



An introductory guide

# How to consult your users



# How to consult: top ten tips

- 1** 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.
- 2** 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.
- 3** 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.
- 4** Use more than one method of consultation.
- 5** Be flexible – think how to reach all your users (people with disabilities, people from ethnic minority groups etc).
- 6** Don't just consult your users – ask others, too, including your front-line staff.
- 7** Be sensitive to those you want to consult – encourage them to give honest views, eg by assuring confidentiality.
- 8** Publicise your consultation so that all who want to can feed in views, and so that people realise you are committed to listening to them.
- 9** Report back on what views you received and what you have done as a result.
- 10** Evaluate carefully after consulting, and learn lessons for next time.

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# Part 1

## Introduction



# Why services don't consult – an introduction to the best excuses

## We don't have enough time

Time spent asking people for their views is rarely wasted. It doesn't need to be a separate exercise, and can be simple to build into your normal exchanges with your users. And whatever response you get (even no response!) provides useful information. You could be investing considerable time and effort in providing a service that people don't actually want, so build time into your programme.

## It's too costly

Not all consultation is expensive. Using existing information, like user comments and complaints, or asking your own staff for their views, is cheap and often gives very valuable feedback. If you are providing a service that doesn't meet your users' needs, how many resources are you wasting without knowing it?

## We might raise people's expectations and be unable to deliver

Explain the context of your consultation clearly – the areas where you can make changes and the areas where you can't. Most people are realistic, and understand that resources are limited. But you must be prepared to make some changes – otherwise you shouldn't ask for views. Make sure you report back on the results of your consultation, and explain why, when suggestions couldn't be met. You will probably find that people expect you to consult them, and will be critical if you don't.

## People who participate are not representative

You'll never be able to ask everybody, but there are ways of making sure that the people you consult are representative by using statistical sampling techniques. And try to use a number of different consultation methods, so that you are able to reach different groups of people and increase the range of views you receive. Think about the needs of different groups, and identify ways of making it easy for them to get involved.

## People won't understand the issues involved

Give people the information they need in plain language to enable them to make informed comments. Users (and non-users) may not be aware of all the issues, but it does not usually take them long to learn.

## People will never agree

Don't assume that you are going to get agreement – you probably won't. Consultation and involvement mean discussion and negotiation. In the end, you will have to make the final decision yourself, but you will do this from a better, more informed understanding of the issues and people's views if you have consulted first.

## People aren't interested

Remember that those you want to consult are probably busy people, too. They may be interested, but don't have time to give their views, or think you won't take any notice of them. Make it easy for people to participate, think about ways of encouraging comments, and feed back to them so that they know what has been done as a result of their contributions. If you are willing to make an effort there are always ways to interest people.

## Our services already meet people's needs – we haven't had any complaints

Never assume that your services are perfect. If you haven't had any complaints, it might just mean that people don't know how to complain, can't be bothered, or think you won't take any notice of their views. The obvious way to find out whether services meet people's needs is to ask them.

## It might encourage people to complain

Complaints may well increase as a result of consultation, but look on this positively. It's no use to you or them if people who aren't happy with the service suffer in silence. Use complaints to improve your systems and services. They are one of the cheapest ways to learn from your users.

## We don't know how to consult

***Read on . . . this guide should help.***

# Chapter 1

## Why consult?

- 1.1 Why bother to ask your users (and non-users) what they want or think of the service you provide? In the private sector the answer is usually obvious – if customers don't get the service they want, they go elsewhere. But the situation is different in the public sector. People often have little or no choice over who provides their public services (although you should encourage choice wherever possible). As public service users ourselves, we know, for example, that we can't choose which fire service will answer our emergency call, which council will collect our rubbish, or who to pay our tax to.
- 1.2 So if choice is limited, why consult? Two of the key reasons are:
  - it helps you plan, prioritise and deliver better services; and
  - it creates a working partnership with your users so that they have an interest in better services.
- 1.3 Before you start any form of consultation, you need to consider carefully why you are doing it and what you want to achieve.
- 1.4 Consultation is the only way to ensure that your services are user-focused. This guide is designed to help you get started, and point you in the right direction. It doesn't set out to debate the philosophy behind involving people in public services (for more about this see the publications list at the back). But it does give general 'good practice' tips about consultation, introduce some of the commonly-used ways of consulting users, set out some of the issues to think about when considering each method, and summarise the pros and cons of different types of consultation.



- 1.5 This guide replaces *Asking Your Users . . . How to improve services through consulting your consumers*, which we published in 1995 with the National Consumer Council and Consumer Congress. We have updated it to include latest thinking, additional consultation techniques, and new examples from services that have found consultation useful – most of them from organisations that won Charter Marks (awarded for public service excellence) in 1997.

#### Benefits of consultation

- Helps you plan services better to give users what they want, and expect.
- Helps you prioritise your services and make better use of limited resources.
- Helps you set performance standards relevant to users' needs (and monitor them).
- Fosters a working partnership between your users and you, so they understand the problems facing you, and how they can help.
- Alerts you to problems quickly so you have a chance to put things right before they escalate.
- Symbolises your commitment to be open and accountable: to put service first.

# Chapter 2

## Making consultation work

- 2.1 Commitment – from all managers and staff – is the key to effective consultation. As well as understanding why it is important to talk to your customers, you must be prepared to respond to what you learn and to make changes – even if what people want requires major changes in working methods, culture or operation. Without this, users will become cynical and unwilling to participate in future consultation.
- 2.2 If consultation is to work for you and your users, it needs to be planned and its effectiveness monitored. But you'll have a good chance of success if you take on board these relatively simple messages:
- **Integrate:** make consultation an integral part of your operation. Build it into your management systems and planning cycle so that it becomes a continuous process. Develop a consultation strategy.
  - **Commit:** make sure that all staff and managers are fully signed up to the need for consultation, and understand the issues involved. Commit to the idea of consultation, so that it will continue even if an individual consultation exercise goes wrong.
  - **Consult early:** involve people as early on in your planning process as possible – once you've started it will be much more difficult to stop or change things if you need to.
  - **Start small:** set yourself realistic targets and be confident that you can manage the process. Don't feel you have to use a particular method just because someone else does, or because it is flavour of the month. Think about what will work for what you want to know and who you want to reach.
  - **Evaluate:** have arrangements in place to evaluate the effectiveness of your consultation, and have them in place from the start of the process (see pages 11–14).
  - **Learn from others:** do talk to colleagues in other services (and from other areas), and learn from their experiences – what have they done, how did it work, what tips do they have, what pitfalls should you avoid? They may have useful views on your service as well.

Ensure confidentiality and anonymity wherever you can, and make clear that you welcome feedback – positive and negative.

- **Be clear:** set out what you want to know and why, and make sure that this is clear to those you are consulting. Say from the start what you can consult on (for example organising parents' evenings) and what you can't consult on (for example the curriculum, where there are statutory limitations).
- **Think about who to consult:** your existing users are important, but what about occasional users, former users, or those who don't currently use your services? Your consultation will be more effective if you get views from people who have particular needs, such as people with disabilities and their carers, and people from minority ethnic groups. If you are trying to consult groups of people who might be cynical about what you are doing or reluctant to participate, you may find it helpful to use a third party – an independent facilitator – to encourage co-operation, understanding and involvement.
- **Be sensitive:** in some areas (such as health services or police services) your users could be very worried about criticising what you do. Ensure confidentiality and anonymity wherever you can, and make clear that you welcome feedback – positive and negative.
- **Be realistic:** don't put pressure on people to get involved and don't expect too much from them. You want to reach a wide range of people, and you need to be realistic about how much time they will have. Be realistic about the skills and resources you have, and what you need to carry out the consultation effectively.
- **Talk to front-line staff:** they deliver your services and are close to your users. They will have strong views on what's feasible. Make sure they make an input and that they know if a consultation exercise is under way in case questions come in. Your own internal customers are important, too.



- **Be flexible:** there are many ways of finding out what people think and want. Some are simple and cost relatively little (for example, using existing information like comments and complaints); others can take months and cost thousands of pounds. What you do depends on what you want to find out, how you want to use the results, how much money, time and expertise you have, and the sort of service you offer.
- **Use more than one method:** don't rely on any single method and think you're doing all that is needed. Avoid short cuts.
- **Publicise:** let people know what you are doing so that all who want to can feed in views. Show them that you are committed to listening to them, and value their opinions.
- **Help people participate:** consider your proposals for consultation from your users' point of view. Sending out a questionnaire might be easy for you, but will enough people want to fill in the forms? Expect that people will need to be offered support and skills to enable them to participate, and don't assume that they know something just because you do. Making it easy and enjoyable will encourage more people to participate.
- **Use plain language:** in whatever method you use, and design any material well.
- **Expect the unexpected:** be aware that you might get results very different from those you expect. Don't be discouraged if this happens. Your credibility with users will increase if you deal with the more difficult and unexpected results, rather than simply making the changes that are easiest for you. Be prepared to challenge your own and your organisation's long-standing beliefs.
- **Feed back:** report back to people on changes you make as a result of consultation, and make clear at the start whether or not their views will be treated in confidence.

# Chapter 3

## Choosing your approach

- 3.1 There is no one ‘right’ method that will work for any given circumstance. All sorts of conditions influence which methods give you useful information, and there are no guarantees that just because one method worked well once it will do so again. But here are some general common-sense messages that will help you choose your approach.
- 3.2 The most important tip is not to rely on just one method. Using more than one method increases the chances of a better response – both in terms of quality and quantity. Be prepared, though, for what you will do if different methods come up with different results. Be aware that there isn’t a single ‘user’s view’, and consensus between all users is highly unlikely.
- 3.3 Knowing something about the people you want to consult helps you choose the most suitable methods. Table 1 (below) gives some general advice on which methods to try, and why. 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 if you want to link methods in this way, make sure that you are talking to the same audiences: the focus group would need to be representative of the people you actually wanted to reach with the questionnaire, or their views would be less relevant.

Table 1

Target groups	Which consultation methods – and why
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Frequent and regular users</li> <li>● Individuals and special interest groups who know about your service</li> <li>● The general public if your service or the issue is popular or particularly important</li> <li>● Staff</li> </ul>	<p>For these groups try:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Postal and face-to-face questionnaires</li> <li>● Draft documents for comment</li> </ul> <p><i>because:</i> they are already aware of the issues, are (probably) interested, and don’t need detailed additional information.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Infrequent users</li> <li>● Potential users</li> <li>● Broad interest groups</li> <li>● Non-users</li> </ul>	<p>For these groups try:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Meetings</li> <li>● Open days</li> <li>● Focus groups</li> <li>● Discussions</li> </ul> <p><i>because:</i> they need information before they are able to respond.</p>

- 3.4 **Think about the type of response you are likely to get from different groups. Be prepared for differing responses from people who are expert in your service or area, and those who are less familiar with it. Decide how you are going to weight views. Whose opinions are most important? Can you please everybody? How are you going to explain what decisions you have taken to different people?**
- 3.5 **Table 2 (below) indicates the types of views you might expect from different people.**

Table 2

Who is being consulted?	What sort of views/comments can you expect?
Individual users	Personal view of service as individual has experienced it. Snapshot of service.
User groups/panels/meetings	'Non-expert' view from users of your service. Can help you see a different perspective.
Representative groups	Considered thoughts and proposals based on good knowledge of the service you provide and what users of your service want. Sometimes views may be stronger than those of the average user.
General public	General perception of service. Can be useful indicators of problems and preferences with service provision.
Sounding boards (non-users)	Relatively impartial views on proposals – useful for testing out proposals and plans.
Staff	Experience of a range of customers' views, combined with knowledge about the practical aspects of providing the service.

# Chapter 4

## Evaluating your consultation

- 4.1 Evaluating the effectiveness of your consultation is vital, and should not be left to the end of the process. It will be much easier to do if you have included it in your initial planning. There are many models for evaluation, but try to keep it simple. If you've planned properly, identified what your success and failure criteria are and how you are going to measure them, then the evaluation process should be straightforward. There will always be unforeseen factors that influence results, and your evaluation should be flexible enough to take account of these.
- 4.2 Effective evaluation tells you what worked and what didn't (and why). It helps make sure that you get the best value for money from your efforts and time. If one particular method doesn't work, try to work out why. Problems are always much clearer with hindsight, and help you avoid pitfalls next time. Equally, if something works well, try to assess why it was successful, so that you can build on it.
- 4.3 If you are able to answer the question 'what would I do differently or the same next time?' your evaluation will have been valuable.

### Points to think about:

#### Objectives

Set clear objectives from the start of the consultation. Why are you doing it? What do you want to find out? Who are you going to ask? How are you going to do it? What are you going to do with the results? As with all objectives, they should be **SMART** (Specific, Measurable, Agreed, Realistic, Time-bound). At the end, you want to be able to measure whether:

- objectives were clear;
- they were relevant to the consultation itself and linked to your wider planning process; and
- they were explained to, and understood by, all relevant staff and those consulted.

The length of time consultation takes is often underestimated.

### Who you consulted

Set specific targets for the levels of response you want from different groups (think about users, potential users, representative groups, special groups – for example older people, or carers – staff, other service providers, the general public). Information about which consultation methods worked for which groups will be very useful for the future. At the end, you want to be able to measure whether:

- you got views from those you wanted;
- you were successful in consulting minority, disadvantaged or under-represented groups;
- different groups responded to different methods;
- you gave feedback to those consulted; and
- the people consulted felt that the consultation was worthwhile.

### Method/s

Identifying which methods to use is clearly central. You need to bear a number of issues in mind, including **who** you want to consult; **what** sort of information you want, and **how** much money, time and experience you have. At the end, you want to be able to measure whether:

- the methods used were right for your objectives;
- if you used more than one method, which worked better than others – and why; and
- you got the required:
  - quantitative and/or qualitative information
  - response rate
  - representative sample.

### Timescale

The length of time consultation takes is often underestimated. You may give a deadline for responses, but what will you do if people ask for extensions? Have you planned how you are going to report back

on the results? – this can often take longer than the consultation period itself. At the end you want to be able to measure whether:

- the timetable was clear and kept to – if not, why not; and
- enough time was allowed for responses.

### Information provided

Remember to evaluate the effectiveness of any material you produced as part of the consultation process. Did the posters used to advertise your open meeting attract the right audience? Was putting material on the Internet an effective way of encouraging views? Did you succeed in making information available to the right people? At the end you want to be able to measure whether:

- information was:
  - easy to access;
  - relevant to the consultation;
  - produced in plain language and easy to understand; and
  - available in other languages and in other formats (eg Braille, audio cassette) where necessary.



### Costs

You need to be able to show that you got value for money from your consultation. Some methods are much cheaper than others, but the information you get may not be of any use. Include staff time and training in your budgets and evaluation – this can be the most expensive element, particularly if you are running the exercise in-house. At the end you need to be able to measure whether:

- you budgeted adequately;
- you made savings in particular areas or overspent in others – and why; and
- there were unforeseen costs – and what they were.

## Effect of the consultation

The key question. Has anything changed as a result of the consultation? At the end you need to be able to measure whether:

- you got views that you could use;
- you have actually used those views;
- the consultation has led to some identifiable change in your service or policy; and
- the consultation has changed the relationship between you and your users and others.

# Part 2

## Consultation Methods



CONSULTATION METHOD	RELATIVE COST	METHODS GOOD FOR:					
		GIVING INFO	GETTING INFO	REPRESENTATIVE VIEWS	QUANTITATIVE VIEWS	QUALITATIVE VIEWS	SPECIAL GROUPS' VIEWS
User comments and complaints (page 17)	£		✓✓	✓	✓	✓✓	
Feedback from staff/suggestions schemes (page 21)	£ – ££		✓✓	✓	✓	✓✓	✓
Mystery shopping (page 25)	££ – £££		✓✓✓	✓✓	✓	✓✓✓	✓
Piloting changes (page 27)	££ – £££	✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓	✓	✓
Open/public meetings (page 30)	££ – £££	✓✓	✓✓	✓	✓✓	✓✓	✓
Using representative groups (page 33)	£ – ££	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓✓
Face-to-face interviews (page 37)	££ – ££££	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓	✓	✓✓✓✓	✓✓✓
Focus groups (page 40)	££ – ££££	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓	✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓
User panels (page 43)	£ – ££	✓✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓	✓✓✓	✓
Citizens' panels (page 46)	££ – £££££	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓
Citizens' juries (page 49)	££ – ££££	✓✓✓✓	✓✓	✓✓	✓	✓✓✓	✓
Questionnaire-based surveys (page 52)	££ – ££££	✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓✓	✓✓✓✓	✓	✓
Ballots/referenda/deliberative polling (page 56)	££ – ££££	✓✓	✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓✓		✓
Written consultation exercises (page 58)	££ – £££	✓✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓	✓✓	✓✓	
Open days/roadshows/exhibitions (page 61)	££ – £££	✓✓✓✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Information technology (page 66)	££ – ££££	✓✓✓	✓✓	✓	✓✓	✓	✓

✓ = reasonable ✓✓✓✓ = very good

# Chapter 5

## User comments and complaints

- 5.1 Encouraging users to give you feedback (compliments and general comments as well as complaints) will help them feel that your service is committed to listening to them. Monitoring this information can help you spot problem areas and give you general feedback. You will need good procedures to help you deal with individual problems and to give you information about trends, problem areas and so on.

### Points to think about

- **Procedures:** have a clear policy and procedure for dealing with comments, complaints and suggestions. Involve staff and users (including elected representatives, school governors etc) in producing it and monitoring its effects.
- **Information:** give users straightforward information about how they can comment or complain – who to, what will happen next, why you want them to tell you what they think. Remember to include information about any appropriate independent review mechanism (for example, an ombudsman).
- **Presentation:** present the information clearly – use plain language, and consider font size and layout. Include information on bills, leave a card with customers when you visit, have a ‘suggestions’ line, think about using the Internet – try to be creative.
- **Choice:** not everyone wants to make complaints or comments in writing; make sure users can talk to someone either face-to-face or by phone. Make sure also that staff treat oral complaints in the same way as written ones.
- **People with special needs:** think about the needs of people:
  - with impaired sight or hearing or learning disabilities;
  - whose first language is not English or who cannot read at all; and
  - who might have problems with physical access (eg people in wheelchairs, people with pushchairs).
- **Publicity:** publicity is important. Send out details when you contact your users, put posters where they are likely to see them, circulate information to advice agencies, voluntary groups and

## Recognise that you may get more complaints as a result of your procedures being easier to use.

other interested people. And feed back to users so they know they have been heard.

- **Staff:** make sure that staff understand and know your comments and complaints procedures and how they should respond – recognise that you may get more complaints as a result of your procedures being easier to use.
- **Encouragement:** encourage a ‘no-blame’ culture, and approach criticism and comments in a constructive and positive way.
- **Reporting:** publish information about complaints. This lets users know:
  - how you are performing against standards;
  - that you take complaints seriously and that it is worth making a complaint; and
  - what improvements you have made as a result of complaints.

### Pros

- Gives free feedback on services.
- Easy to set up.
- Helps you identify recurring problems.
- Can save time and money.
- Shows users you are open to comments and complaints and serious about putting things right.
- Gives you information about your service’s weaknesses and strengths.
- Provides both quantitative and qualitative information.

### Cons

- Presentational. Complaints may increase if you make your complaints handling system good, and if you publicise it well.
- Not representative. Some users are reluctant to complain (or compliment), so don’t assume that all the problems/successes will be highlighted.

- Essentially reactive to existing systems: gives less insight into potential changes.
- Can be difficult to present complaints information in a positive way

**Costs:** cheap, as you are using existing resources.

**Use to:** get detailed information from individual users.

#### Frederick Bird Primary School, Coventry

'Freddies' is an inner-city school serving a community rich in cultural diversity, with 500 pupils aged 3-11. Worry boxes were introduced two years ago as a means of helping pupils share with their teachers problems that they did not want discussed in class or in front of other pupils. This is especially important when dealing with issues such as bullying. Children put a ticket with their name or initials into the box placed in a neutral space in each year group area. At the end of the day when the pupils have gone, teachers check the box and arrange to find a quiet time to speak to any children who wish it as soon as possible. Pupils appreciate the confidential nature of the worry boxes, and teachers have found them a valuable tool.

Contact: Jon Salway tel: 01203 221920 fax: 01203 228026



More guidance on setting up complaints systems is contained in the Service First Unit's *How to deal with complaints* guide available from the Service First publications line on 0345 22 32 42 or on our website: [www.servicefirst.gov.uk](http://www.servicefirst.gov.uk)

London Borough of Brent 'One-Stop-Shop' increased the proportion of people returning comment cards from three per cent to 40 per cent by introducing collection boxes on interview desks. The boxes make it as easy as possible for customers to register their views. Recently, the system was reviewed to:

- take into account customers' comments on the style, font and size of the card;
- be able to monitor whether customer visits to the 'One-Stop-Shop' were for the same enquiry or a new one;
- be able to check the consistency of customers' perception of the service;
- be able to check the service's performance against standards; and
- be able to monitor the relevance and helpfulness of leaflets and information on display.

Brent 'One-Stop-Shop' have also introduced a comments card system for their Call Centre, whereby comment cards are posted with any requests for information. The cards are pre-paid so this is at no extra cost to the customers.

Contact: Sandra Carson tel: 0181 937 1211 fax: 0181 937 1342

First Community Health NHS Trust has a free phone number for comments, suggestions, complaints or compliments called 'Are You Satisfied?'

All staff have received information and training on the 'Are You Satisfied?' procedures, and all new staff receive training during the Trust's induction programme. A 'business-size' card is available to people using the service to make it easy for them to comment, suggest, complain or be complimentary about the service they receive.

Mid Staffordshire Community Health Council has been invited, since 1995, by the Trust, as an independent third party, to contact those complainants who wish to be contacted to assess how the Trust has addressed their complaint and the sensitivity and clarity of explanations given to them. This process enables the Trust continuously to improve complaint outcomes based on first-hand experiences.

Contact: Alan L Sharville tel: 01785 222888 ext 5488  
fax: 01785 221499

# Chapter 6

## Feedback from staff/suggestions schemes

- 6.1 Staff who are in everyday contact with users know what annoys and frustrates them, what they like and what they want changed. It's worth collecting, analysing and acting on this information. Front-line staff can be the first to spot problems; tapping into this information can help you solve problems at an early stage. It can also make staff feel valued and gives them an important role in improving services.
- 6.2 You don't necessarily need a complicated system. For many services, a simple form, and discussions at regular team meetings, will be enough. Or you could set up a group to collect and consider suggestions. Promote staff suggestions schemes actively rather than simply expecting passive feedback. Build in ways of passing on this feedback to decision-makers.

### Points to think about:

- **Who to consult:** which of your staff have most contact with your users? Contact may be face-to-face, by telephone or in writing. Try to get comments from staff who deal with the public in as many different ways as possible. Your staff will have views about the ways your users like to comment, and these may help you target future consultation exercises.
- **Training:** staff need to be trained to deal with comments and, particularly, complaints. Depending on your circumstances, think about training in areas like telephone skills, problem solving, dealing with difficult or angry customers etc. Make sure that your staff are briefed well enough to provide information to members of the public. They should have an overview of the organisation and know where to get further information.
- **Systems:** you should have regular systems for getting feedback from staff. These should be both formal (eg regular team meetings, inviting front-line staff to planning meetings) and informal (eg informal chats between senior and junior staff, written/e-mail systems, suggestions boxes). There should be ways for staff to make anonymous comments/suggestions if they wish.

If there are good reasons why suggestions can't be implemented, it's important to explain what these are.



- **Valuing staff:** make sure your staff know that you value their comments and views. Consider rewards (they do not necessarily need to be financial) for good suggestions. If you have a reward system for good suggestions/comments, make sure that the process of selecting the winners is fair, and is seen to be fair. And always publicise what you have done as a result.
- **Reporting:** staff must feel that they will not be penalised for making comments that might be critical of your service. Make sure that reactions to ideas are not defensive or negative, but do respond to suggestions. If there are good reasons why suggestions can't be implemented, it's important to explain what these are. Having an open and positive attitude will encourage staff to contribute more ideas.

### Pros

- Gives positive and negative feedback on services
- Shows you value front-line staff
- Shows how you are open to suggestions and comments
- Source of instant information about what happens when people use your service

### Cons

- No good unless staff are properly trained, and systems for collecting and discussing feedback are in place.
- Can be time-consuming to analyse comments.
- Won't provide statistics (other than numbers of comments).
- Not necessarily representative. Relies on staff making the effort. No substitute for actively seeking their views.

**Costs:** relatively cheap, as you are using existing resources.

**Use to:** get views from people who see your service from both user and provider perspective

**ideas.uk** is a registered charity, managed under the auspices of the UK Association of Suggestion Schemes, which is dedicated to sharing good practice and promoting the benefits of organisations involving their employees in ideas programmes.

**ideas.uk** is producing a self-assessment package to help organisations understand the key issues about developing ideas programmes.

For more information about **ideas.uk**, contact Rod Edgerton on the Ideas Helpline, tel: 0870 902 1658 or ([www.ideas.uk.mcmail.com](http://www.ideas.uk.mcmail.com)).

**Greater Manchester Police** have a suggestion scheme called 'Forceful Ideas'. The aim of the scheme is to create and encourage a free flow of ideas between employee and management to improve efficiency, service, morale and performance within the Greater Manchester Police.

The scheme is promoted through:

- promotional gifts, given to every contributor;
- regular contributions and updates to the staff newspaper;
- logos on correspondence;
- videos;
- poster competitions; and
- presentation of awards by the Chief Constable. Such events are photographed and covered by the local press, as well as the force's own press office, and published in the staff newspaper.

A scheme Panel meets quarterly and reviews all suggestions. They can make awards up to £250 to an individual for an implemented idea, and where an idea cannot be implemented they can make an encouragement award of £25, to acknowledge an innovative idea.

Contact: Pat Garside tel: 0161 856 0693/5 fax: 0161 856 0656

**Burton Hospitals NHS Trust – Queen’s Hospital** introduced a staff suggestion scheme after gaining Charter Mark in 1994. The revised and updated scheme was instrumental in winning Charter Mark for a second time, in 1997.

The original scheme was open to members of staff only and was based on the criteria used in Charter Mark assessment, namely setting standards, choice and consultation, courtesy and helpfulness... and so on. For the duration of the Charter Mark scheme, every issue of the staff magazine, *Noticeboard*, invited staff to suggest good ideas for improving the quality of service or increasing efficiency. Each issue suggested a theme in line with the Charter Mark criteria, although this was only used as a guide: any suggestions were welcome at any time. An attractive first prize (one week’s working visit to a hospital in Canada) was offered along with modest runner-up prizes. In addition, winners were publicised in the staff newsletter and local press.

The first scheme drew a large number of entries. The winner was a nursing sister who suggested issuing pre-paid return forms with clinic appointment letters. This made it easy for patients to confirm the appointment, request an alternative time or cancel. The form was circulated among staff and patients in draft form to make sure that it was clear and simple to use. When put in use, the pre-paid forms helped reduce the number of missed appointments, which cost over £80 each in wasted staff time. This also helps reduce waiting lists, as unnecessary appointments are more effectively ‘weeded-out’ of the system.

The suggestion scheme was extended and repeated in 1996. This time it not only included staff members but patients and visitors too. Again it drew a good response from many quarters. Overall winner was a consultant radiologist who suggested a new initiative on healthy eating, including increased choice of meals and better information. She told *Noticeboard*: ‘Facilities for healthy eating within the hospital have certainly improved and we now have a good range of salads, fruits and so on available, particularly in the restaurant. But I still feel we can do more, particularly if we are to set a good example for patients. I’d like to see more high-fibre dishes and less fat, in addition to which we could display more healthy eating information.’

Contact: Steve Peak tel: 01283 566333

# Chapter 7

## Mystery shopping

- 7.1 Mystery shopping can provide you with very specific and detailed feedback on areas of your service. Someone commissioned by you (you could recruit some of your own users to do this) tests the service, looking at a number of predetermined areas, and then reports back. This should give you a picture of the type of experience a real user would have. The process is relatively simple, although you will get much more out of it if it is well structured.

### Points to think about:

- **Suitability:** this 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 suitable.
- **The shopper:** the mystery shopper should preferably be typical of your real users. They should not be given too much background knowledge (which may restrict their ability to see the service as real users do), but they should be given guidance on how to assess the service and how to feed back the information.
- **Running the scheme:** you might want to contract out your mystery shopping to an external research firm. If you decide to run the scheme in-house, you will need to consider how to ensure enough turnover of your shoppers so that they don't become too knowledgeable. You also need information from your mystery shoppers in a consistent format, so you will need to think about questionnaire design, briefing for your shoppers, and the practicalities of how they will feed back their information to you.
- **Systems:** as well as quality of service issues and the responses of staff, this approach can also identify problems with systems; for example, are signs and directions clear, is correct information on display in offices, and are relevant leaflets available?
- **Individual incidents:** what are you going to do with the information? You will get snapshot details of individual incidents, and will need to make sure that 'one offs' are not given too much weight. If it looks like there might be a problem in a particular area, send another mystery shopper in to test the same service - 'one offs' and more fundamental problems can then be handled differently.

- **Presentation:** you need to think carefully about how you present the idea to staff – it can be seen as an underhand way of checking up on them, and a distraction from serving ‘real’ customers.
- **Incentives:** think about incentives, both for mystery shoppers and for staff. Encourage shoppers to highlight good as well as bad service, and then reward the staff who have performed particularly well.

### Pros

- Precise and detailed feedback.
- Relatively simple to implement.
- Equivalent to asking other users for their experiences.
- Flexible and immediate. You should be able to highlight particular service areas and investigate possible problems quickly.
- Can be used to commend/motivate staff.

### Cons

- More applicable to front-line, person-to-person services.
- Staff are often suspicious of schemes.
- Only gives isolated instances and small samples.
- Regular shoppers could get too experienced/stale.

**Costs:** relatively cheap, depending on how you do it.

**Use to:** test specific areas of service delivery.

#### Post Office Counters Ltd – Sunderland Branch Office

Post Office Counters Ltd conduct monthly mystery shopper surveys at selected Post Offices. Post Office Visit Questionnaires are used by independent consultants to assess individual offices. The questionnaire includes questions on appearance of offices, condition of offices, waiting times, presence of name badges and accuracy of information given. Following the visit to an office by a mystery shopper, the office receives a written report highlighting the results of the survey. Sunderland Branch Office uses these results to identify staff training needs.

Contact: Ann Riddell tel: 0191 510 2185 fax: 0191 514 4394

# Chapter 8

## Piloting changes

- 8.1 Trying out changes on a small area of your service is a useful way to test whether those changes are going to work for the whole service. It is difficult to predict all the issues that will arise when you introduce something new. The information you give people about how planned changes will impact on them may lack detail, and prevent them from providing informed comments on your proposals, so piloting the changes can give them (as well as you!) real material to consider.

### Points to think about:

- **Pilot area:** the area you are going to pilot your changes in needs to be as typical of the rest of the service as possible, so that the lessons learned are relevant.
- **Resources:** the resources invested in a pilot are obviously less significant than if you were going to introduce a change to your whole service, but pilots do demand significant resources for effective monitoring and evaluation, and you need to build these in from the start.
- **Presentation:** you need to be clear about the status of the pilot. Some people may think that you've already decided what you are going to do. You need to convince them that you have an open mind about how the service will develop, and that you value their views.
- **Managing change:** throughout the pilot you need to be discussing progress and problems with people, and trying to address issues that arise. You don't need to wait until the end of the pilot to adjust things if it's very clear that something isn't going to work – take the opportunity to try something else. But do give changes a chance to be properly considered. Recognise that people at first may be suspicious and negative, but they may change their views when they have given the changes a chance.
- **Evaluation:** the point of a pilot is to test how well something works on a small scale so you can decide whether to extend it. Evaluation of any exercise is therefore fundamental. You need to establish clearly both what you are going to measure (your success and failure criteria), and how you are going to measure it (including different ways of asking people for their views).

### Pros

- Enables informed judgements to be made about costs and benefits.
- Allows discussion with users and potential users to resolve problems at pilot stage.

### Cons

- There may be suspicion that the results are a foregone conclusion.
- Evaluation needs to be very carefully planned.
- Circumstances may change during the life of the pilot so that the lessons are less relevant to the whole service.
- If unsuccessful, can prejudice people against possible changes in the future.

**Costs:** cheaper than introducing change to whole area – but evaluation costs may be high.

**Use to:** try out significant changes to service that could be controversial.

The area you are going to pilot your changes in needs to be as typical of the rest of the service as possible.



## North Kent Healthcare NHS Trust – Speech and Language Therapy Department 'Can't wait to talk' pilot project

By the end of 1994, waiting lists for therapy were ranging from 70 to 172 in community clinics; waiting times for initial assessments were reaching 10 months. Once children were assessed, they were put on a waiting list for therapy (up to 12 months' wait). Complaints were at their highest, and many parents were concerned that their children were waiting at overburdened clinics.

£40,000 was allocated by West Kent Health Authority, and with this one Speech and Language Therapist and two Assistants were appointed. Four clinics with the worst waiting lists had one day/week allocated for the visiting therapist/assistant team. During the day, four therapy groups were arranged with approximately six children in each group.

The pilot project aimed to review:

- the effects of group therapy on clinic waiting lists;
- the efficiency of group therapy;
- the type of groups that were most effective;
- consumer satisfaction with the mode of delivery; and
- the broader effects of the project on service delivery.

The group ran from 21 November 1994 to 9 November 1995. 83 groups were held. There were five blocks of therapy during the year, each block lasting between six to eight weeks. The results of the pilot were:

- waiting lists decreased significantly;
- quality therapy packs were produced for use in the continuation of the project and to sell to others; and
- training and systems were put in place to ensure the continuation of quality group therapy.

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# Chapter 9

## Open/public meetings

- 9.1 Open meetings are meetings arranged for members of the public to find out about and express their views on a particular issue. Attendance is open to any interested member of the public. Meetings are usually held at a public place (school or church hall, local sports centre etc) convenient for people to get to. The issue to be discussed is usually publicised in advance through posters, leaflets, letters, invitations etc.
- 9.2 Public meetings often have very low attendance, and those people who do attend often have a particular concern or view, which is not necessarily representative of the population as a whole.
- 9.3 Open meetings can, however, be a good way of encouraging dialogue between a service and its users, and of keeping members of the public informed. Used carefully, they can complement other forms of consultation.

### Points to think about:

- **Issue:** the issue being discussed will clearly have an impact on attendance. More people will come if they are directly affected by or concerned about the issue, or where their interest is attracted. Try to make the material advertising the meeting as interesting as possible, but make sure that people who do attend have not been misled about the content. And have clear objectives for what you want to achieve from the meeting and how you are going to take forward what comes out of it.
- **Target audience:** open meetings are unlikely to attract an audience that is representative of the local population, and may contain more retired and middle-aged people than young people – so don't use them as your only method of consultation. Think about your target audience, and organise the meeting at an appropriate time and location.
- **Collecting information:** Think about why people might want to attend an open meeting. As well as an interest in a particular issue, people might be motivated to attend by a sense of community spirit or support for the service. It is worth finding out – a short questionnaire for people who attend could give you lots of information, as much about who doesn't attend the meetings as

about who does. As a general rule, try to collect more information than just numbers of attendees.

- **Publicity:** publicise the meeting as widely as possible to reach your intended audience. As well as posters, leaflets etc, word of mouth is an effective means of advertising. Speak to informal networks, parish councils, community and interest groups etc.
- **Practicalities:** planning the practical side of a meeting can be difficult if you have no idea how many people are going to attend, so you might want to invite people to let you know if they are going to come, so that you have some indication of numbers. If you've only planned for 30 people and 100 turn up, you may have problems.
- **Meeting structure:** think about how the meeting will be structured. Make sure that any speakers know what is expected of them (eg how long they should speak), and that the Chair is well briefed and is able to control any more vocal members of the audience and limit repetitive discussion. If appropriate, you might want to think about breaking the meeting up into smaller workshop/discussion groups to give more people the chance to participate.
- **Reporting:** recording views and reporting back can be difficult in open meetings, particularly if there are large numbers of attendees. Make sure that someone takes a note of the points raised (you may wish to tape-record the proceedings). You can ask people to vote on the main issues. But be careful about placing too much weight on these results – views recorded in this way should generally only be used to give an indication of public views. You must make clear to participants how their opinions will be taken forward.

## Pros

- Provides local opportunities for people to comment on matters that affect them directly or indirectly.
- Offers a convenient and transparent way to demonstrate public consultation/build up good relationships.
- Can be used to inform the public at the same time as getting views.

## Cons

- People who attend are unlikely to be representative of the local population.
- Attendees' ability to contribute to a discussion about service-wide, strategic priorities can be limited by a lack of knowledge and possible lack of interest.
- Contributions will mainly be about local, topical or personal concerns.

**Costs:** relatively cheap, depending on how you do it.

**Use to:** get a feel for public opinion on a particular topic/issue and inform the public.

### The Devon and Cornwall Police Authority – Annual Policing Plan

Members of the public were consulted on the Devon and Cornwall Police Authority's policing plan, through a series of open meetings. The consultation was organised and carried out by the police authority, in co-operation with the police force. Handbills distributed at the consultation meetings asked, 'What are the issues that you feel the police service should address next year?'

The objectives of the meetings were to:

- hear about public concerns; and
- set out to improve public understanding of police operations and to educate the public about policing matters.

Publicity for the meetings included 2,500 letters and posters to parish councils, neighbourhood watch groups and other local organisations.

The meetings were held in the evenings, in venues such as village halls and schools. Each meeting started with a brief introduction and was followed by a discussion. The topics discussed were summarised and listed on flip charts. When the discussion had finished, the public were asked to vote for the three issues that they considered to be most important to include in next year's policing plan, in order of priority.

The vote, by 671 people at 16 meetings, identified a total of 60 issues that individuals thought should be in the top three priorities for policing in 1997/98.

Contact: Graham Davey tel: 01392 438781 fax: 01392 420274

# Chapter 10

## Using representative groups

- 10.1 Many, mainly voluntary, organisations know what is happening on the ground, and are in a good position to tell you what users think about your service and the problems they have. They may be advice agencies, single interest groups or support groups, or may see themselves as having a 'watchdog' role.
- 10.2 Representative organisations may be made up of people who have a particular interest in a subject and have strong views, and you need to take this into account. They should not be used as the only means of consultation, but will be a useful source of qualitative information about your services. They can also help you find out where you need more in-depth research.
- 10.3 Representative organisations are a ready-made source of information. They may carry out their own research or be able to provide you with feedback on users' experiences. Many organisations are experts in particular fields: Community Health Councils see large numbers of people who are having problems with health services; Citizens Advice Bureaux advise people on a wide variety of subjects including benefits, housing and court procedures.
- 10.4 Organisations may also be able to get the views of particular groups of users, such as disabled people and their carers, or minority ethnic groups, perhaps through their advice work or because they are part of a network, so know who you should talk to.

### Points to Think About

- **Finding groups:** find local groups through your library, local Council for Voluntary Services, Race Equality Council, Citizens Advice Bureaux or other advice agency. Or look in the various directories (see page 70). Many Councils have databases of the groups in their area. You may be able to use these to locate groups – or you could keep such databases yourself (although it can be time-consuming to keep them up to date).
- **What they do:** find out what the group does, who it represents, its priorities, what its specific interests are, how it carries out its work and so on.

## Discuss how best you can work together.



- **Involving them:** discuss how best you can work together. You could meet individual groups, or hold forums where several groups get together. Fit the consultation into your own strategic planning – do you want to consult organisations every year, or only when you review your charter or management plan, or on a regular basis throughout the year?
- **How they can help:** think about whether organisations could help you by carrying out research. But don't always expect them to do it for nothing – they may be cheaper than a commercial operation, but running voluntary groups costs money.
- **Timing:** give voluntary bodies time to respond – they are busy and may be inundated with statutory agencies' consultation requirements.

### Pros

- Numbers to be dealt with are more manageable.
- Allows you to tap into information being collected by independent organisations.
- Can provide quantitative and qualitative information.
- Can help you get views of particular groups such as minority ethnic communities or people with disabilities.
- Relatively quick and cheap.
- Gives you a chance to explore views in depth.
- Allows you to discuss detailed solutions with people with some technical knowledge.

## Cons

- Depending on the type of organisation, the group may contain particularly motivated people who aren't fully representative of users.
- May not provide statistical information.
- Finding the right group and maintaining records of existing groups can be very time-consuming.
- Groups may require a considerable amount of time to respond.

**Costs:** relatively cheap

**Use to:** discuss general and specific issues of relevance to particular groups of users/consumers.

### Southwark Council – Southwark Housing Management

Southwark Housing Management is the in-house management contractor looking after more than 50,000 homes for Southwark Council. It provides a local service from 16 neighbourhood offices and prides itself on the relationships it has built up with tenants and residents. Customers are represented on tenants and residents associations and community forums etc. Tenants and residents make real spending decisions on repairs and maintenance and help appoint managers. Staff believe that the investment in sustaining that relationship is the key to improving services.

Contact: Chris Brown tel: 0171 525 7792 fax: 0171 525 7727

### London Borough of Ealing – Social Services – SPACE Scheme

The SPACE scheme in Ealing finds homes for adults with learning disabilities. An independent 'User Empowerment Group' was set up in 1996 to provide a voice for people placed with families to make sure that standards are both understood and maintained.

The group meets once a month in the evening. Members of the group choose where they would like to meet. Venues have included a pub and a bowling alley.

The group was set up by the SPACE Scheme as a forum for consultation, but the users lead their own group and decide which issues they would like to discuss. Issues covered so far have been independent living and bereavement.

An independent User Empowerment Worker supports the group and receives feedback about the standards of care each user receives. This can be from the quality of food they eat to issues about choice and independence. Feedback is given to the SPACE team with service user consent.

Recently, the group has started to join in the assessment of new carers. Volunteers from the group spend one evening assessing potential carers. The service user asks five questions and then offers feedback about their views of the carer. This is included in the final assessment report that is presented to the panel for approval of carers.

The group is now developing a panel that will meet new referrals to the service independently. This will give new service users a real view of the service without the presence of the SPACE Team.

Contact: Stephen Day tel: 0181 579 4399 fax: 0181 579 9592

# Chapter 11

## Face-to-face interviews

- 11.1 Interviews (like other forms of qualitative research) can tell you what people think and why, and allow you to explore in detail their views, attitudes, behaviour or motives. They might help you decide on what you want to cover in quantitative research or provide views on a service you are proposing. What they cannot give you is accurate statistics about users' opinions.
- 11.2 In-depth one-to-one interviews can help you to explore particularly sensitive topics. They allow a rapport to be built up, which enables the interviewer to probe into feelings and thoughts that someone may not reveal in a group discussion or on paper. But they are time-consuming and difficult to analyse.

### Points to think about:

- **Expertise:** get expert advice from someone who has carried out interviews in your own or another organisation, a local university or a research consultancy. You need someone with experience in research to run in-depth individual interviews and analyse the results.
- **Content:** consider carefully what you want the interview to cover, and draw up a framework for your interviewer/s. One of the advantages of interviews is that they allow the flexibility for new and interesting issues or ideas to be probed in depth, but you need to ensure that the specific areas you want information on are covered, and defining these clearly in advance is important.
- **Location:** decide where you are going to carry out the interview – this could be in the interviewee's home, in the street or at the point of service delivery. You will get differing response rates depending on where you choose. If you decide to interview in the street, you will be restricted in how long the interview can take and will not be able to go into any great depth. People may not be keen to let you into their homes, but you are likely to get much better quality information through home interviews.
- **Representativeness:** don't expect the feedback from individual interviews to be typical of the views of all users.

## Useful for obtaining the views of people who might not feel comfortable speaking in a group.

### Pros

- Can help in obtaining wide-ranging responses to proposals for new services.
- Good for gaining views of certain sorts of individuals excluded from mainstream consultations (such as people from disadvantaged groups).
- Flexible enough to allow new issues to be raised that your organisation may not have thought of.
- Can provide more detailed feedback than a group discussion.
- Useful for obtaining the views of people who might not feel comfortable speaking in a group.
- May help explore sensitive, personal or painful issues.

### Cons

- Interviewers need to be trained researchers.
- Because of small numbers, you cannot rely on results being typical of the overall group you are concerned with.
- Costs are high per individual.
- Does not provide statistical information – gives you the ‘why’, not the ‘how many’.

**Costs:** high per individual, but you get a lot of information in return.

**Use to:** explore issues where a large amount of open-ended information is needed.

## Wycombe District Council – Community Call Service

The service provides 24-hour emergency cover every day of the year to over 3,000 residents. A great amount and depth of information and personal attention is given to every customer from their first contact with the service. This includes an in-depth interview on first connection to the system. The interviews are conducted by one of the Community Call Service staff members and are carried out in the customer's own home at a time that is convenient to them, including outside normal office hours. The interview covers:

- a description of the service and what it can offer
- the customer's personal details, including any specific medical problems, and how to get the maximum benefit from the service
- the choice of equipment available and what will be most suitable for them, including discussion of its location within the home and the requirement (if any) for active and passive remote triggers
- all financial aspects, including rental/purchase options and VAT exemption
- the role of key holders
- whether they have any other unmet needs that could usefully be referred to other agencies

The customer is left with a full information pack, which includes contact names and numbers for office staff.

Contact: Bill Stevenson tel: 01494 421613 fax: 01494 421691

# Chapter 12

## Focus groups

- 12.1 Focus groups are normally made up of around 8–10 people led by a trained facilitator in a one-off discussion on a particular topic. Like individual interviews, focus groups allow you to explore issues in considerable depth, and have the advantage that people can bounce ideas off others.
- 12.2 Focus groups are particularly useful if you want to find out what specific groups of people (such as non-users or minority ethnic groups) think about your service.

### Points to think about:

- **Composition:** although it is tempting to try to get a group to be fully representative of your users, experience shows that the more similar the group is in terms of gender, age and social class, the easier it is for them to communicate effectively. You may need more than one discussion group if you want to investigate the views of more than one part of the community. The timing of your focus groups will need to fit in with the needs of the members.
- **Expertise:** it is important to use a skilled facilitator to run groups. They will help make sure that everyone has a chance to speak, and move the discussion along without imposing their own views.
- **Focus:** start with something relatively simple with real boundaries. For instance, ask a group of users to talk about your waiting facilities, or your information leaflets.
- **Valuing participants:** show participants that you value their contribution by making sure that they have clear information about what their role is, and that all practical arrangements run smoothly. It is often the little things that are important (and sometimes forgotten) – giving people a map to help them find the venue, letting them know how long the discussion is likely to take and what's going to happen afterwards, letting them know whether refreshments are to be provided etc.
- **Incentives:** it is often a good idea to follow up your invitation with a telephone call the day before the focus group, and is generally appropriate to offer to pay travel expenses. You might wish to give a

small additional financial incentive (say £10) to attend. You could also consider a prize draw or free access to your facilities as incentives.

- **Preparation:** it is important to prepare for the focus group carefully. Draw up a list of questions for discussion or areas that you want to be covered. Although the groups should be fairly flexible and informal, a structure that makes sure that the significant areas are covered, and that other issues do not take over the discussion, is important. If there is more than one focus group, this will also provide for some consistency, allowing results to be compared between groups.
- **Recording:** you might want to consider tape recording sessions to allow more detailed analysis afterwards. But normal notes are also important because, for example, the use of visual aids would be difficult to record on tape.

## Pros

- Lets you find out what is important to users.
- Users may feel more confident in groups and say things they wouldn't say on their own.
- Groups allow people to spark ideas off one another.
- Provides information about what people think and why.
- Can help you get through to non-users.
- Can include people who do not read and write or who do not speak English (if you get an appropriately skilled facilitator).

## Cons

- Must use experienced facilitator (so can be expensive).
- Group views can tend to the norm (although a good facilitator will help avoid this).
- Difficult to prioritise issues (although there are techniques for doing this).
- Does not provide statistical information – gives you the 'why', not the 'how many'.

- Feedback will not be typical of the views of all users.
- Lack of confidentiality in group may inhibit some participants.

**Costs:** high per individual, but you get a lot of information in return

**Use to:** get qualitative views from all audiences – particularly useful for accessing potential and non-users

#### Employment Service – Suffolk District

In 1996, benchmarking of customer service standards against Charter Mark criteria revealed one major area for improvement – the way clients' views were gathered. To address this, more than 50 client consultation groups were organised. A simple agenda was produced to guide discussion, and at the end of each session, participants were asked to complete a simple questionnaire to indicate their level of satisfaction with a wide range of subjects including the helpfulness of staff, regular interviews and office layout.

The information was fed back to the District Office with a summary of key points raised. These feedback sheets were then assessed by the small group and ideas for improving service fed back to the Jobcentres via a District Focus Group.

Contact: Colin Reeve tel: 01473 585181

# Chapter 13

## User panels

- 13.1 A user panel allows a small group of users and senior managers to discuss user concerns. Whereas a focus group usually only meets once, a user panel will meet regularly over a long period. It can give you early warning of problems and help you come up with ideas for changing or developing what you do. You could also use the panel to test changes you're considering.
- 13.2 Many services have found user panels a useful (and relatively cheap) way of focusing on user issues.

### Points to think about

- **Composition:** consult staff, users and representative groups at an early stage about the proposed brief, membership, balance, roles of members and so on. Include a cross-section of users on your panel: you won't be able to get a fully representative group, but try to have a range of people.
- **Size:** have a relatively small panel (no more than 12 in total, including managers).
- **Purpose:** have clear objectives for the group, for example: 'to make the service more friendly and easy to use'.
- **Access to decision makers:** make sure that the group has access to managers with the authority to make things happen. The more commitment shown by top management, the greater the chance that the panel will be effective in influencing decisions and strategy.
- **Skills:** draw up a clear 'job description' and list the main qualities and experience you need before starting to select members.
- **Length of appointment:** appoint members for a fixed term: after a while, they will get to know your business so well that there is a risk they may start to feel part of your organisation, and so lose credibility with other users.
- **Facilities:** provide support for members: give them access to information, somewhere to meet, expenses for attending meetings, photocopying and secretarial facilities. Make the panel an integral and serious part of a member of your staff's work.

Treat the panel seriously. Be prepared to listen, learn and act.

- **Representativeness:** don't use the panel as your only means of consultation. The group will not necessarily be representative of the views of all users, and its lack of financial and operational independence could create cynicism.
- **Timing:** allow time for representatives to refer back to user groups or to consult others – this can help increase their accountability and credibility.
- **Commitment:** treat the panel seriously. Be prepared to listen, learn and act.

### Pros

- Useful sounding board on which to test plans and ideas.
- Can give you relatively quick feedback.
- Adds credibility to your consultation process.
- Creates a continuing dialogue with users.
- Helps you concentrate on issues from the user perspective.

### Cons

- Managers may think that once they have a user panel, that's all they need to do.
- Users can get too close to the organisation over time.
- Provides little in the way of statistical information.
- Won't be effective without good input and commitment from management.
- Can be unrepresentative – especially of disadvantaged minority groups.

**Costs:** relatively cheap.

**Use to:** test user reaction to changes and proposals, and get ideas for improvements.

Bath Mental Health Care NHS Trust has set up a 'Readers' Panel' of service users and carers to make sure that any written information produced by the Trust for the public is in plain language and easy to understand.

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# Chapter 14

## Citizens' panels

14.1 Citizens' panels (which are larger than user panels) comprise a significant sample of citizens (usually between 600 and 2,500 – a national panel would be bigger), and are representative of the relevant population. The panels are used as sounding boards to test specific options or proposals, and to assess local services and develop views about future needs and goals.

### Points to think about

- **Resources:** running a panel requires a mix of professional skills (eg research, organisation, analysis), and considerable resources. Some panels are conducted in partnership with other local service providers. This can be a good use of resources, for example local council, health authority, community health council and training and enterprise council sharing the panel. Watch the number of partners, though – too many can require too much co-ordination and mean individual partners can't use the panel often enough.
- **Survey topics:** the types of survey the panel is useful for requires careful thought. You are more likely to get useful results when you ask questions about something the members know and care about. Think about targeting particular surveys on sub-groups of the panel – for example, older people. Questions that seek information about specific experiences of panel members (eg Have you used this service? What was it like to use?) are more likely to provide solid responses.
- **Role:** panel members need to be clear about their role on the panel. Make sure you tell them what is expected of them from the start – some people think a 'panel' will involve face-to-face discussions, where in fact questionnaires or telephone polling are the most common panel techniques. Members also need to be told how frequently they will be consulted, how long they will be on the panel etc.
- **Publicity:** you need to publicise how you use the results of panel surveys. You should make sure that you have effective ways of communicating with your panel members (some panels have produced regular newsletters), which are frequent and comprehensive.

## Pros

- Can track changes in views over time.
- Can collect views of particular groups in the population or particular service users.
- Because members are recruited on a voluntary basis, they are more likely to be committed to responding to questionnaires and so increase the response rate.
- Special needs of certain panel members will be known about in advance so they can be prepared for.
- The cost of a panel, once established and used several times, is less than a large-scale one-off survey.
- Panel offers opportunity to consult members of the population who have traditionally been hard to consult, such as members of ethnic minority groups.
- Once a panel is set up, it can provide very quick results.

## Cons

- It can take longer than expected to recruit the panel.
- Delays in getting questionnaires back can result in delays in analysing results.
- Response rates are sometimes not as high as would be hoped/expected.
- The subject needs to be seen as relevant to the members – and there can be criticism if important decisions are not considered by the panel.
- Over time, the process of taking part in a panel is likely to make members increasingly experienced and knowledgeable. This will make the panel less representative of the population as a whole – regular replacement of the membership is therefore essential.
- Younger members tend to drop out, so the panel gradually gets older.

**Costs:** Likely to be expensive, requiring significant resources in terms of staff time, skills and money. Large set-up costs and regular maintenance needed. But sharing costs with other partners can be cost-effective, and, in the long run, it should work out cheaper than regular one-off surveys.

**Use to:** Get views of representative population, and track views over time.

Kirklees Metropolitan Council. "Kirklees Talkback" – a Citizens' Panel of more than 1,000 residents.

Kirklees Panel was established in partnership with the local health authority. Around three surveys a year are sent out, with questions from both the council and the health authority. They also run focus groups recruited from the panel.

Kirklees Talkback has proved an easy, quick, effective way of gathering information from adult residents of Kirklees. Having the panel has raised the profile of customer research across the council – more and more services and managers want to use the panel, and have started to develop their own customer research projects.

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The Government has recruited a People's Panel of 5,000 people across the UK to consult members of the public on their attitudes to public services and generate ideas about how they can be improved. Members are randomly selected to be an accurate cross-section of the UK (for example by age, background, region etc).

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# Chapter 15

## Citizens' juries

- 15.1 Citizens' Juries were first developed in Germany and the USA. They grew out of a perceived need to give ordinary citizens a stronger voice and role in democratic decision-making. In the UK they have so far mainly been used in local government and the health sector. They are a structured method of obtaining detailed, considered views from members of the public on particular issues. Juries are usually made up of 12–16 lay people (neither experts in the particular issue nor members of interest groups), who hear evidence from a range of specialist witnesses over several days and draw conclusions.
- 15.2 Juries demand considerable commitment from jurors, and resources from the commissioning service. So it is important to have a very clear framework for the jury, which explains the issue, the role of the jury, and what will be done with the conclusions reached. The issue itself should be important enough to justify the time, effort and cost involved.

### Points to think about:

- **Co-ordination:** the issue you want the jury to consider may well impact on the responsibilities of several organisations. If this is so, it is important to bring together all the bodies involved to make sure that the jury's conclusions are considered by those with the power to make changes. Otherwise you will have wasted the considerable resources invested in the exercise, as well as the significant commitment of the jurors.
- **Composition:** methods of selecting jurors vary (and it's sensible to use professionals here). You might wish to try to get a representative sample of the local population (although with such small numbers of people it is clear that the jury could not really be representative); the jury could be largely self-selecting (but be careful of using volunteers only, as they will almost inevitably be very unrepresentative); or you might use a random selection method (eg using the Electoral Roll).
- **Location:** if possible, hold the juries in neutral buildings – this will help avoid feelings that you are controlling the jury. An independent facilitator or moderator should be used.



- **Publicity:** you will need to choose between keeping the jury process completely open and allowing the jury enough privacy to debate and discuss the issue without inhibitions. Will the jury be open to observers? Will the organisation record the proceedings? Juries may attract media attention. Will the juries give briefings or interviews once the process is complete?
- **Resources:** juries need a great deal of back-up organisation from the commissioning service, and you shouldn't underestimate the time involved.
- **Reporting:** it is normal practice for reports of juries to be published. You'll need to consider how this will be done (in some cases the jurors themselves have drafted the report, but they need to have advance warning and time and resources if they will be required to do this). Reports should reflect the conclusions of the jury, and include any dissenting opinions. You should make a clear commitment about how and when you will respond to the report.

### Pros

- Provides informed feedback.
- Members of jury have an opportunity to make a real contribution to public affairs and generally seem to enjoy the experience.

### Cons

- Expensive.
- Not suitable for all issues.
- Works best where organisations have already made substantial progress in their consultation.
- Jurors will not want to commit the time and effort unless they are given some undertaking that their views will count.
- May not be representative of views of general public, who don't have the benefit of expert evidence.

**Costs:** very expensive (can be £20,000 or more).

**Use to:** involve people in detailed consideration of key issue.

In 1995, the Local Government Management Board sponsored five pilot projects using Citizens' Juries. Local authorities found that the juries produced ideas that were fresh to the Council, and recommendations were better informed and more thought-out, and therefore more useful, than had been expected. The juries consisted of between 11 and 16 members, and sessions lasted from 2.5 days to 4 days.

Juries need a great deal of back-up organisation from the commissioning service.



# Chapter 16

## Questionnaire-based surveys

- 16.1 Quantitative research gives you statistics in response to set questions. For instance, it could tell you what proportion of your users would like you to extend your opening hours to 6pm, or the aspects of your service that users would most like to see improved. 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 group). It also allows you to compare information year on year if you ask the same questions. Quantitative surveys can be face-to-face, postal or conducted over the telephone.
- 16.2 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.

### Points to think about:

- **Preparation:** read other surveys – the results and the questionnaires and any evaluation of the process. Talk to colleagues who have used surveys.
- **Questions:** the usefulness of a survey will depend on the questions. It is only too easy to carry out surveys which ignore the issues that are important to your users. Discussion groups can help you find out what you should be asking, or talk to local organisations who represent your users.
- **Testing:** pilot 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 (if you asked a question like 'do you like our charter or should it contain more information?' what would a 'yes' answer mean?).
- **Relevance:** don't ask a question if you can't act on the results.
- **Satisfaction surveys:** be wary of simple satisfaction surveys –

they are relatively unsophisticated and can provide misleading information. For instance, with health services, people are generally so pleased to be better that they will say they are highly satisfied, having forgotten what happened along the way.

- **Design:** 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.
- **Expertise:** 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.
- **Removing barriers:** 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 Braille, large print or audio cassettes to survey visually impaired people; put your questionnaire on the Internet and invite e-mail responses (e-mail addresses appear automatically on mail, so bear in mind that people won't be able to send anonymous responses in this way); include a reply-paid envelope for postal surveys.
- **Confidentiality:** 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.
- **Responses:** 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, but don't expect a 100% response! A 60% response would be regarded as very good. It's worth getting professional advice about sample

sizes. The larger your sample the more the exercise is going to cost, and there's a stage at which accuracy levels will not be significantly improved by increasing the sample size.

### Pros

- A very good method of obtaining reliable statistical information.
- Requires a relatively low level of interaction.
- Allows you to analyse large samples quickly and even to track changes over time, if you use the same questions in later surveys.
- Can be low-cost if routine and supported by in-house expertise.
- Good method of getting the views of non-users.
- Conducting the survey over the phone gives you the chance to explain questions if necessary.

### Cons

- A poorly designed survey, with poorly drafted questions, can give misleading results.
- If only a small number of people respond, results will be unreliable.
- Difficult to get views of the disadvantaged minority groups who make up only a small part of your community.
- A lot of time and money can be involved in analysing results.
- Difficult to obtain qualitative information.
- If you conduct the survey over the phone, time constraints may result in hurried answers, and there is a danger of the answers reflecting the views of the interviewer.
- Can be costly (you may not be able to afford to survey a large number of people).

**Costs:** varies depending on how the survey is done and how large the sample is. An in-house postal questionnaire can be relatively cheap.

**Use to:** discuss general issues with users. Can be targeted to particular groups and focused on specific issues.

#### The Abbey Practice – 1997 Patients' Survey

To ensure that the Practice has a clear and up-to-date idea of its patients' attitudes towards the services it provides, 940 users were sent questionnaires by post in April 1997. The survey asked questions under four headings: the physical environment in the surgery, the doctor, the staff and miscellaneous questions. To ensure that the material returned could be collated and produce statistically worthwhile results, a tick box method was employed for the answers. 218 questionnaires were returned. This was considered a very good response rate. As a result of patients' comments homeopathy treatment is now provided and a fax machine for repeat prescriptions has been installed on a 6-month trial period.

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#### Horsham District Council – Leisure Services Directorate

The Directorate places a strong emphasis on obtaining customer feedback across a broad range of services to ensure that it continues to meet the demands of the district's residents.

This has resulted in such ventures as a 'junior board of directors' set up at Broadbridge Heath Leisure Centre to provide an insight into younger customers' requirements. A survey of 1,200 teenagers (the Horsham Youth Leisure Survey) undertaken in collaboration with sixth-form students has provided valuable feedback to support leisure strategy development. In light of the findings of the survey, the District Council has recently agreed to the conversion of the Park Recreation Centre to a modern 'Family Entertainment Centre'. This will incorporate ten-pin bowling, American pool and snooker, a range of high-tech interactive games, a theme bar and catering facilities.

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# Chapter 17

## Ballots/referenda/deliberative polling

- 17.1 With a few high profile exceptions, national referenda are rare in this country, but they have been used at local levels. People are asked to vote either for or against an option or a limited number of options.
- 17.2 In deliberative polling, a representative sample of people is initially polled on an issue. They then learn more about the topic through being given information, asking questions and participating in discussions, and at the end of the process are polled again.

### Points to think about:

- **Usage:** referenda and ballots will only be suitable for some issues. You will only get a 'yes/no' answer, so if you are looking for qualitative comments this is not the right technique. Issues should be those that will be of significant interest to your users, and the question/s need to be phrased in a way that allows people to make a clear choice between the options. If the issue does not lend itself to a 'yes/no' answer, then avoid this approach.
- **Context:** deliberative polling recognises that people make different choices when they have different amounts of information. Any sort of polling should not be carried out in a vacuum – people should have the opportunity to debate the issues, hear from supporters of all the different options, and make a considered choice.
- **Methods:** a variety of different methods can be used – postal ballots and personal voting are the most common at the moment, but information technology is opening up new possibilities. Electronic systems to allow groups of people to vote for particular options are already used, and telephone and Internet voting from the home are often seen on the television. Increasing opportunities for people to use these methods are likely to improve participation levels, but there are issues surrounding confidentiality and prevention of misuse that may be significant as these areas develop.

### Pros

- Easy to interpret results.
- Increasingly easy for people to participate.

### Cons

- No qualitative information.
- Results can be based on superficial uninformed responses – but there's no way for you to find this out.
- Results can be swayed by the amount and quality of information provided by supporters of each option, rather than by the issue itself.
- Often gets low turnouts.
- Deliberative polling techniques can be very expensive.

**Costs:** expensive, particularly for deliberative polling.

**Use to:** get clear mandate (depending on response) for particular action.

You will only get a yes/no answer, so if you are looking for qualitative comments this is not the right technique.

# Chapter 18

## Written consultation exercises

- 18.1 Written consultation exercises are designed to provide a formal means by which people can be invited to comment on policies and proposals. The key is to get the best spread of views from those most likely to be affected, and from those with most to contribute.
- 18.2 All consultation documents should be concise, clearly laid out and written in simple language that will be understood by the intended audience, avoiding jargon. They should ideally contain the following:
- a summary (preferably no more than one page long);
  - a description of the issue, proposal or problem being addressed;
  - the purpose of the consultation and, if appropriate, the objective of the proposal;
  - the issues on which views are being sought; wherever possible they should take the form of clear questions and/or options;
  - an explanation of what decisions, if any, have already been taken and an explanation of why a particular option is favoured;
  - if relevant, various sources of opinion and information, and factual statements (for example, from academics or consumer groups);
  - where appropriate, an explanation of who is likely to be affected, and how, including an assessment of the impact on particular groups such as small and medium-sized enterprises, the voluntary sector, charities and consumers;
  - the deadline for responses, and wherever possible an outline of the proposed timetable for the rest of the decision-making and implementation processes;
  - the name, address and, wherever possible, the telephone number and e-mail address of a person whom respondents can contact if they have further queries;
  - a list of those being consulted. You could also ask consultees to advise you of any other organisations/individuals who should be consulted;

- 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 that responses will normally be made available unless they are confidential.

### Points to think about:

- **Publicity:** publicise the existence of the document (for example, through an appropriately targeted press release), and wherever possible use the Internet to publish it and receive replies.
- **Format:** be ready to deal sympathetically with requests for documents in other formats/languages. If necessary, consider other ways of consulting ethnic minority groups or people with special needs, for example, through face-to-face discussions.
- **Timing:** allow people consulted enough time to reply, making allowances for holiday periods and other potential timing difficulties. Decide in advance how to deal with requests for the deadline for comments to be extended, and how to acknowledge responses.

### *After the consultation period:*

- **Reporting:** the results of all consultation exercises should be carefully analysed. Once a decision has been taken on the way forward, let respondents know promptly how the work will proceed, and explain how the decision reflects the results of the consultation.
- **Summary:** produce and make available a summary of views and information collected from the consultation exercise.
- **Feedback:** where respondents ask why their views have been rejected, try to give them a prompt and full explanation.

### Pros

- Can provide users with detailed, comprehensive information.
- Gives you considered views of respondents based on accurate information.

### Cons

- You may get a low response – written documents will put some people off commenting.
- You will exclude people who can't read or write English (consider translating documents and providing them in other formats).
- Costs of printing and distributing documents can be significant.
- Timescales will be longer than for some other methods of consultation.
- Analysing responses can be resource-intensive.

**Costs:** relatively cheap, but depends how many people you consult and how you print and distribute documents.

**Use to:** get views on detailed and potentially complex information from interested parties.



# Chapter 19

## Open days/roadshows/exhibitions

- 19.1 Open days and exhibitions can be relatively informal occasions when users (and potential users) can find out what you do, meet staff, ask questions and so on. Or they can be more structured, with formal presentations and discussions. Roadshows are similar, except that you go to communities rather than expecting them to come to you.
- 19.2 Such events are not suitable for all services and are probably most useful if you want to get across the message that you are approachable and want users to be involved in what you're doing. They can also be a way of talking to people who don't currently use your services but might in the future.
- 19.3 Messages can be got across in many different ways. You could use simple information stands or displays, or try something technical like a video or slide show.

### Points to think about:

- **Venue:** if it's an open day you will probably want to hold it at your own location so that users can see your services for themselves. If your own venue is unsuitable or you are taking a roadshow around your area, make sure that the location you use is suitable for the purpose, and that there is good access for your users and potential users.
- **Timing:** this is important. Is a weekday, evening or weekend going to be most convenient for those you want to reach? Do you need to consider school holidays? Can you offer more than one option?
- **Publicity:** you will need to publicise the event well to get good attendance. Use a variety of methods to let people know what is happening (eg notices in local newspapers, posters, leaflets, invitations, informing local groups). If you want to attract particular groups of people, think about ways of targeting them specifically.
- **Material:** the information you have on display or present is important. The people who come may have varying degrees of knowledge about your service, so you need to ensure that the information you provide appeals to a general audience. Make it as

A charter or similar document containing key information about your services, standards, contact points etc can be a useful document for your users and potential users to take away with them.

visual and interesting as you can, try to stimulate questions and make sure that you have staff around who can answer queries. A charter or similar document containing key information about your services, standards, contact points etc can be a useful document for your users and potential users to take away with them. But be careful not to rely too much on giving information to people to take away and read – people may be very willing to take material, but will they really read a mountain of paper when they get home?

- **Practicalities:** plan the practical aspects of the event carefully. You will probably need to make arrangements for setting up stands/equipment etc, and think about things such as refreshments, places for people to sit and rest, and so on. Try to get some indication of likely attendance if possible.
- **Feedback:** try to 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 to show you who hasn't come. Comments can be collected in a variety of ways, from staff recording relevant points, to the public posting comment cards into a box.
- **Representativeness:** as with other techniques like this, where those commenting are largely self-selecting, don't use an open day or roadshow as your only means of consulting. The views you will get are unlikely to be representative.



## Pros

- Gives the public flexibility of when to attend.
- Arouses interest by giving the public something to see or do.
- Provides ad-hoc feedback on services and ideas for change.
- Can be a source of suggestions and comments.
- Gives users a chance to become familiar with your premises and meet staff, so promoting good relations.
- Gives you an easy way to publicise your services and provide information to users.
- Can help you contact potential and non-users.
- Gives you quick feedback.

## Cons

- People who attend may not be particularly representative of users and non-users.
- Won't provide statistical information (other than on numbers who attend etc).
- Feedback may be limited to responses to the information presented/on display.

**Costs:** vary according to what you do – an open day could be very cheap, but a roadshow or exhibition can be very expensive.

**Use to:** inform audiences who are relatively unfamiliar with your service.

## London Borough of Camden – Camden Transport Services

Camden Transport Services provide passenger transport each week for 630 elderly people and pupils with special needs. They also manage and maintain the council's 200-vehicle fleet.

The service first held an open day in 1995 to help raise awareness of its services and to receive comments from users to help improve the quality of the transport and care it provides. The day was attended by almost 100 people – mostly service users with carers and parents. The service spent some £3,000 to £5,000 and feel that perhaps some of this could have been spent more wisely. For instance, a marketing professional might have been worthwhile. They also feel that they might have had a higher turnout if the day had been arranged outside school term.

A questionnaire was used to collect feedback from the users, and oral feedback was recorded as well. These comments heavily influenced the service's vehicle specification for the future. To help them with future consultation, the service wrote a review of the open day and identified the following:

### Things that worked well

- good venue, fully accessible to everyone including people with disabilities;
- excellent catering;
- all demonstration vehicles attended, as did the exhibitors. There were just about the right number of vehicles for the size and layout of venue;
- parking meters suspended and yellow line restrictions waived for the day;
- exhibition lay-out and seating arrangements;
- good feedback from users that did attend; and
- ushers to and from display vehicles

## London Borough of Camden – Camden Transport Services *continued*

### Things that didn't work well

- low turn-out by Camden Officers;
- not all display boards for transport were completed on time; and
- poor response to the questionnaire

### Things to think about for the future

- allow enough time for designing material and thinking about the type and format of the material that will be displayed;
- staff participating in the event should be clearly identified with badges;
- have a system of greeting people and showing them around and answering questions;
- better publicity in terms of:
  - attaching an RSVP slip to invitations to enable better planning
  - ensuring that any questionnaire is well distributed, providing assistance to complete it, allowing adequate resources to collect information, and feeding back that information to users
- make sure that what is on display accurately reflects the services you can provide so that users do not get the wrong impression of what they can expect.

Contact: Malcolm Norton tel: 0171 413 6727 fax: 0171 413 6732

**Make sure that what is on display accurately reflects the services you can provide so that users do not get the wrong impression of what they can expect.**

# Chapter 20

## Information technology

- 20.1 **The development of new information and communication technologies is making it possible to consult and involve users in new ways. Making participation easier for people is one of the key ways to increase levels of involvement. For many, the opportunities offered by new technology make it both easier, and more fun, to take part. Bear in mind, though, that this is not yet universally the case. Access to new technology is limited, and there will always be some people who will not want to use these methods. You will exclude significant groups if you rely too much on these media.**
- 20.2 **Information is becoming easier to access via the Internet, cable television, video phones etc. Increasing use is being made in public services of these techniques in combination with other methods.**

Walsall Council's Leisure Services Department used an interactive software package to find out what people thought about proposals for a new swimming baths development at Darlaston. With a member of staff on hand to help, people could see 3D computer images of three proposed building and pool styles and use the computer to vote for their preferred option. The consultation process was an important factor in the success of the £4.5m English Sports Council Lottery funding bid.

Contact: Albert Charles tel: 01922 654311 fax: 01922 653131

### Internet

- **Use of the Internet is growing very fast. Many organisations now have website pages, with screens asking for comments on both the information on the web pages and the services provided. If you have a website, you should be able to get information on how many times your individual pages are accessed.**



This will give you useful information about service areas that might be of most interest/importance to people, or issues you might want to focus on in specific consultations.

- You can put draft documents, questionnaires, forms etc on the Internet, and comments can be returned by e-mail. This can be much cheaper for you than printing and distributing lots of material. For people who have access, responding to invitations for views is very easy.

### Pros

- Usage spreading rapidly.
- Relatively cheap.
- Quick response rate and easy for people to use.
- Can be a cheap way of circulating a large amount of information to people.
- Information can be quickly updated and amended.

### Cons

- Limited access – won't, at the moment, reach most people and will never reach everyone.
- Be prepared for technical problems!
- Information needs to be designed for the Internet. This requires expertise.

The format in which information is made available will influence the ability of different groups to participate in consultation.

### London Borough of Wandsworth – Planning Service

Customers of the service include architects, developers, builders and solicitors as well as the many 'neighbours' who are consulted on planning applications. The service uses its Internet web site to consult its customers and other members of the public.

The system allows members of the public worldwide to view all current planning applications (including drawings), examine the decisions register and look at details of available development sites in the area. All Planning Service application forms and some guidance notes are available on the system. Users can leave their comments electronically about planning applications, the system, or any Council service.

The system was accessed by the public more than 20,000 times in 1996/97. Comments on planning applications were received from Hong Kong, Australia, Denmark, USA, Singapore and Germany, in addition to many local responses.

Contact: Ian Thompson tel: 0181 871 6626 fax: 0181 871 7809

### Kiosks

- **Kiosks, like the Internet, can give people fast access to an enormous amount of information, and can also be used to encourage feedback about services. Kiosks, which usually have a screen and keyboard, and can also have a scanner to read documents, telephone or camera to allow video conferencing, can be situated where your services are provided, or in a location that will allow wider access.**

### Pros

- **Easy to use/practical for users (if situated strategically).**
- **Can be used to reach rural communities.**
- **Quick way of collecting comments.**

## Cons

- Few in number (cannot consult a large sample of people).
- Can be very expensive.
- Relies on the user taking the initiative to use the kiosk.

## Audio/video cassettes and CD-ROMs

- The format in which information is made available will influence the ability of different groups to participate in consultation. Audio and video cassettes are a good way of involving people with low literacy levels. Presenting information about the service on video or CD-ROM might make the information more user-friendly and interesting.
- This technology can also be used for recording people's views. Giving evidence on video can give people time to prepare what they want to say, they can have several 'takes', they can add extra information, and they do not have to rely on writing.

## Pros

- Can help reach people with low literacy levels.
- CD-ROM allows you to present a lot of information in an accessible format.
- Can make people interested in/take notice of what you are trying to get across.

## Cons

- Can be costly, especially if you have to provide the equipment for recording views.
- Not everyone will have the facility to use this form of technology.



# Annex A

## Further reading

Service First Unit publications  
(see inside back cover)  
All available free from Service First  
Publications Line on 0345 22 32 42

### Consultation

*Citizen Involvement – A Practical Guide  
for Change* – Beresford and Croft, British  
Association of Social Workers, 1993,  
Macmillan Press

*Citizens' Juries: Theory into practice* –  
Coote and Lenaghan, Institute for Public  
Policy Research, 1997

*Citizens' Juries in Local Government: Report  
for the LGMB on the Pilot Projects*, Local  
Government Management Board, 1996

*Citizens' Panels – A new approach to  
community consultation*,  
Local Government Information Unit, 1997

*Consulting the Public – Guidelines and  
Good Practice* – Seargeant and Steele,  
Policy Studies Institute, 1998

*Consulting your consumers: a handbook for  
public service managers*, National  
Consumer Council, 1994

*Involving the Public*, Local Government  
Management Board, 1998

Finding Representative Organisations  
*Consumer Congress Directory: A directory  
of organisations in the consumer  
movement in the UK*, Consumer Congress

*Voluntary Agencies Directory*,  
NCVO Publications

# Annex B

## Useful contact organisations

### British Deaf Association

1-2 Worship Street  
London EC2A 2AB  
Tel: 0171 588 3520 Fax: 0171 588 3527  
Minicom: 0171 588 5529  
Internet: [www.bda.org.uk](http://www.bda.org.uk)

### Commission for Racial Equality

Elliot House  
10/12 Allington Street  
London SW1E 5EH  
Tel: 0171 828 7022 Fax: 0171 630 7605  
Internet: [www.open.gov.uk/cre/](http://www.open.gov.uk/cre/)

### Community Development Foundation

60 Highbury Grove  
London N5 2AG  
Tel: 0171 226 5375 Fax: 0171 704 0313  
E-mail: [admin@cdf.org.uk](mailto:admin@cdf.org.uk)  
Internet: [www.cdf.org.uk](http://www.cdf.org.uk)

### Consumer Congress

20 Grosvenor Gardens  
London SW1W 0DH  
Tel: 0171 730 3469 Fax: 0171 730 0191  
Minicom: 0171 730 3469

### Data Protection Registrar

Wycliffe House  
Water Lane  
Wilmslow  
Cheshire SK9 5AF  
Tel: 01625 545700 Fax: 01625 524510  
E-mail: [data@wycliffe.demon.co.uk](mailto:data@wycliffe.demon.co.uk)  
Internet: [www.open.gov.uk/dpr/](http://www.open.gov.uk/dpr/)

### Equal Opportunities Commission

Overseas House  
Quay Street  
Manchester M3 3HN  
Tel: 0161 833 9244 Fax: 0161 835 1657  
E-mail: [info@eoc.org.uk](mailto:info@eoc.org.uk)  
Internet: [www.eoc.org.uk](http://www.eoc.org.uk)

### INLOGOV

School of Public Policy  
The University of Birmingham  
Edgbaston  
Birmingham B15 2TT  
Tel: 0121 414 3872/4961  
Fax: 0121 414 4989  
Internet: [www.birmingham.ac.uk](http://www.birmingham.ac.uk)

### Institute for Public Policy Research

30-32 Southampton Street  
London WC2E 7RA  
Tel: 0171 470 6100 Fax: 0171 470 6111  
E-mail: [ippr@easynet.co.uk](mailto:ippr@easynet.co.uk)  
Internet: [www.ippr.org.uk](http://www.ippr.org.uk)

### Local Government Association

26 Chapter Street  
London SW1P 4ND  
Tel: 0171 834 2222 Fax: 0171 664 3030  
Internet: [www.lga.gov.uk](http://www.lga.gov.uk)

### Local Government Information Unit

1-5 Bath Street  
London EC1V 9QQ  
Tel: 0171 608 1051 Fax: 0171 253 7406  
E-mail: [lgIU@geo2.poptel.org.uk](mailto:lgIU@geo2.poptel.org.uk)  
Internet: [www.lgiu.gov.uk](http://www.lgiu.gov.uk)

**Local Government Management Board**  
Layden House  
76-86 Turnmill Street  
London EC1M 5QU  
Tel: 0171 296 6600 Fax: 0171 296 6666  
Internet: [www.lgmb.gov.uk](http://www.lgmb.gov.uk)

**National Consumer Council**  
20 Grosvenor Gardens  
London SW1W 0DH  
Tel: 0171 730 3469 Fax: 0171 730 0191

**National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO)**  
Regents Wharf  
8 All Saints Street  
London N1 9RL  
Tel: 0171 713 6161 Fax: 0171 713 6300  
Internet: [www.ncvo-vol.org.uk](http://www.ncvo-vol.org.uk)

**Plain English Campaign**  
PO Box 3  
New Mills  
High Peak  
Derbyshire SK22 4QP  
Tel: 01663 744409 Fax: 01663 747038  
E-mail: [info@plainenglish.co.uk](mailto:info@plainenglish.co.uk)  
Internet: [www.plainenglish.co.uk](http://www.plainenglish.co.uk)

**Royal National Institute for the Blind**  
224 Great Portland Street  
London W1N 6AA  
Tel: 0171 388 1266 Fax: 0171 388 2034  
E-mail: [webmaster@rnib.org.uk](mailto:webmaster@rnib.org.uk)  
Internet: [www.rnib.org.uk](http://www.rnib.org.uk)

**Royal National Institute for Deaf People**  
19-23 Featherstone Street  
London EC1Y 8SL  
Tel: 0171 296 8000 (voice)  
0171 296 8001 (Minicom)  
Fax: 0171 296 8199  
Internet: [www.rnid.org.uk](http://www.rnid.org.uk)

**Service First Unit**  
Cabinet Office  
Horse Guards Road  
London SW1P 3AL  
Tel: 0171 270 1838 Fax: 0171 270 6362  
E-mail: [servicefirst@gtnet.gov.uk](mailto:servicefirst@gtnet.gov.uk)  
Internet: [www.servicefirst.gov.uk](http://www.servicefirst.gov.uk)

# How to consult your users

## Reader survey

It would help us to have your comments on this guide and how useful you found it. Please return the completed form to Phillip Jones, Service First Unit, Room 71B/G, Horse Guards Road, London SW1P 3AL. Phone 0171 270 1882. Fax 0171 270 6362.

Please show how useful you found the sections of this guide (please tick on the scale)

	Not Useful			Very Useful	
<b>Introduction</b>					
Why services don't consult	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Why consult?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Making consultation work	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Choosing your approach	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Evaluating your consultation	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>Consultation methods</b>					
User comments and complaints	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Feedback from staff/suggestions schemes	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Mystery shopping	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Piloting changes	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Open/public meetings	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Using representative groups	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Face-to-face interviews	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Focus groups	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
User panels	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Citizens' panels	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Citizens' juries	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Questionnaire-based surveys	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Ballots/referenda/deliberative polling	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Written consultation exercises	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Open days/roadshows/exhibitions	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Information technology	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Further reading	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Useful contact organisations	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Continued overleaf

Have you carried out consultation exercises before? Yes  No

If 'Yes', how useful did you find this guide? Very  Moderately  Not at all

If 'No', how useful did you find this guide? Very  Moderately  Not at all

Any other comments? (eg other techniques that could be covered, style and presentation of this guide.)

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It would help us if you completed the contact details below, but please return the survey anonymously if you wish.

Name: .....

Organisation: .....

Contact address: .....

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Phone: .....

Fax: .....