



Consultation Toolkit

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Introduction: involving people

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.

Welcome to this quick reference guide to involving your customers and other stakeholders in decisions. Anyone who wants to involve people more in what they do can use it. Its designed to lead you through what you will need to do and contains the tools you will need to consult effectively. Despite the clear benefits of consultation, however, there are potential drawbacks arising from 'consultation fatigue' and poor quality control. Therefore, it is important that we carry out these exercises professionally and in a joined-up corporate fashion.

Everyone's different. Everyone has a unique set of needs and views – It's your job to understand and respond to them.

Time for action: the need to involve

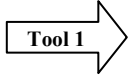
The need to consult people on what we do for them is important because:

- The council has customer service as one of its priority issues.
- Local people expect good quality services and decisions.
- XXX% of people want us to make more effort to find out their views.
- All councils are required to consult on their services as part of Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA), The Right to Involve and other statutory processes.
- 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.

If people have good experiences through the Council's consultation methods, they will not only be willing to participate in future consultations but will become increasingly involved in them.

Involving our customers

These five stages are the agreed framework for involvement at North Lincolnshire Council. This booklet is designed to give you tools to work through these, whatever your service may be.



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|----------------|-------------------------------------|
| 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 |

STAGE ONE: deciding who to involve

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 rangers, 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 e.g. Pest Control not Environmental Health or Residential Care not Social Services.

(Tools 2 and 3) below should help you to 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 that we might otherwise ignore.

In district of Market Harborough according to the 2001 census 2.13% are from ethnic minority groups, 13.75% have a limiting long term illness, 20.16% are above 60 years of age, 20.15% are 16 and under, and 22.31% are unemployed.

Remember:

- Map your stakeholders.
- Use a phased approach - who will you listen to first?
- Pilot things - learn and improve as you go.

You cannot consult with absolutely everyone about absolutely everything - do whatever you feel an objective observer would think reasonable and appropriate.

Mapping stakeholders and consulting the hard to reach

Tool 2

Use this checklist as a basis to think about and map your stakeholders:

KEY CUSTOMERS

- People who pay directly.
- People who pay indirectly (e.g. through council tax).
- Users of services.
- Internal customers (e.g. 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.
- Interested agencies - voluntary, private, public sector.
- People affected by policies or development (eg planning).
- Local Councillors, Neighbourhood Forums, Parish Councils, MP's, Carers or Advocates, Local Businesses etc.

Tool 3

Consulting with the 'Hard to Reach' checklist. For lots of reasons, you may have to make special arrangements to find out some people's views for example:

- People who have problems reading, writing and speaking English.
- Some disabled people.
- Some people on low incomes.
- Some people from ethnic minorities.
- Some people who are generally 'too busy'.
- Young People.

There are a number of other reasons for exclusion which are worth taking into account:

- 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.

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

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.

Use tools 4 and 5 below to draft some question areas.

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. There are a few key points:

- 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.
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Tool 4

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, views, and attitudes.
- Assess potential interest in something.
- Improve customer relationships.
- Other Issues - What are they?

Tool 5

Here are some ideas of the type of question areas you might want to ask about.

- What do people like most and least about the service?
- Is the standard or level of the service right?
- 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 the service equally accessible by everyone?
- Is there enough information available about the service?
- Is the service good value?

If you can, it is useful to consult a small number of people on which questions to ask. Ultimately your consultation should be tailored to the main decisions that need to be taken.

STAGE THREE: 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 pull down chart (tool 12) and tool 6 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 7 overleaf).
- 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 (for example do a follow up phone call or survey card a few days later).
- You will probably need to use a mix of 'quantitative' methods (such as where we can measure a satisfaction or opinions numerically - surveys for example.) and 'qualitative' methods (such as 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



This chart 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:

Involving	<i>Users on committees/panels</i>
	<i>Neighbourhood appraisals</i>
	<i>Large scale community events</i>
	<i>Policy conferences</i>
	<i>Community associations</i>
	<i>Round table / users forums</i>
	<i>Citizens juries</i>
	<i>Deliberative focus groups</i>
	<i>Residents' forums</i>
	<i>Tenants' associations</i>
	<i>Focus groups</i>
	<i>Referenda</i>
	<i>Simulations</i>
	<i>Residents' panel</i>
<i>Neighbourhood forum</i>	
Consulting	<i>Public meetings</i>
	<i>Specific surveys</i>
	<i>Ongoing surveys</i>
	<i>Residents' surveys</i>
	<i>Video box</i>
Informing	<i>Quality check phone calls</i>
	<i>Complaints and suggestions</i>
	<i>Mystery shopper</i>
	<i>Advice leaflets</i>
	<i>Newspapers</i>
	<i>Reports</i>

What methods to use and when

Different types of people prefer different consultation methods and some methods work better for some things than others. Tools 7, 8 & 9 below should give you some ideas.

Tool 7

Research has shown that different types of people prefer different consultation methods. Here's 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 8

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 customer's 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 9

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 Meetings
- 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

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.

Some local authorities ask people's 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.



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.

EXAMPLE 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"

Ensure that you have:

- Used plain English and no jargon.
- Avoided any leading or ambiguous questions.
- Thought about different people's 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.



Final checklists 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.

Example: 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 people. That is £1,200 per response.
Not Best Value

Different types of consultation methods are available. Use it - this chart shows the main methods of consulting and involving people that you could use.

Method	Description	Pros	Cons	Costs
<i>Users on committees/panels</i>	<i>Stakeholder involvement in decision -making bodies.</i>	<i>Has real power. Shows user perspective of service provider.</i>	<i>Users may get too close to be representative,</i>	<i>Low</i>
<i>Neighbourhood or participatory appraisal/audit</i>	<i>Local people conduct own study and prepare analysis and plan.</i>	<i>Involves residents in whole process. Builds skills and local pride.</i>	<i>Needs big input in training and support.</i>	<i>Low</i>
<i>Large-scale community events</i>	<i>Various. Bring together locals to give views /produce plan.</i>	<i>Can take very full view. Can build consensus and pride in result.</i>	<i>Also needs much pre work and balancing ideas.</i>	<i>Medium/high</i>
<i>Policy conferences</i>	<i>Extended large meeting, including key stakeholders, breaking into smaller workshops.</i>	<i>Gets key people focussed clearly on issue. Improves partnership and joined-up working.</i>	<i>May be too big to achieve consensus or decision. Raises expectations.</i>	<i>Medium/high</i>
<i>Community Associations</i>	<i>Management committee for community centre.</i>	<i>Builds local partnership, skills and involvement.</i>	<i>Asks a lot from people. May miss majority view.</i>	<i>Low</i>
<i>Round tables/user forums</i>	<i>Groups of stakeholders meeting regularly to discuss issues.</i>	<i>Bring in important variety of views, knowledge etc. Can build consensus.</i>	<i>Need to be well prepared and supported.</i>	<i>Low</i>
<i>Citizens' Juries</i>	<i>Extended group discussing issue and hearing/seeking evidence.</i>	<i>In-depth look at complex issues. Shows how evidence affects views.</i>	<i>Small selected group may lack credibility. Much work.</i>	<i>High</i>
<i>Deliberative Groups</i>	<i>Participants gather and have information and chance to discuss before giving opinion.</i>	<i>Gets various points of view. Allows in-depth consideration. Shows how views change.</i>	<i>Requires quite skilled preparation and facilitation.</i>	<i>Medium</i>
<i>Tenants or other Stakeholder Associations</i>	<i>Body of tenants (or other stakeholders) meeting formally.</i>	<i>Very self-led, strong local involvement.</i>	<i>May be a minority. May get adversarial.</i>	<i>Low</i>
<i>Focus Groups</i>	<i>Group of people talk about issues and share views.</i>	<i>Good in-depth look includes feelings, responses and results of discussion. Can look at certain types of people.</i>	<i>Views of just a few may be misleading. People can change when in groups.</i>	<i>Medium</i>

Method	Description	Pros	Cons	Costs
<i>Referendums</i>	<i>An open vote on a particular issue for all the public.</i>	<i>Easy to understand. Gives a clear message. Open to all in theory.</i>	<i>Big effort to set up. Usual turnout worries.</i>	<i>High</i>
<i>Simulations</i>	<i>Proposed arrangements or ideas are tried out in role-play with stakeholder representatives.</i>	<i>May get good idea of complex and Unpredictable possibilities. Shares points of view.</i>	<i>Needs good facilitation and running. Can only involve a few people.</i>	<i>Medium</i>
<i>Residents' Panel</i>	<i>List of people who will respond to periodic surveys.</i>	<i>Can be quicker and cheaper than one-off surveys. Gets into how views change, who thinks what and why.</i>	<i>Will pick out more interested types - not the average person. Becomes less representative over time.</i>	<i>High</i>
<i>Neighbourhood Forums</i>	<i>Locally-run bodies which hold public meetings on local issues.</i>	<i>Address local issues. Independent image. Can respond to approaches.</i>	<i>Risk hearing only an active minority.</i>	<i>Low</i>
<i>Public Meetings</i>	<i>Open meeting called on specific issue.</i>	<i>Allow expression of views on important current topic.</i>	<i>Can be adversarial and dominated by minority. Not liked by most people.</i>	<i>Low</i>
<i>Specific Surveys</i>	<i>Various research into customer needs, views, experience, etc.</i>	<i>Done well can be clear, fair and very informative. Can give good figures.</i>	<i>Bad surveys can give poor information. May miss certain groups.</i>	<i>Varies</i>
<i>Ongoing Surveys</i>	<i>Monitoring of satisfaction for example high-volume service.</i>	<i>Brings standards into service evaluation. Shows trends over time. Can contact less vocal users.</i>	<i>Time-consuming.</i>	<i>Medium</i>
<i>Residents' Surveys</i>	<i>Wide-ranging survey, hundreds of interviews every 2 years.</i>	<i>High accuracy, credible Trends over time. Representative sample.</i>	<i>Relatively expensive. Not quick</i>	<i>High</i>
<i>Video Box</i>	<i>Booth with camera - open to public to record views.</i>	<i>Allows very expressive feedback. Needs no literacy or third party. May attract hard-to reach such as young people.</i>	<i>Can be tricky to organise. Scares some people off.</i>	<i>Medium</i>
<i>Electronic Polling</i>	<i>Use internet, etc. to get views, perhaps set up debates.</i>	<i>Good potential for debate and live interaction or access at any time from home or public terminal.</i>	<i>IT puts off many people, others may have little or no access to the kit.</i>	<i>Low after set-up</i>
<i>Quality Check phone calls</i>	<i>Quick follow-up to service delivery to check quality or satisfaction.</i>	<i>Quick and customer-responsive. Easy to administer.</i>	<i>May be too much for customers.</i>	<i>Low</i>

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Method	Description	Pros	Cons	Costs
<i>Complaints and suggestions</i>	<i>System to make it easy for customers to give feedback.</i>	<i>Fairly easy to do. Customer views are key. Promotes satisfaction.</i>	<i>Only gets views of vocal minority - often negative.</i>	<i>Medium</i>
<i>Mystery Shoppers</i>	<i>Researchers go into service delivery process as users.</i>	<i>Combines user perspective with consumer's questioning.</i>	<i>Does not involve real users normally.</i>	<i>Low</i>
<i>Planning for Real</i>	<i>Well known way of involving communities in developing ideas. Uses a 3D model of the area - people attach ideas or comments using flags or objects.</i>	<i>Can involve whole community. Draws on local knowledge & skills. Builds a local sense of pride.</i>	<i>Takes a number of weeks to evolve, needs ongoing consultation.</i>	<i>Medium/Low</i>

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.



What happens after the consultation?

- Don't 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.

Consultation is a continuous process, not a one off event.

All consultation should relate to a decision that you are intending to make, and that can be influenced by the results of that consultation.

- **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.

- **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.

- **Other Uses - Results can:**

- Add significantly to our knowledge if they are co-ordinated 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.

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 (eg. 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 change?