.g. focus groups or policy conference) and expect people to be interested and flock to it. You may need to work hard to engage them
- If you only allow people to write in on an issue (say following a magazine article) you are likely to often get unrepresentative responses.

Tool 11: Final checklist before consulting.

Just before you start, think about these things again: do you know...?

- Who to consult - have you thought of everyone
- Who's views will be most influential
- That you have thought of the 'right' issues and questions to focus on
- That you have selected the most appropriate method
- How much it will cost and where the money is coming from
- What decisions will be affected and when
- That you have thought about the Data Protection Act and how it might relate to your consultation.

Make it short and sweet:

One council sent a 20 page questionnaire to 180,000 homes at a cost of £100,000. It took 3 hours to fill in and was sent back by just 85 (patient) people. That's £1200 per response.

Not Best Value.

Stage five: evaluating and using the results

Many authorities have reported that much of their consultation is not used effectively. Finding out what people think about services without having a clear plan for what you are going to do with it is of limited value.

Your design should have included:

- Ensuring that it informs a decision to be made
- Making it clear what people can change by participating
- Feedback to people on how their views have been taken into account.

Findings

Summarise the key results of the exercise:

- How effective were the methods – were there any weaknesses?
- What the views given were
- What the conclusions are
- What action can be taken in response.

Consultation is a continuous process, not a one off event. All consultations should relate to a decision that you are intending to make, and that can be influenced by the results of that consultation

Tool 12: what happens after the consultation?

- Do not underestimate the amount of effort required to process data or write reports. Even if you get an agency to do it you may have a lot of work
- Look at the broad picture painted by the range of consultation you have done. Where is there consensus or conflict?
- You will need to adopt some process for making quality improvements (big and small) based on what you have found out, and for taking any big decisions on budgets etc. Make sure you've thought this through.
- Do further consultation to test out your ideas on how to respond to the results (especially on ideas for changes to the service)
- Don't be too concerned if the method was not successful - seek advice & try again

Balancing conflicting demands

Stakeholders are not homogeneous and it is therefore likely that you may have to balance conflicting demands. Choice of technique can help this. If an issue is complicated the views of a small well- informed sample may be better than a large uninformed sample. Where interactive methods are used taking particular note of how views changed over time may be useful. Ultimately conflict resolution will always be a matter of judgement and part of the decision making role of members

Changes to service as a result of the consultation exercise

Describe the action that has been or will be taken in response to the consultation exercise:

- What will / has been done to improve the service, policy or project
- When it will happen

- How will it benefit customers
- How the impact of the changes will be monitored
- Ensure the changes are captured and reported on your service plan.

Other uses for results

Consultation results can:

- Add significantly to our knowledge if they are coordinated over a number of years
- Help managers to get staff to focus on particular issues
- Demonstrate that service changes have had an impact
- Be used as evidence for grant applications and funding bids.

Reporting

The output of a consultation exercise usually takes the form of a report to Cabinet, Overview and Scrutiny Committees or Full Council. You should be clear at the start what the output will be, to whom it will be presented and when.

Providing Feedback

Providing feedback is vital. It is particularly important in conflict situations so that individuals who do not like the decision reached may still feel that the process gave them a fair hearing.

Consider how will provide feedback e.g. via the internet, by letter, by returning to user group's meetings to give verbal reports or perhaps through a press release for relevant newsletters or local newspapers. The results and any feedback should also be entered onto the Consultation and Community Engagement Database on the SLDC website.

Evidence trail

Maintain a record of the evidence trail supporting the exercise, including all consultation documentation such as questionnaires, website usage, email enquiries etc and cite where these are held in any reports on the exercise (this is important to enable responses to be given to Freedom of Information Act requests and for audit purposes).

Tool 13: Evaluating consultation

Recently, local government generally has been attacked for never evaluating consultation. We need to prove we're different. Use this checklist when your consultation is over:

- Were the objectives understood by everyone?

- Were the right stakeholders involved (type, numbers, including hard to reach groups)?
- Did the methods used match the objectives?
- Was there the right balance of qualitative and quantitative methods?
- Were the levels of resources and support right?
- Could we say that a representative set of views were obtained?
- Was the timescale and process transparent and kept to?
- Was the consultation accessible (e.g. translations, plain English etc)?
- What were the costs (include staff time)?
- Did it lead to a change of policy, service etc?
- How many people will be affected by the changes?

Reviewing

A review using the Community Engagement Standards Self Assessment Guidance (appendix 4) and /or a requesting a peer review will help to evidence our compliance with the standards, improve the standards of consultations within SLDC and share good practice with other authorities within Cumbria.

Final tips

Remember:

- Make sure you are consulting and not just providing information!
- Let local councillors know if you are carrying out an area based exercise
- Make sure the exercise is fit-for-purpose and properly resourced and conducted
- Ensure you consult with a representative sample of people and make the consultation exercise inclusive
- Expect and accept that there may be conflicts of opinion
- Do not raise expectations or promise what cannot be delivered
- Balance different views and do not favour one group or another – ensure you draw your conclusions in an objective and transparent a way as possible
- Make sure you act, where you can, on what you find out and where you can't, let the consultees know why
- Tell consultees how their views are used

- Keep an evidence trail
- Record the improvements you make as a result of consultation on your business plan.

Useful contacts

Community Engagement Officer

for specific questions on consultation and questionnaire design

e.nichols@southlakeland.gov.uk

Partnerships and Organisational Development Team

for equalities and research and intelligence and maps

policy@southlakeland.gov.uk

Communications Team

for press, social media and website

communications@southlakeland.gov.uk

Publications and websites:

- The Government's Code of Practice on Consultation (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/consultation-principles-guidance>) 2008
- The Market Research Society's Code of Conduct (http://www.marketresearch.org.uk/standards/code_of_conduct)
- SLDC Equality pages (<https://www.southlakeland.gov.uk/your-council/equality-and-diversity>)

Toolkit Appendices

1. Annual Consultation Programme
2. Consultation Planning Template and guidance
3. Consultation and Community Engagement Database Quick Guide
4. Cumbria Community Engagement Standards self assessment guidance.