



Community Consultation Considerations

All kinds of organisations need to engage people and groups in the community, for many varied reasons.

Whether it is to see how services are perceived, to help plan new developments, or to check that needs are being correctly identified, involvement of service users - individuals, groups or communities that you are targeting - is essential.

This document is an attempt to help organisations to ask the right questions of the right people to get meaningful feedback.

Your service

To begin with, you need to understand what your service is, who your users are and where they are. Have a written document that clearly describes these, and make sure your team and stakeholders have a chance to contribute and discuss.

With an understanding of your service and its users, you can compare your organisation's current reach with what you know about the make-up of the local community and your target areas; you can assess where the gaps are - the first step to being clear about who you still need to reach.

Your questions

It is not enough to simply say 'we want to involve more people from xyz group' - consultation needs to have clear goals.

Take time to think about a) exactly what you want to achieve and find out with your consultation and b) the questions you will need to ask (or other activities) to get there. The more specific you can be, the better.

Open questions are useful for finding out issues or priorities, uninfluenced by the question itself. Closed questions can help narrow down potential answers or solutions. Test out and discuss different questions with as many people as you can: make sure your consultation is the best it can be.

Time is a scarce resource so remember KISS - keep it short and simple. Make sure each question counts, and don't include anything that has no purpose. The shorter and simpler the better.

Hard to reach

The need for consulting with minority community groups - whether related to race, religion, disability, or another characteristic - is particularly important to ensure services are inclusive and accessible.

Many organisations do not have existing representation of such groups or have a limited cohort of people with whom to engage. They run the risk of asking the same people for their opinion and therefore failing to appreciate or understand the diversity of needs within those communities.

It is crucial that organisations work hard to engage the most appropriate people - rather than the most available. Take time to research how you can access the people you want to connect with: Where do they meet? Where do they get their information? What social networks do they use?

Think about consulting at schools, supermarkets, sports clubs, places of worship, community centres, etc., as well as their online equivalents.

Building the relationship

Most of the groups you want to engage with have limited time and energy. And if you're considering reaching out to them, it is likely that others are doing or have done the same. 'Consultation fatigue' – people getting tired of replying to emails, surveys or meeting invites – can mean that your consultation doesn't get the response you are hoping for.

Some things you could consider to overcome these barriers:

- a. Build a relationship. If you're a stranger simply asking for information, people might be reluctant to participate. Get to know the groups or people you want to engage with – meet them informally, at social events; find out what you can offer and what people want, before diving in with what you want to know. Remember – to build a relationship takes time, commitment, energy, and a flow both ways.
- b. Part of relationship-building is to keep people updated once you've talked to them. Let them know what is happening with feedback provided, what changes or outcomes have resulted – make sure they hear from you again. Best of all is if people see and experience how their input is making a real difference.
- c. You're asking people to provide their time, knowledge and lived experience – their expertise. What can you offer in the short term to recognise that? Paying for people's time with cash or vouchers, providing entertainment or refreshments, offering transport or other practical support, are all ways you can show how you value the input you're asking for.

Community Consultation Checklist

1. Who are your users? Age, gender, socio-economic profile, etc. Assess this against the profile of the general population. Which groups do you need to reach more?
2. Have you thought hard about and discussed your questions and methodology? Is each question designed to achieve a specific goal? Have you tested your consultation as widely as possible?
3. Research where and how to access under-represented groups. Remember: working age people might not be available during working hours. Find social places, the places we all go (supermarkets, shopping centres, restaurants etc.) as well as those specific to certain groups e.g. social centres, places of worship, support groups, etc.
4. Think about advertising or other publicity to reach your target groups.
5. Make sure that the consultation is SMART [Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, Time-Bound] - particularly, be sure to check your offer is relevant to the people you reach out to.
6. Don't leave your consultation too late - for maximum value, consultation needs to happen right at the start, and continue as ideas and plans develop, so communities and service users can be involved as things progress.
7. How can you make your consultation accessible? Think about:
 - a) Day/time/date - when are people available?
 - b) Accessibility - what physical barriers are there?
 - c) Language and communication needs of people you want to engage with.
 - d) Methods - get creative in how you try to consult e.g. events, committees, focus groups, surveys, peer research, forums, meetings, advisory groups, satisfaction surveys, community-based research, ICT, chat rooms and notice boards.
8. Make sure you provide feedback and evidence of action to people who you engage with.

What next? Assessing potential impacts

When formulating any policy or procedure, it's often useful to conduct a diversity impact assessment (also known as an equality impact assessment).

This is a set of questions that helps focus on the impact of any changes or developments on groups or people with specific protected characteristics.

Doing the impact assessments will help you to step outside your own viewpoint and into those of others.

You will find a template DIA at the end of this document, and many more online.

Whilst it is useful to conduct the initial DIA internally, involvement of people from different communities and groups should be a priority. Start with staff, volunteers or existing users, and then widen the net to involve as widely as possible.

The Equity Sequence™ has five key questions, which can be used alongside or to complement your DIA:

- Was this designed with equity in mind?
- Who was this designed by, for, with and without?
- Who benefits from this, and who is disadvantaged?
- How can this be efficiently and effectively transformed to reduce bias, discrimination and inequity?
- What opportunities does this offer to create greater equity and equality?

When doing these assessments, we are trying to identify potential significant impacts on any one community or group. Your assessments can also usefully identify positive impacts on specific groups or communities.

From a legal perspective, it is important to identify changes that may be discriminatory or unlawful, particularly in relation to the Equalities Act 2010.

Avoiding discrimination and promoting inclusion and diversity are both often held to be morally – as well as legally – right; it has been shown, too, that organisations and businesses do better when they get these things right.

Contact

This information was produced by Swindon Equality Coalition, a network of people and organisations that promote and support equality, diversity and inclusion.

Please do get in touch with any feedback or to find out more about how you can get involved: equality@vas-swindon.org | <https://vas-swindon.org/equality>

Appendix 1: Sample Diversity Impact Assessment

1. What is it about?

What is the proposal?

What outcomes/benefits are you hoping to achieve?

Who is it for?

How will this proposal meet the equality duties?

What are the barriers to meeting this potential?

2. Who is involved?

What data/evidence do you have about who is or could be affected (e.g. equality monitoring, customer feedback, current service use, national/regional/local trends)?

How can you involve your customers in developing the proposal?

Who is missing? Do you need to fill any gaps in your data?

3. Impact

Does the proposal create an adverse impact which may affect some groups or individuals? Is it clear what this is? How can this be mitigated or justified?

What can be done to change this impact?

Does the proposal create benefit for a particular group? Is it clear what this is? Can you maximise the benefits for other groups?

Does further consultation need to be done? How will assumptions made in this analysis be tested?

4. So what?

What changes have you made in the course of this DIA?

What will you do now and what will be included in future planning?

When will this be reviewed?

How will success be measured?

Appendix 2: Sample Expression of Interest Form

When contacting organisations and community groups to ask for 'user involvement', please be sure to give the following information:

- Your name, organisation & contact details
- Purpose and goals of the consultation
- How many people you wish to engage with, and any specific criteria or characteristics for those people
- How do you plan to involve people?
- What is the length of the engagement you are seeking?
- Is any remuneration or payment of expenses available - and, if so, how much?
- What adjustments can you make so your engagement will be as accessible as possible, e.g. language, location, timings, etc.
- What is the best way for people who are interested to contact you?