

Barrow Borough Council Consultation Policy



**BOROUGH OF
BARROW IN
FURNESS**

Consultation Policy

Introduction

1. Barrow Borough Council is committed to making evidence based decisions that take into account the views and experiences of all those affected by them. We will seek to engage with all sectors of the community to ensure that everyone has an equal chance to have their say.
2. This Policy has been developed to ensure that all consultation undertaken by the Council is effective, efficient and consistent. We aim to continuously improve on our consultation process.
3. This Policy provides the framework for all consultation that takes place throughout the Council.

Aim

4. This Policy aims to support a process of informed and transparent decision making and planning, by improving the quality, and effectiveness of consultation undertaken by or on behalf of the Council.

Objectives

5. The objectives of this Consultation Policy are to
 - support Community Planning, service delivery and performance management processes
 - share consultation results effectively and use them to inform policy development and service delivery wherever appropriate
 - maintain an open dialogue with stakeholders, while giving due consideration to the risk of consultation fatigue in sections of the community
 - openly and actively feedback to consultees on action resulting from consultation
 - ensure that the Council satisfies its statutory duties (including those prescribed in the Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000 and the Disability Discrimination Act 2005) to consult with all sections of the community and to publish the results of that consultation through appropriate media.

The Business Case: Benefits of Consultation

6. Barrow Borough Council recognizes that there are clear and significant benefits to engaging in consultation with service users and non-service users. Consultation is the only way to ensure that services are user-focused. Effective consultation can deliver a range of benefits, including helping to:
 - plan, prioritize and deliver better services, to give users what they want and make the best use of limited resources;
 - set performance standards relevant to users' needs (and monitor them);

- create a working partnership with users, so that they have an interest in improved services;
- Identify problems early so they can be corrected before they escalate;
- symbolize commitment to transparent and accountable decision-making, and to putting services first.

Roles and Responsibilities

7. Service Managers are responsible for ensuring that all Council employees understand and apply the consultation process outlined in this Policy. Service Managers must ensure that stakeholders are consulted on key service and policy-making decisions.
8. The Consultation and Policy Officer (working title) is responsible for providing support to help apply the consultation process, and for advising on the most appropriate consultation methodologies.
9. The Policy Unit (Strategy and Regeneration) is responsible for delivery of consultation on corporate policy and priorities.
10. Department of Personnel and Performance are responsible for delivery of consultation in relation to corporate performance and satisfaction.
11. Department of Personnel and Performance is responsible for meeting training needs that are identified by service managers or departmental heads in order to help them meet their consultation objectives.
12. The Consultation and Policy Officer (working title) is responsible for updating and publicizing the Consultation Policy as required.
13. All consultation exercises should be quality reviewed and approved in advance of implementation at a level appropriate to the scope and nature of the consultation. Managers should consider the following general rules when identifying the appropriate level of approval:
 1. consultation on department or service specific issues will be usually be approved by the department or service manager;
 1. consultation regarding more than one service or department will require approval from Management Board
 1. Consultation relating to or affecting corporate policy should be approved by Management Team
 1. Management Team may, at its discretion, refer to the Joint Board and/or Executive Committee any proposed consultation that is considered to be of a potentially sensitive or political nature.
14. All consultation exercises should have an officer identified and designated as the Principal Contact. It is the responsibility of the Principal Contact to ensure that details of the consultation are submitted to the Consultancy Management System (via Policy Unit, Strategy and Regeneration) and that those details are updated at appropriate stages.

Principles of Consultation

15. To ensure that our consultation reflects best practice and supports a process of informed and transparent decision-making and planning, the following principles will form a framework for development of consultation projects and exercises. Approving officers must be satisfied that each of these principles has been properly considered before approval to proceed with a consultation exercise is granted.

Need

16. Before any new consultation begins, a thorough search will be made to find out whether relevant information has already been gathered from the public. We will avoid unnecessary repetition and duplication. In particular we will use the Consultancy Management System, described below, to identify previous research and opportunities to join-up or merge consultation exercises.

Purpose

17. We will be clear about the purpose and scope of each consultation exercise that we undertake. Any consultation will contain a clear statement describing why it is being carried out and how the results will be used. It will be clear to consultees what may be influenced by responding to the consultation – and what cannot. We will undertake specific and focused consultation to an agreed timescale, which allows the results to be used for their intended purpose.

Methodology

18. We will consult using a variety of methods to ensure that all groups can participate fully. We will further encourage participation by paying attention to timings and locations of events, the provision of information in different formats, access requirements etc.
19. Methods chosen should be appropriate to the purpose, reflecting the strengths and weaknesses of each method, and be managed with a clear understanding of the particular skills, knowledge and resources that consultation requires. The Consultation Guidance will assist with methodology selection.
20. We will seek informed public opinion rather than instant reaction. Whenever possible, the council's communication mechanisms will be used alongside consultation to inform and stimulate public interest, and provide clear background information on the issue being discussed. This information will be presented in plain language and in formats that meet the needs of the consultees.

Sample

21. Consultation should aim to seek a representative cross-section of views. It is widely documented that some sections of the community may be harder to engage in consultation than others. Therefore, appropriate action should be taken to ensure that the views of these individuals and groups are not excluded or

overlooked. The Consultation Guidance provides practical suggestions and contacts that enable this to be achieved.

22. We will seek to consult through existing networks whenever possible, by making full and effective use of, for example:

- Local Neighbourhood and Issue-based Forums, including those operated by Cumbria County Council and Furness Community Network
- Community Voice (Citizens' Panel)
- Established Service User Groups and Networks

Timescale

23. Consultees will be given adequate time to prepare their response. It is recognized that the length of time will vary depending on the time of year and the level of response that is being sought. Sufficient time will be allowed for the results of consultation to be collated, analyzed and considered, so that the results of consultation feed directly into the decision making process.

Results and publishing of reports

24. The full range of views expressed during consultation will be acknowledged and attention drawn to areas of agreement and disagreement. The results of consultation will be weighed carefully together with other evidence and considerations before decisions are made.

25. Reports should be published and distributed in an appropriate and timely fashion. This means giving due consideration to who should receive a copy of the report, and the most suitable medium for publication. Managers should consider the following general rules when identifying appropriate distribution and publication approaches:

25.1. Stakeholders in the consultation exercise will normally expect to receive a copy of the report; for example partners or other agencies that helped to identify sample groups, or develop questions.

25.2. Those who approved the consultation exercise will expect a copy of the report; for example if Executive Committee was asked to consider the consultation exercise at planning stage, it will be appropriate for the report to be submitted to that Committee.

25.3. Those affected by the findings of the report, or who may be expected to take action on the results, should receive a copy. This may include affected members of staff, elected members with particular responsibility for affected geographic or subject areas; or overview and scrutiny committees with relevant work-plans

25.4. Consideration should be given to the timing of report distribution and publication: copies of reports should be distributed in advance of general publication, and sufficient time allowed for recipients to consider the findings. This may mean temporarily withholding publication of reports, pending meetings of affected boards or committees.

26. Details of published reports, including information on how to obtain copies, should be made available on the Consultancy Management System. In most cases it will be appropriate to provide a link to the report document on the Council's Internet site.
27. Consider publicizing the publication of reports through local media, but do this only where there is a positive message of broad interest to the population, and try to ensure that the coverage relates to the positive action being taken as a result of the consultation, rather than on the consultation exercise itself.

Feedback

28. Accessible feedback should be provided to consultees, both on the results of consultation and on how they have been used, in order to encourage greater public participation in the future.
29. In some cases the results of consultation will be outweighed by other evidence or considerations; in such cases a clear and honest explanation of the decisive factors should be included in the feedback.

Evaluation

30. The effectiveness of consultation should be evaluated and the results shared to encourage broader lessons to be learned. Evaluation will consider not only the number of responses received but also the quality, cost and timeliness of the consultation and the overall usefulness of the results in helping to inform decisions.

Consultancy Management System

31. The Consultancy Management System is a resource to coordinate and share consultancy management information within the Council, publish consultation documents and reports, and alert members of the public to consultations in areas of their expressed interest. In addition the system allows information on planned, current and completed consultation to be shared with partner agencies.
32. All consultation exercises, regardless of scope or methodology, should be registered on the Consultancy Management System by passing the required information to the Consultation and Policy Officer (working title). The information required to register a consultation exercise is set out below. This requirement for this information is intended to ensure that the principles outlined above are considered in the planning and implementation of all consultation.
33. Ongoing consultation exercises, for example regular consultation with service user groups or forums, must also be registered in order that officers, elected members and the public can be alerted to the activity. In some cases this will mean registering each meeting of a group or forum as a unique consultation event, while in other cases it will be sufficient to make one registration for an ongoing series of meetings. Service managers should agree an appropriate registration with the Consultation and Policy Officer (working title).

34. A similar response, appropriate to the level of public interest, will also apply to the registration of statutory consultations, including consultation on Licensing and Planning Applications.

Information required for registration of a consultation exercise

35. The following information will be required:

- **Need and Purpose:** what you intend to consult about and describe how the results you obtain will inform decision-making and service delivery.
- **Target group:** Identify the people you are seeking to consult with (ensure you have considered those groups considered hard to reach).
- **Method(s):** Describe the consultation methods you intend to use.
- **Timescale:** Give an outline of the timetable you expect to follow.
- **Resources:** What financial, staff and other resources are required
- **Analysis and reporting:** How the responses will be analysed and who will receive a copy of the report.
- **Feedback:** How consultees will receive feedback, if appropriate, including a summary of responses and actions or outcomes arising.

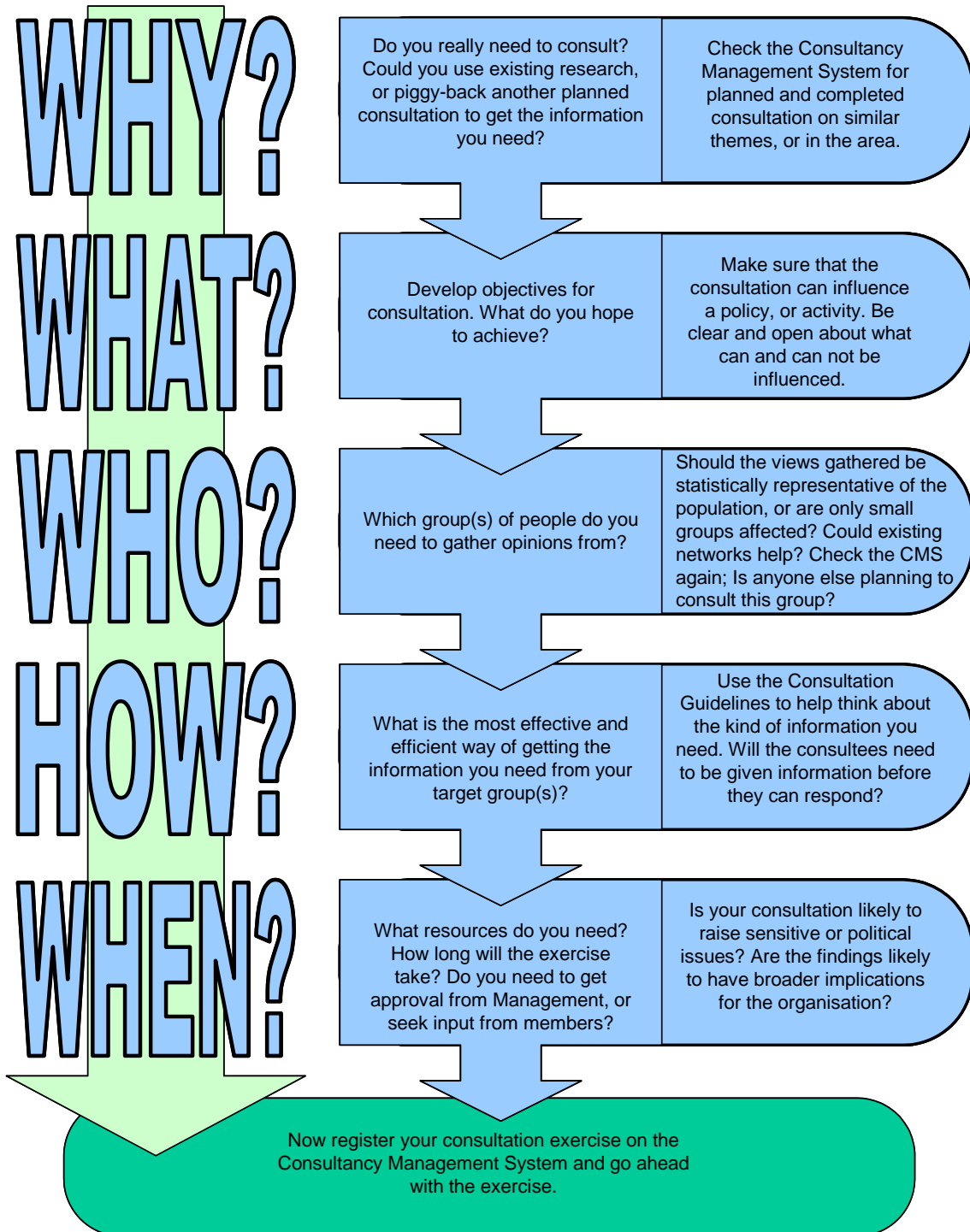
Consultation Guidelines

A Toolkit for Developing Consultation

Consultation Guidelines

- 36.** The guidance below forms part of the Authority's Consultation Policy and highlights just some of the possible approaches to consultation. Policy Unit, Strategy and Regeneration, can offer further advice and guidance on consultation issues, including planning and scheduling, selecting appropriate methodologies, identifying consultees and accessing existing networks. Subject to resourcing constraints, Policy Unit may also provide practical support for consultation exercise development, implementation, and analysis.
- 37.** The Guidance is intended to help you to uphold the Principles of Consultation described in the Consultation Policy.
- 38.** The Diagram below, "Planning to Consult" summarizes the 5 key questions to ask when considering and developing a consultation exercise, and these questions are explored further in the guidance that follows.

Planning to Consult: 5 Key Questions to ask before you start



Need: Why?

39. It is important to properly establish the need to undertake consultation. Do you really need to carry out a consultation exercise? Unnecessary consultation is a waste of resources and likely to discourage participation in other more important exercises.
40. Check the Consultation Management System – does someone already have the information you're looking for, or are there opportunities to link up with other consultation exercises?
41. Carry out some research before you start. Have other Local Authorities done similar consultation? Is there existing regional or national research data? There may be lessons to learn: was the consultation effective? Did the methodology provide worthwhile results? Could it have been done more efficiently?

Purpose: What?

42. This stage involves identifying exactly what you hope to achieve through consultation. How you will use the results?
43. Make sure that the exercise can influence a decision, policy or strategy. Be clear about the opportunities for influence and any constraints
44. Being clear about what you want to achieve, and what may and may not be influenced by the consultation, will help you to manage the expectations of your consultees.
45. Your objectives should be clear and linked to your wider planning process; they should be clearly explained to, and understood by, everyone involved in the consultation, including consultees.

Sample: Who?

46. Consultation should aim to seek a representative cross-section of views. Some sections of the community are unlikely to be engaged in consultation through traditional methods, and appropriate action should be taken to ensure that the views of these individuals and groups are not excluded or overlooked.
47. Consider using existing groups and networks where possible; this is likely to be time and cost effective, but be aware that existing groups may not fully reflect broader opinion.
48. In identifying a target group of consultees, you will need to consider how important it is that responses are representative of a section of the community, or of the population as a whole. Or do you require in-depth personal responses and records of individual's experience?

49. On completing the consultation you should be able to demonstrate that you have the quantity and breadth of views that you wanted, and that you were successful in reaching groups who are traditionally more difficult to engage.

Methodologies: How?

Introduction

50. There is no one 'right' method that will work for any given circumstance. All sorts of conditions influence which methods will provide useful information. These guidelines provide some pointers that will help identify a suitable approach.
51. The key message is that it is rarely appropriate to rely on just one method. Using more than one consultation method will increase both the quality and quantity of information gathered. It is important to understand that different methods may well produce different results: there is rarely, if ever, a single view, and consensus between all users is unlikely.
52. Identifying the people you want to consult will inform selection of the most suitable methods. The table below (Table 1) gives some general advice on which methods may be suitable for reaching particular target groups, and why.
53. It can be useful to use one method to help development of another; for example a focus group to consider the design of a questionnaire. But when linking methods in this way, it is important to ensure that both samples are representative of the same demographic. (i.e. the focus group would need to be representative of the intended audience for the questionnaire, or their views would be less relevant.)
54. Think about the type of response you are likely to get from different groups. Expect different responses from people who are familiar with your service compared with those who do not use it. It may be appropriate to give more or less weight to the views of certain groups, but it will be necessary to explain such action to all stakeholders, clearly and in advance. Table 2 (below) indicates the types of views you might expect from different people.

Table 1: Which methods?

| Target groups | Which consultation methods – and why |
|--|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Frequent and regular users • Individuals and special interest groups who know about your service • The general public (if your service or the issue is popular or particularly important) • Staff | <p>Consider:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Questionnaire based methods • Draft documents for comment <p>Because they are already aware of the issues, are (probably) interested, and don't need detailed additional/supporting information.</p> |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Infrequent users • Potential users • Broad interest groups • Non-users | <p>Consider:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Meetings • Open days • Focus groups • Discussions <p>Because they need are likely to need more information before they can respond.</p> |

Table 2: Type of response

| Who is being consulted? | What sort of views/comments can you expect? |
|-----------------------------|---|
| Individual users | Personal view, or snapshot, as experienced by the individual |
| User groups/panels/meetings | 'Non-expert' view from users of your service. Can help you see a different perspective. |
| Representative groups | Considered responses based on sound knowledge of the service and an understanding of service users needs/aspirations. However views may be more extreme than those of the average user. |
| General public | General perceptions of service: useful indicator of problems and preferences |
| Sounding boards (non-users) | Relatively impartial views on proposals: useful for testing out proposals and plans |
| Staff | Experience of a range of customers' views, plus awareness of the practicalities of providing the service |

Selected Methods

- 55. The following are a small selection of the consultation methods available for use by the Council.
- 56. The Council will use a wide range of public consultation methods. They will be used appropriately, reflecting the strengths and weaknesses of each method, and will be managed with a clear understanding of the particular skills, knowledge and resources that consultation requires.

Questionnaire-based research

- 57. Questionnaire-based surveys are most often used for quantitative research to provide statistics in response to set questions. It allows you to get views from a widely representative group of users (and non-users), and can give statistically reliable information (ie you can be reasonably certain that the answers given by your sample represent those of the entire population – see “Other Considerations” below).
- 58. Quantitative research will tell you what proportion of people think something but, unless you plan carefully, it won't tell you why. It can also fail to pick up on what might be significant problems for users, but which you hadn't considered when drafting your questions.
- 59. The quantity, quality, and even the content of survey responses can be significantly affected by the survey medium.

Postal Surveys

- 60. Postal surveys are ideal when you want to gauge public opinion and satisfaction ratings on broad topics. They should also be considered when covering sensitive or personal issues. They are flexible, easy to administer and relatively cheap, however there are hidden costs such as printing, enveloping and postage.
- 61. A well designed questionnaire produces reliable statistical information but poor questions will result in poor data, a low response and inaccurate results.
- 62. The respondent is able to complete the questionnaire in their own time which may lead to more considered responses and large numbers of people can be contacted in a short period of time. Wherever possible tick-box responses should be provided making it easy for the respondent to complete, and data analysis straightforward. Expect lower response rates from younger age groups, people with literacy problems and people whose first language is not English (unless translations can be provided). Surveys must be easy to complete and even then, the reader may misinterpret questions and we have no control over who actually completes the survey

Electronic (Internet) Consultation

63. Electronic surveys are similar to postal questionnaires but can include some 'routing' of questions so that respondents giving one particular answer are led down one route to answer further questions, while respondents giving a different answer are led down another route.
64. This method of consultation can be conducted in-house - Policy Unit, Strategy and Regeneration, can develop and run a fully routed, formatted web survey on the public or internal websites – and can reach large numbers of people at low cost. It can be a particularly effective way of consulting with young people.
65. However there are significant drawbacks to online surveys: The principal difficulties are that only a minority of the population has access to the internet; there is little or no control over who fills in the questionnaire; and the number of responses is often fairly low. For these reasons online surveys of the general population are often best used to support other exercises, not in isolation. Some of these problems can be resolved by targeting specific groups: pre-registration, contact lists and closed surveys (e.g. surveys of staff via the Intranet) can help.

Telephone surveys

66. Telephone surveys are an effective means of collecting survey data quickly and at relatively low cost. They involve calling, usually without prior warning, and running through a series of questions on the telephone. More complex issues can be tackled than in a postal survey as an interviewer is involved, and there is more freedom to explore general views and perceptions in detail – provided questions are not so tightly structured that they constrain responses.
67. Interviewing skills are required to perform the research, and telephone surveys have high refusal rates - cold calling may annoy the prospective respondent. For this reason it may be preferable to avoid cold calling and use telephone surveys only where consultees have indicated a willingness to be contacted in this way (e.g. as a follow up to other consultation).

Face-to-face interviews

68. Face-to-face interviews, conducted by stopping respondents in the street, or visiting their homes, are an effective way to find out what people think about services and issues, based upon a structured questionnaire. Typically used to gather facts, figures and attitudes about a subject, they can also be used when issues are already known and need to be quantified, or when open-ended information is required. Most suited to surveys in which a wide range of topics must be covered using a large number of questions.
69. Questionnaires used in face-to-face interviews can be longer and are more flexible than postal surveys. More probing questions and complex routing of questions can be incorporated, as the interviewer can guide the respondent through the questionnaire or offer encouragement.

70. Response rates are generally high and the quality of the data collected is of greater accuracy and completeness than in a postal survey. The consultee cannot omit or misinterpret questions.
71. However, face-to-face interviews are time consuming, labour intensive, require trained interviewers, and are therefore expensive. Interviewer effect can occur - the respondent may not answer truthfully or give an answer they think the interviewer wants to hear.
72. There may be difficulties with interpretation of responses, especially language is an issue, or responses are sought from people with disabilities such as a hearing impairment. Interpreters may be required or you may need to consider what is the most appropriate way of communicating.
73. Older and younger people are more likely to refuse than other groups.

Survey questions

74. The usefulness of a survey will depend on the questionnaire. It is all too easy to omit issues that are important to users, or to generate responses that do not provide the information needed to make a decision. Here are some helpful tips on developing a questionnaire:
- Keep questions relevant. Don't ask a question if you can't act on the results.
 - Pay attention to the design and layout of survey forms. A large print size, plenty of space for people to write, clear instructions and questions, putting everything in a logical order and asking for personal information at the end rather than the beginning, will all increase the chances that people will fill in the form. People may be put off by a very long questionnaire.
 - If you need to ask complex questions, you might need to employ someone to conduct the interview rather than rely on a self-completion questionnaire.
 - Think about how to remove barriers for users: translate questionnaires, or consider an interpreter; use an interviewer for people who might have difficulty reading or writing; use alternative formats to survey people with disabilities; put your questionnaire on the Internet and invite electronic responses; include a reply-paid envelope for postal surveys.
 - Allow people to make their comments anonymously. Make clear that opinions will not be published in such a way that individuals can be identified, unless you want to quote responses, in which case you need to ask for people's permission.
 - Sample sizes and response rates will vary according to the sort of survey method you are using, who you are asking and what you are asking. Response rates to postal surveys can be as low as 5-10% if they are sent 'cold'. You can improve this by designing the questionnaire carefully, including pre-paid reply envelopes, personalising letters, offering prize

draws etc. Do not expect a 100% response: a 60% response would be considered very good.

- Consider testing your questionnaire on a small group. Can they understand the questions? Do you get meaningful results? Will the results help you? Avoid leading questions, and only ask one question at a time.

Citizens Panel: Community Voice

- 75.** Barrow Borough Council's Citizens' Panel is called Community Voice and is made up of around 500 residents. The Barrow panel is part of a larger, county-wide panel and management of the panel is sub-contracted to an external consultant by Community Voice Partners. Barrow Borough Council's Community Voice Partners are Cumbria County Council, Cumbria Police and the district councils of South Lakeland, Allerdale, Copeland and Eden.
- 76.** We have an opportunity to consult our Panel members via a survey twice each year, within a set timetable. We can also recruit Focus Groups on specific topics, drawn from Citizens Panel members, at any time. Panel members in Barrow may also be consulted by Cumbria County Council or by the Police.
- 77.** The Panel is recruited to be representative of the population, so is useful when a broadly representative sample of local opinion is needed. However, because of the relatively small size of the panel, the results cannot be extrapolated to represent the whole population in a way that is statistically reliable. For this reason, the Panel should be used as a sounding board to test out specific options or proposals, or to develop views about future needs and goals, rather than to make specific decisions on policy or service delivery.

Focus groups

- 78.** Focus groups involve a small group of people (typically 8-10), usually chosen according to specific criteria (e.g. age, gender, service-user) and invited to take part in an informal discussion about a particular issue. It is advisable to use an experienced, independent facilitator: Effective facilitation is the key to a successful focus group.
- 79.** Focus groups are cheaper and quicker than in-depth interviews and are good for stimulating, testing and clarifying ideas. Issues can be explored in great detail. Participants can be recruited from a variety of sources including existing network groups, Citizens' Panel or based on responses to other surveys.
- 80.** Focus Groups are particularly suited to finding out what specific groups think about your service and are an effective way to consult most groups, including community groups, young people, older people, Minority Ethnic Groups, service users and non-service users, and staff.
- 81.** Do not use focus groups when addressing sensitive, personal or particularly contentious issues.

- 82.** Due to small numbers the results cannot be extrapolated to represent the whole population and are therefore not statistically reliable. You may consider running several focus groups that represent different groups in your population. Bear in mind that, as data from focus groups is not statistical (although it can be quantified) analysis can be time consuming and complex.

Meetings

Forums

- 83.** Meetings of people from particular groups, such as residents of a specific area, users of a service, people with a specific interest in a topic, etc., usually with officer and/or member involvement. Membership of the Forum may be set (e.g. local groups) or open to the public and an agenda may be set in advance or formulated at the time according to participant concerns.
- 84.** Forums are good for reaching people in their own areas and addressing specific local concerns. They can relate to natural communities and by working in partnership with other agencies (police, health etc.) all issues can be dealt with, which increases credibility with the public.
- 85.** It is important to avoid domination by small cliques and confusion or conflict over the respective roles of Council Officers and Members and other local representatives.

Open/Public Meetings

- 86.** Public meetings provide an opportunity for people to hear about issues, plans or proposals, keep members of the public informed, and maintain a dialogue between a service and its users. Used carefully, they can complement other forms of consultation.
- 87.** However public meetings often have a very low attendance and those people who do attend may have a particular concern or view which is not necessarily representative of the population as a whole.
- 88.** Open meetings are unlikely to attract an audience that is representative of the local population and attendees ability to contribute to a discussion about service-wide, strategic priorities can be limited by a lack of knowledge and/or interest. It is important to consider the target audience and organize the meeting at an appropriate time and location, and public meetings should not be used as a sole means of consultation.
- 89.** Attendees may wish to cast votes on the main issue, however significant weight can rarely be attached to the results. It is particularly important in this case to make clear to participants how their opinions will be taken forward.
- 90.** Public meetings do offers a convenient and transparent way to demonstrate public consultation and build good relationships, and can be used to inform the public at the same time as getting views. They are particularly useful where

issues are particularly local (i.e. neighbourhood level) and have a high profile; for example proposals for the regeneration or redevelopment of a particular street or group of streets would be a suitable topic for a public meeting.

Representative groups

- 91.** Many organizations already know what users think about the Council and our services, and the kind of problems they have. These representative organizations are a ready-made source of information and are usually willing to share their knowledge and expertise for the benefit of their members. For example, Furness Community Network, Citizens Advice Bureau, Furness Multicultural Community Forum, Barrow and District Disability Association, etc.
- 92.** These representative organizations may be made up of people with a particular interest in a subject and have particularly strong views: for this reason they should not be used as the only means of consultation, but will be a useful source of qualitative information.
- 93.** In addition to the institutional or corporate responses of these groups, representative organizations may also provide a gateway through which to access the views of particular groups of users (for example people with disabilities or from minority ethnic groups).
- 94.** It is particularly important when consulting representative groups to be clear about the purpose of your consultation and the nature of your sample; it is easy to believe that by consulting one or two organizations from a given sector, you have satisfactorily gathered the views of that sector, but this may not be the case. Be critical, and remember your objectives: what population or sector does the group represent, and is it genuinely representative? Given this information, does the quality of the sample allow you to meet the objectives of your consultation exercise?

Written consultation exercises

- 95.** Written consultation exercises are a formal means by which people can be invited to comment on policies and proposals; Can provide considered views of respondents based on accurate information. The key is to get the best spread of views from those most likely to be affected, and from those with most to contribute.
- 96.** Consultation documents should be concise, clearly laid out and written in plain English, avoiding jargon. They should contain:
 - a short summary (a single page);
 - an explanation of the purpose of the consultation and the issues on which views are being sought, ideally in the form of clear questions or options;
 - an explanation of what decisions have already been taken, if any, and where appropriate an explanation of why a particular option is favoured;

- Background or supporting information, including sources of opinion, information, and factual statements;
- the deadline for responses, and an outline of the proposed timetable for the rest of the decision-making and implementation processes;
- full contact details of a person whom respondents can contact if they have further queries. (Ideally this should be someone with sufficient knowledge and experience to deal with most enquiries autonomously.);
- a list of the types of people being consulted (groups, organisations and demographic groups, not named individuals);
- a request that those responding should explain who they are and, where relevant, who they represent (to help ensure that responses from representative bodies are properly weighted); and
- a statement relating to the confidentiality of responses.

97. It is important to publicize the existence of the document (for example, through press release) and use the Internet to publish it and receive replies.

98. Requests for documents in other formats/languages should be met wherever possible. If alternative languages or formats can not be provided, all reasonable measures must be taken to record responses from the affected group(s) or individual(s).

99. It is particularly important with a written consultation exercise to let respondents know the outcomes and explain how the decision reflects the results of the consultation. Consider publishing a summary of views and information collected from the consultation exercise and, where respondents' views have been rejected, offer a prompt and honest explanation.

100. Note that the documents themselves will put some people off commenting, particularly if they are long or complicated. This method can exclude people who cannot read or write English, or those with poor literacy skills. Costs of printing and distributing documents can be significant (consider using electronic media) and timescales will be longer than for some other methods of consultation.

Open days, roadshows and exhibitions

101. These can be relatively informal occasions when users (and potential users) can find out about services; meet staff; view facilities, etc. Alternatively, they can be more structured, with formal presentations and discussions.

102. Such events are not suitable for all services but can also be an effective way of engaging people who don't currently use your services but might in the future.

103. Timing of events is particularly important; will weekdays, evenings or weekends be most convenient for those you want to reach? Do you need to consider school holidays? Can you offer more than one option?

- 104.** Success can be measured by attendance and this will be largely dependant on publicity. Use a variety of methods to promote the event and consider ways to target specific groups.
- 105.** It is important get as much feedback as possible from those who attend. As well as the specific comments of those who do come, it can be very useful to collect demographic information. Comments can be collected in a variety of ways, from staff recording relevant points, to the public posting comment cards into a box.

User comments and complaints

- 106.** Monitoring feedback (compliments and general comments as well as complaints) from users can help you spot problem areas and issues for attention. This requires a clear and well-publicized policy and procedure for dealing with comments, complaints and suggestions.
- 107.** Be prepared for the number of complaints to increase if you improve and publicize your complaints handling system.

Mystery shopping

- 108.** Mystery shopping can provide specific and detailed feedback on areas of your service.
- 109.** The approach is more suited to some services, and aspects of services, than others. Front-line operations, where it is important to check that customers are being treated quickly and courteously, and being given the right information, are particularly suitable.

Planning and timescale: When?

- 110.** Use this Guidance to properly plan and deliver your consultation. Registering on the Contract Management Database will ensure you have considered the key points in preparing to consult.
- 111.** Make sure that the consultation is approved at an appropriate level. Consultation must be quality reviewed and approved prior implementation, and the level of approval required will depend on the scope and nature of the consultation. As a general rule, consultation on department or service specific issues will be approved by the department or service manager; while consultation with a broader scope will require approval from Management Board. In some cases, where the consultation relates to high profile public policy, or sensitive issues, Management Board may consider it necessary to seek input from elected members at the planning stage.
- 112.** Major consultations will be identified in advance through the Council's business planning process.

113. Consultees should be given adequate time to prepare their response. The length of time will vary depending on the time of year and the level of response that is being sought.

114. Sufficient time must be allowed for the results of consultation to be collated, analysed and considered, so that the results of consultation feed directly into the decision making process.

Other considerations

Equalities

115. Equality and Diversity issues must always be considered when undertaking consultation. All people should be considered when making Council decisions, in line with statutory prescription and best practice.

The Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000

116. The Race Equality Duty contains 3 complementary strands, namely that a listed public authority, 'in carrying out its function' must have 'due regard to the need:

- to eliminate unlawful racial discrimination; and
- to promote equality of opportunity; and
- to promote good relations between persons of different racial groups'.

117. We must ensure that these general and specific duties are given appropriate consideration when planning consultation exercises. It is the responsibility of the Principal Contact to ensure that such consideration takes place, and can be evidenced, and that any action identified required to meet the duties is taken.

118. In order to meet these specific duties when carrying out consultation, we should use consultation methods that allow and encourage people from as wide a range of racial groups as possible to play a full part in the process. People must be made to feel confident enough to talk about their needs and their experiences of your policies and services. The method you choose should give all people who are likely to be affected by the policy the chance to consider it and respond.

119. Here are some points to consider to help ensure that race equality is built into your consultation process:

- Adjustments to the process should be in proportion to the effect that the policy is likely to have on race equality
- The consultation methods you use should be tailored to the groups you want to reach;
- There should be monitoring and assessment of the consultation methods, feedback built into the process and, if necessary, adaptation of the methods used

- Have you planned to consult with relevant stakeholders who are interested in promoting race equality – from individuals to community groups, or key agencies. Locally these might include: Furness Multicultural Community Forum, Cumbria Race and Diversity Partnership, Cumbria Multicultural Centre, etc. Consider asking these groups to help you to organize consultation meetings, possibly jointly.
- Be aware of groups that are easily overlooked: e.g. Groups that are new to this country, such as refugees and asylum seekers; groups that have often been excluded by public authorities, such as Gypsies and Travellers; women from ethnic minorities; young or older people from ethnic minorities; people from ethnic minorities with disabilities, and their carers; businesses owned or run by people from ethnic minorities; and relatively isolated families or individuals in rural areas, including shopkeepers and restaurant owners from ethnic minorities.
- Consider the need to hold separate meetings for particular ethnic minority communities, and also for groups within those communities, such as young people, older people, women, people with disabilities, Gypsies and Travellers.
- Translate consultation material, and publicity material for the consultation exercise, as required, and arrange for interpreters at meetings.
- Check that dates, times, and venues (for example, licensed premises) do not clash with religious customs or festivals.

Disability Discrimination Act 2005

120. The Disability Discrimination Act 1995, and the 1999 Amendment Act made it unlawful to discriminate against disabled persons in connection with the provision of goods, facilities and services.

121. In addition 2005 Act the act places general and specific duties on the Council, requiring us, when exercising their functions, to have due regard to the need to eliminate harassment of and unlawful discrimination against disabled persons; to promote positive attitudes towards disabled persons; to encourage participation by disabled persons in public life; and to promote equality of opportunity between disabled persons and other persons.

122. We must ensure that these general and specific duties are given appropriate consideration when planning consultation exercises. It is the responsibility of the Principal Contact to ensure that such consideration takes place, and can be evidenced, and that any action identified required to meet the duties is taken.

123. In order to meet these duties when carrying out consultation, we should use consultation methods that allow and encourage people with disabilities to play a full part in the process. People must be made to feel confident enough to express their needs and their experiences of your policies and services. The method you choose should give all people who are likely to be affected by the policy the chance to consider it and respond.

124. Here are some points to consider to help ensure that equality for people with disabilities is built into your consultation process:

- Adjustments to the process should be in proportion to the effect that the policy is likely to have on equality for people with disabilities
- The consultation methods you use should be tailored to the groups you want to reach;
- There should be monitoring and assessment of the consultation methods, feedback built into the process and, if necessary, adaptation of the methods used
- Have you planned to consult with relevant stakeholders who are interested in promoting equality for people with disabilities? – from individuals to community groups, or key agencies. Locally these might include: Barrow and District Disability Association, Cumbria Deaf Society, Cumbria Blind Society, etc. Consider asking these groups to help you to organize consultation meetings, possibly jointly.
- Be aware of groups that are easily overlooked: e.g. Groups that are new to this country, such as refugees and asylum seekers; groups that have often been excluded by public authorities, such as Gypsies and Travellers; women from ethnic minorities; young or older people from ethnic minorities; people from ethnic minorities with disabilities, and their carers; businesses owned or run by people from ethnic minorities; and relatively isolated families or individuals in rural areas, including shopkeepers and restaurant owners from ethnic minorities.
- Consider the need to hold separate meetings for particular ethnic minority communities, and also for groups within those communities, such as young people, older people, women, people with disabilities, Gypsies and Travellers.
- Translate consultation material, and publicity material for the consultation exercise, as required, and arrange for interpreters at meetings.
- Check that dates, times, and venues (for example, licensed premises) do not clash with religious customs or festivals.

Data Protection

125. Under the Data Protection Act 1998, departments must ensure that personal data is processed fairly. (Personal data in the present context will usually just mean names and addresses but, depending on the nature of the consultation, might also include other information of a personal nature that makes it possible to identify individuals.) To that end, departments must ensure that certain conditions under the Act are met, notably that data subjects (respondents) give their consent to processing (publication), and that they are told the purpose or purposes for which the personal data is being processed.

126. The Principal Contact in consultation should liaise with the Data Protection Officer to ensure that the implications of this legislation are properly considered.

Freedom of Information

- 127.** Under the Freedom of Information Act 2001, individuals will have a general right to access information held by the authority, including, in principle, responses to consultation exercises, subject to certain conditions and exemptions. Relevant exemptions in this context are section 40, which exempts personal information where disclosure would infringe data principles (on which see above) and section 41, which exempts information provided in confidence.
- 128.** Staff involved in consultation should liaise with the Freedom of Information Officer to ensure that the implications of this legislation are properly considered.

E-government

- 129.** Staff should give due regard to the Council's E-government strategy when undertaking consultation. In particular, staff should consider using the Internet to undertake, support and promote consultation exercises.

Top Ten Tips

- 130.** The Cabinet Office document “How to Consult Your Users” offers these top ten tips for successful consultation:
- Build consultation into your regular planning cycle and consult early. Don't wait until too late to change your plans, and do give people enough time to comment.
 - Don't ask for views if you can't or won't do anything with them – make clear what you can change and what you can't.
 - Learn from others – use experts if necessary, but don't just do something because ‘everyone else does’. Work out what's right for your own situation.
 - Use more than one method of consultation.
 - Be flexible – think how to reach all your users (people with disabilities, people from ethnic minority groups etc).
 - Don't just consult your users – ask others, too, including your front-line staff.
 - Be sensitive to those you want to consult – encourage them to give honest views, e.g. by assuring confidentiality.
 - Publicize your consultation so that all who want to can feed in views, and so that people realize you are committed to listening to them
 - Report back on what views you received and what you have done as a result.
 - Evaluate carefully after consulting, and learn lessons for next time.