listen up!
effective community consultation
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Introduction

Why has this paper been written?

1. The idea that public sector organisations should consult people about the kinds of services and policies that they want is not new. Some authority members and officers have long believed that consultation helps them to shape policies and services that are in tune with what people need, and that are consequently likely to be cost effective. A few authorities have been at the forefront of developing new consultation techniques, such as citizens’ juries. But not all public service providers share this enthusiasm: some have been hostile to the idea of consultation, and others have found it difficult to carry out successfully.

2. Effective consultation is not easy to achieve. Many organisations have struggled to get a cross-section of people engaged in consultation, rather than a narrow, self-selecting group. Consultees often disagree with one another, so interpreting the results can be tricky. What consultees say must also be balanced with other factors that affect decisions, such as resources and statutory requirements. Some authorities have found it difficult to square direct community consultation with the role of members as decision-makers. Very few authorities have managed to work with partner organisations to carry out ‘joined up’ consultation programmes.

3. Yet consultation can be a powerful tool for improving the quality and cost-effectiveness of services, and for ensuring that policymakers stay in touch with citizens. These benefits can be secured only if consultation is carefully planned, effectively carried out and thoughtfully used. Overcoming obstacles to effective consultation is becoming ever more important, as new legislation gives authorities additional and more comprehensive duties to consult.

4. This paper aims to help authorities to secure the benefits that consultation can offer and get good value from the resources that they invest in it. Much good material has already been published on different consultation methodologies, so they are not discussed in detail here. Instead, this paper concentrates on:

   • what consultation is;
   • planning consultation;
   • overcoming common obstacles to effective consultation;
   • the principles of good practice; and
   • evaluating effectiveness.

5. The paper concentrates on consulting local people, but the good practice described could also be applied to consultation with businesses, partner organisations or other external bodies.

For whom has this paper been written?

6. This paper is primarily intended to:

   • help officers in councils, police authorities, fire authorities and health bodies to plan and carry out community consultation more effectively; and
   • offer advice to authority members about using community consultation in making policy and improving services.

An executive summary aimed specifically at authority members is also available.

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1 A list of useful publications, including guidance on available methodologies, is set out in Appendix 1.
7. Although the Audit Commission has published this paper now to help authorities to tackle their expanding statutory duties to consult, particularly under best value, the paper is not intended to be solely a guide to fulfilling these new duties. It may therefore also be of interest to other public sector service organisations, including government agencies, and to non-statutory organisations.

**The evidence on which this paper is based**

8. This paper is based on visits to 18 case study sites, including councils, police forces, health bodies and fire brigades, and on discussions with a range of organisations that represent people who use locally provided public services. It also draws on an Audit Commission survey of a sample of authorities and on other recently published research.

9. In preparing this paper, the Commission has benefited from discussions with other bodies, such as the Local Government Improvement and Development Agency, which have an interest in developing good community consultation practice. The Commission is grateful to the local and national organisations that have helped to shape the ideas in this paper. However, as always, the Commission remains responsible for the conclusions reached.

**Terminology**

10. Throughout this report, ‘authorities’ usually refers to councils, police authorities and forces, fire authorities and brigades, and local NHS bodies. References to ‘health bodies’ include health authorities, trusts, primary care groups and local health groups.
1. What is consultation and why do it?

11. This section looks at:
   • how to define consultation;
   • why authorities should consult the public;
   • consultation methods; and
   • current consultation practice.

What is consultation?

12. Consultation has been defined as a process of dialogue that leads to a decision. This is a valuable working definition. The notion of consultation being a dialogue implies an ongoing exchange of views and information, rather than a one-off event. Dialogue also implies two or more parties listening to and taking account of one another's views. This definition also highlights the importance of consultation being closely related to decisions: there is little value in agencies consulting over policies or services that they have no plans to review. However, the notion of consultation 'leading to' a decision is important too. The results of consultation are an important input to decisions, but having consulted the public does not free authority officers and members from their duties to offer advice on, and to make, decisions. Authority members need to consider a range of factors when making decisions, and the outcome of consultation is only one of these factors, albeit an important one.

13. Individuals can be consulted in three main capacities:
   • as consumers, when they are asked for their views about particular services that they either do, or might, use;
   • as taxpayers, when consultation focuses on the balance between the level of services provided and their cost; and
   • as citizens, when consultation focuses on what people think about policy questions, such as the type of development that might take place in their town centre or the relative priority that they give to different aspects of policing.

Although this paper does not specifically cover consultation with local businesses, they can also be consulted as service users, as business ratepayers and as organisations with a wider interest in a local area.

14. These are important distinctions, because agencies should aim to take people's views into account when reviewing service delivery, taxes or charges for services, and policies. However, the main elements of good practice are the same, whether people are being consulted as citizens, taxpayers or consumers.

Why consult?

15. Councils, police authorities and health authorities already have statutory duties to consult the public on a range of issues. In some cases, this duty to consult has existed for many years – so most of these bodies have some long-standing experience of public consultation. However, best value for councils, the police and fire services changes the requirement to consult the public in significant respects. The creation of NHS primary care groups in England and local health groups in Wales is also intended to enhance public involvement in decision-making. Many public sector bodies will now have a much broader and more extensive duty to consult local people on the way that services are delivered overall, rather than just on specific issues. A summary of the current consultation requirements for different authorities is included in Appendix 2.
16. Having a statutory duty to consult is not the only reason for doing so. Where authorities – both here and abroad – have embarked on extensive consultation programmes, they have often found the experience to be worthwhile when it is done well and used carefully to inform decision-making.

17. The main potential benefits of consultation are:

- services can be targeted more closely on providing what people want, and avoiding what people do not want;
- take-up of services can be improved, making unit costs lower, especially where there is a charge for services;
- user satisfaction with services can be monitored over time, providing a useful performance indicator on improvements to the quality of services;
- problems arising from proposed changes to services can be pinpointed in advance, and so avoided;
- the results of consultation can be used to help to make decisions about policies, priorities and strategies;
- local people can be involved more in decision-making, rejuvenating the local democratic process; and
- authorities, particularly councils, can strengthen their role in community leadership.

Consultation methods

18. Councils, police forces and health authorities already use many different consultation techniques. Some of these are more appropriate for one-off issues, whereas others are useful for broader consultation across a range of issues. A summary of consultation methods indicates which are most appropriate for particular purposes, and provides a brief indication of relative cost [see inserted WALLCHART]. Definitions used in this Table are used throughout this paper.

19. The wide range of consultation methods in use highlights the spectrum of activities that are referred to as consultation. Some commentators emphasise the distinctions between consultation and information-giving, market research and direct user control of services. In practice, however, it is sometimes difficult to make absolutely clear distinctions, and it may be more useful to focus on the idea of a spectrum of consultation methods, from those that are less involving to those that are more involving [EXHIBIT 1]. A sound approach to consultation is not necessarily one where all activities are concentrated towards the right-hand end of the spectrum. Because different methods are needed for different purposes, what is really important is to pick the right method for each situation.

20. Broadly speaking, the kinds of consultation carried out by public service providers can be divided into two types:

- direct consultation with a sample of people; and
- consultation with delegates, such as area forums, and tenants’ association or community organisation members, who represent the views of other local people.

21. Direct consultation allows authorities to find out the views of local people at first hand. But in this kind of consultation it can be difficult to make consultees feel involved in the decision-making process, or to provide feedback to them on how their views were taken into account. Using delegates who represent the views of others...
WHAT IS CONSULTATION AND WHY DO IT?

means that consultees can become more involved in the authority’s decision-making processes, but runs the risk that delegates may not truly represent the wider community, or even the groups that have delegated them.

A compromise reached by some authorities is to set up standing panels of volunteers who can become more involved in the decision-making process, but who are not delegated to represent any views other than their own. But even in this model, participants may become too involved in, or knowledgeable about, the authority’s processes and thus become progressively less representative of ordinary people. This model is also not usually appropriate for consulting about some services, such as certain social services, which are used only by a very small proportion of people.

EXHIBIT 1
The consultation spectrum
The degree to which consultees are likely to feel involved increases across the spectrum.

WHAT IS CONSENTATION AND WHY DO IT?

EXHIBIT 1
The consultation spectrum
The degree to which consultees are likely to feel involved increases across the spectrum.

What is really important is to pick the right method for each situation

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Source: Audit Commission
**Current consultation practice**

23. Although there is little systematic information available about the extent of consultation work by health bodies, police or fire authorities, the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions (DETR) recently published a detailed survey of English councils’ practice ([Ref. 1](#)). This included data on the forms of public participation that were commonly used already and that councils were planning to use in future [EXHIBIT 2]. Many local authorities seem to be moving away from so-called traditional methods such as consultation documents, opinion polls and public meetings, with growing numbers using panel surveys, citizens’ juries, and interactive websites.

**EXHIBIT 2**

**Consultation methods used by local authorities**

Authorities are increasingly making use of new methods.

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*Source: DETR (Ref. 1)*
24. Subsequent research by the Local Government Management Board (now the Improvement and Development Agency in England and Syniad in Wales) (Ref. 2) suggested further rapid growth in the use of some of the more recently developed methods. Almost half of all councils claimed that they already used or were about to use a panel survey. The number of councils using, or considering, a citizens’ jury has increased from less than one in ten to almost one-quarter, although they were more than twice as likely to be considering this approach as using it.

25. The rapid growth in the reported use of these so-called innovative techniques is striking, but does not on its own imply an improvement in the quality of consultation. Although some traditional consultation techniques – such as public meetings – are often insufficient on their own, many long-established methods – such as surveys – are valuable if done well. A technique is not necessarily better simply because it is new: the keys to success are matching the methods used to the purpose of the consultation exercise and the service covered, and carrying out the chosen methods competently.

A technique is not necessarily better simply because it is new
2 Planning consultation

26. Good planning is an essential feature of effective consultation. This chapter looks at:
   • deciding what to consult about;
   • deciding when to consult;
   • consulting jointly with other organisations; and
   • developing a strategic approach.

Deciding what to consult on

Identifying priorities

27. In a few services, such as development planning, there is a statutory requirement to consult all those who will be directly affected by each decision before it is made. In others, regular monitoring of people’s views is valuable and can be done at minimal cost. However, in general it is not realistic for authorities to aim to consult continuously about every service they offer, so it is important for them to identify priorities.

28. These priorities should be selected to address the issues that are particularly important to the whole organisation, as well as to individual services. Although the big issues of the day vary in different areas and types of authority, consultation priorities often have common characteristics. These typically concern:
   • major policy decisions where the authority does not already know much about local people’s views;
   • controversial decisions in which there is likely to be a high level of public interest (which will include some decisions, such as proposed school or hospital closures, where consultation is a statutory requirement);
   • services that have a significant impact on users’ quality of life, but are not rated highly by users;
   • services that account for a significant proportion of overall spending;
   • newly developed services or new statutory duties, where there is no information already available about local people’s views or priorities; and
   • services or decisions where consultation is a statutory requirement.

29. When identifying priorities for consultation, managers also need to ask themselves:
   • what information has already been collected on public opinion by the authority or other organisations that may be of use?
   • what appropriate structures are already in place to consult the public?
   • can the consultation be carried out jointly with other services or organisations?
   • will the results of the consultation be of interest to managers of other services or organisations?

Priorities should ... address the issues that are particularly important to the whole organisation, as well as to individual services
30. In large organisations, other departments may already have carried out public consultation that addresses some of the same issues. But, even in smaller organisations, it is possible that other bodies already have information that will reduce the extent of any further consultation that is needed.

31. Best value authorities have a wide-ranging new duty to consult about the ways in which they seek to achieve continuous improvement. As the best value legislation is only now coming into force, there is no specific caselaw to guide authorities in interpreting this duty. However, most commentators are taking the view that authorities will need to consult as part of each best value review, and as part of the corporate best value performance planning process. On this basis, authorities will be consulting on each service at least once every five years, and about corporate priorities every few years. Except where there is already a specific statutory requirement, best value authorities will be free to choose what form these best value consultations should take.

Are there issues where consultation is not appropriate?

32. There are some circumstances where consultation is never likely to be appropriate. While it is possible for an authority to consult on a question on which it has already made up its mind, this is not good practice. If consultees believe that the exercise is not genuine, they may feel disillusioned or angry, and be reluctant to participate in future exercises. ‘Cosmetic’ consultation is also likely to be a waste of resources.

33. Traditionally, authorities have been most likely to consult on issues that do not require specialist expertise to understand. Nonetheless, it is possible to consult on some complex issues. Many of the simpler techniques – such as questionnaire surveys or public meetings – are not useful in these circumstances because they do not equip members of the public with the information that they need in order to participate in a meaningful way. But techniques such as health panels or citizens’ juries can be used (CASE STUDY 1, overleaf). The techniques that work best for complex topics require relatively high resources, so authorities should use them selectively.

34. Similarly, although it is possible to consult effectively on priorities between services, particular care should be taken when doing so. If simplistic approaches are used to consult on these types of choice, popular, widely used services may well be given priority over specialist services that are used by only relatively few people, but which may be vital to those who need them. Authorities can take a number of steps to manage this risk, including:

- providing information to consultees about the impact of services that they do not use themselves;
- using deliberative consultation techniques that allow consultees to appreciate the consequences of their choices; and
- making it clear to consultees that decision-makers will take account of their views, but will consider other factors as well.

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1 The Commission’s report on specialised health services, Higher Purchase: Commissioning Specialised Services in the NHS (Ref. 3) looks in more detail at how health panels can be used to inform decisions about priorities.
Who should be consulted?

35. There is a spectrum of decisions that authorities take that could potentially be influenced by consultation [EXHIBIT 3]. The sections of the public that may need to be consulted will depend on where the decision sits on this spectrum. Decisions that affect relatively few people may need a small, focused consultation involving people who already use, or could use, a particular service. Decisions that affect the whole population need a broader consultation exercise that involves a representative cross-section of the population.

CASE STUDY 1

Consulting about complex topics

Lewisham, Southwark & Lambeth Health Authority

Because the Health Authority found it difficult to judge public opinion on complex medical and ethical issues through broader consultation processes, it has established ‘health panels’ in each of the three boroughs within its boundaries.

These panels comprise around a dozen local people, who are recruited for three separate consultations. The make-up of each panel is balanced as far as possible to reflect the area in terms of ethnic mix, age and gender. A facilitator sends panel members information in advance, and asks them to discuss the issues with other local people. Panel members can talk to the facilitator about anything in the papers that they do not understand, although the papers are written in plain English. Each panel member is paid £15 per consultation. The panels cost around £3,000 each, including internal costs and the use of an external consultant to recruit panel members.

The Health Authority has used the panels to consult on complex issues such as ‘rationing’ resources between front-line services such as kidney dialysis and primary cancer care. The authority has found that the panels have been able to get to grips with technical issues that would not traditionally be thought of as suitable for public consultation, and the results of the panel deliberations have been useful for informing health authority decisions. In the future, the Authority intends to use the panels for consulting on strategic issues, such as health commissioning policies.

It is possible to consult on some complex issues
Selecting the right population to sample in public consultation is not always straightforward. Who should be consulted about charges for social services, for example? Should this be just those who use the services and their carers, or is this a broader strategic decision on which the whole population should be consulted? Similarly, who should be consulted on HIV services? Should consultation include everyone, people who use these services now, or people thought to be at particular risk of HIV infection?

There are no hard and fast rules about who has a legitimate interest in decisions, so deciding who to consult is largely a matter of judgement. In some cases, the solution may be to carry out more detailed, qualitative consultation with those people who have a specific interest in the way that a particular service is provided, coupled with a more general, quantitative consultation on the general policy principles that affect that service.

The Commission has recently published *The Price Is Right?: Charges for Council Services* (Ref. 4), which looks at charging policies and offers advice on how best to set them.

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**EXHIBIT 3**

There is a spectrum of decisions that can be informed by public consultation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Decisions affecting a few people or about service detail</th>
<th>Decisions affecting a larger group of people or about service plans</th>
<th>Decisions affecting many people or strategic decisions about whole authority</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Consultation can be small and tightly focused</td>
<td>Consultation may need to cover several groups of users and stakeholders</td>
<td>Broader consultation involving cross-section of whole population</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Audit Commission*
Deciding when to consult

38. Some statutory requirements govern the point in the decision-making process at which consultation should take place. However, in most cases – including best value reviews – this is for authorities to decide for themselves. Although the 4Cs of best value (challenge, compare, consult and compete) are usually referred to in this order, there is nothing in the best value framework that compels authorities to tackle them this way. The Commission’s best value inspectorate will be more interested in whether consultation has been carried out at the most appropriate point in the review process.

39. The best time to consult during a service review or policy decision-making process will depend on what the consultation exercise is designed to find out. If, for example, an authority knew that its housing repairs service was unpopular but did not know why, market-research type consultation would be needed early in the review to produce diagnostic information. In contrast, if information was already available to steer decisions about where improvements were most needed, consultation might best focus on specific options for future changes. From time to time, particularly if a service is in severe difficulty, consultation may be needed at more than one stage in the review process. However, this can be an expensive approach, especially for authorities that do not have standing consultation structures.

Consulting jointly with other organisations

40. Many members of the public do not know which organisations provide which services. Even when they do, many problems that they have with local services do not fall neatly into the remit of a single organisation. So consultation plans need to consider services as they affect local people, not as authorities provide them, and some exercises will therefore need to be carried out jointly.

41. When people have participated in consultation, it is not helpful for an authority to respond that, ‘the main thing you all said was a problem is not actually anything to do with us’, even if, strictly speaking, this is true [BOX A]. Shifting the blame on to another organisation is unlikely to encourage further participation, especially where no organisation is prepared to take overall responsibility for sorting out the problem. It is not always easy to anticipate whether the main issue that consultees will raise falls into another organisation’s remit. If there is a risk of this happening in a major exercise, doing a pilot exercise first might be helpful. This can identify whether it is important to try to get other relevant organisations on board before launching the whole project.

**BOX A**

We carried out a big consultation exercise on outpatient services. We found that the commonest complaint was that the bus services weren't good enough to get people to the hospital in the first place. There wasn’t much we could do about that.

Policy and research officer, a London health authority
Consulting the public together can encourage officers and members from different organisations to accept joint responsibility for problems, and to begin to work on solutions to problems in the same way that service users perceive them [CASE STUDY 2]. In working together to set up, run, analyse and act on joint consultation, officers from different authorities or service areas can also begin to break down traditional professional barriers.

**Developing a strategic approach**

Authors can make the best use of consultation resources if they co-ordinate their consultation activities into a coherent programme or strategy. Many authorities are too small for each service to have its own specialist staff, so corporate co-ordination can also make sure that all exercises are competently designed and carried out. Under best value, auditors will be looking for evidence of a strategic approach to consultation when they report on authorities’ best value performance plans. Inspectors will also expect individual consultation exercises to take place within a corporate framework.

**CASE STUDY 2**

**Joint consultation**

Lewisham Council has a well-established ‘citizens’ panel’, made up of a demographically representative sample of 1,000 local people. The panel is a partnership project with University Hospital, Lewisham, who co-fund it. Local colleges, the police and the health authority are part of a steering group and use the panel on an ad hoc basis. Costs have been shared, and there have been some joint consultations on cross-cutting topics, including the local crime and disorder strategy and developing healthy living centres. These have helped to bring staff together to tackle the issues.

However, if corporate co-ordination becomes central control, this may stifle creative new ideas and inhibit the use of new consultation methods. So how do you strike the right balance?
44. An organisation-wide, strategic approach can be developed either by building up from existing structures for consulting about individual services, by introducing new corporate structures, or by a combination of the two. Even if some new structures are needed, authorities should be careful not to disregard projects that are already operating successfully within the authority. These may have developed to deal with a single issue, or to cover a small geographical area. In bigger authorities, especially, such well-established projects can be overlooked, especially if they operate on a small scale. But they can offer some valuable lessons on how to reach local people, and could be used as a template for broader consultation across the whole authority. In some cases (Case Study 13, page 40, for example) small local consultation projects have successfully co-ordinated a wide range of public sector service providers.

45. One way to allow individual services to develop their own consultation exercises while still encouraging them to fit into an overall strategy is to give departments a ring-fenced consultation budget and enable them to buy into corporately developed consultation structures at relatively low cost [CASE STUDY 3]. In larger authorities, individual services may want to develop their own consultation strategies, although the corporate centre may still need to devise some basic ground rules and standards, hold a core of technical expertise, and co-ordinate consultation strategies across different departments.

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CASE STUDY 3

Supporting a corporate approach

Brighton and Hove Council

In Brighton and Hove, the Council has long recognised the need to develop central consultation arrangements and strategies without inhibiting service departments from carrying out their own consultations that are designed to inform specific decisions within the service area.

The Council therefore set up a central consultation resource with specialist expertise that service departments can buy into, with half the costs met by the service department and half from a central consultation budget. This central service also involves evaluation of the way in which results are used to inform decisions or to change policies and practices.

By providing central, ‘subsidised’ consultation services in this way, the Council can co-ordinate most consultation corporately, without stifling departmental initiatives on the detail of service delivery.
3. Overcoming barriers to effective consultation

46. In the past, many public sector service providers have not consulted or involved the public extensively because they have found it too difficult to overcome the barriers. Some of these barriers are very real: effective consultation is not easy, particularly if an agency or service has no tradition of community engagement. Others concern problems that are perceived as much as real. This section looks at how some of the commonest problems can be overcome.

Does consultation undermine members’ role as decision-makers?

47. Members of councils, and to a lesser extent police authorities and health bodies, have traditionally thought of themselves as the voice of the people, able to represent the views of the community through their day-to-day contact with constituents and their problems. While this is indeed a vital role, it is not realistic to expect authority members to be aware of the views of all the people whom they represent on every local issue. This is particularly true for members who have been appointed rather than elected, and who do not generally hold surgeries or regular meetings with groups of local people.

48. Consultation can help members to act as effective community representatives by giving them a detailed and balanced view of local people’s views on a particular service or policy. It should have a strong influence on decisions, but should not dictate them. It is the members’ role to decide:

- how to respond to conflicting public views when consultees disagree; and
- what weight to give to the results of community consultation alongside other factors, such as available resources, statutory requirements and the views of partner organisations.

49. From time to time, members may feel that the right decision differs from what the majority of consultees say they want. When that happens, members should not feel constrained to go along with the results of consultation – members have always had a duty to make up their own minds on the basis of all the information and advice available to them [BOX B].

BOX B

We are here to consult the interests and not to obey the will of the people, if we honestly believe that that will conflicts with those interests.
Robert Peel, 1831

Consultation can help members to act as effective community representatives by giving them a detailed and balanced view of local people’s views on a particular service or policy.
However, if members find themselves in this position, they do need to consider carefully whether they are going against the majority of consultees’ views for sound reasons, or simply because those views were not what they wanted to hear. It is particularly important in these circumstances to explain to the public both what the results of the consultation were and why the authority has made a decision that differs from consultees’ views.

As well as using consultation to inform decisions, members can also play an active role in the consultation process [CASE STUDY 4]. Some people have expressed doubts as to whether members should play this role, in case they have too strong an influence on the views of public meetings or consultative groups. It is quite legitimate for members to put their views forward, as long as their views are not expressed so forcefully as to intimidate their audience. Although less common, there is no reason why health authority members should not participate in consultative processes. Because they are not elected, there is an even stronger reason why they should join in local consultation meetings and find out directly what people think.

It can be particularly valuable for members to be seen to be involved in consultation on controversial issues. Where an authority is proposing to do something that it expects to be unpopular in some quarters, members can do nothing worse than hide from public debate on the issue.

The Audit Commission has published a management paper on the role of non-executive members of health bodies (Ref. 5) that includes advice on how non-executives can develop their role as community representatives.

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**CASE STUDY 4**

**Members leading the consultation process**

**South Somerset District Council**

South Somerset has a devolved committee structure, with four area committees that have devolved budgets – relatively few decisions are taken at the centre. The area committees are made up of local councillors but are open to, and are well attended by, the public. They have become a focus for local community consultation.

These area committees have consulted local people on a wide range of issues, with councillors on the committees leading the consultation and using the committees to find out what local people want and what they think of the council’s policy proposals. The committees have provided a focus for other consultation strategies such as ‘village design days’, where local meetings are held in the smaller villages to discuss the needs of people in the village. The area committees have also generated other locally focused consultation exercises including a citizens’ jury on the future of a key site.

Council members believe that although the process can be time-consuming, the results are worthwhile, and that increased contact with local people enhances their knowledge of local opinion and, consequently, strengthens their ability to represent local people effectively.
The cost of consulting

53. Because consultation exercises are not always corporately co-ordinated, few authorities have an accurate picture of all the resources that they devote to them. Nonetheless, consultation undoubtedly does have a cost and many agencies, particularly smaller bodies, are expressing concern about the cost of meeting new, more extensive duties to consult. This is a valid concern, but there are ways in which agencies can make the cost of consultation more manageable.

54. The costs of consultation vary according to the methods used (see wallchart). Some consultation methods – full-scale consumer surveys across the whole authority area or citizens’ juries, for example – are relatively expensive. But others – such as panel surveys or neighbourhood forums – are relatively inexpensive, especially after the initial structures have been set up. The absolute cost of consultation is important, but it is not the only issue. Authorities also need to consider the extent to which consultation can help them to improve value for money or even to save money [CASE STUDY 5], by:

- not providing services that people neither want nor need;
- maximising take-up of services, especially those services for which there is a charge;
- providing services that minimise complaints and avoid expensive correction of mistakes; and
- planning services, especially new services, effectively so that they do not have to be modified or adjusted in the near future.

Consultation can help improve value for money or even save money

CASE STUDY 5

Using consultation to improve the cost-effectiveness of services

Lewisham Council’s tenant consultation

The Council has an established representative structure that it uses to consult its tenants, with local tenant groups electing delegates to neighbourhood committees. This formal arrangement allows the Council to consult tenants on a wide range of issues around housing management, repairs and improvements, and about the local environment.

This approach has been used to change the Council’s working practices and meet tenants’ needs more cost effectively. For example, consultation on housing repairs revealed consistent problems with some types of repair. Coupled with the information that the Council’s DSO gets from its routine checks with tenants on a 10 per cent sample of housing repairs, it was possible to target the types of repair that were most likely to result in tenant dissatisfaction. This approach reduced the number of return visits needed. Together with other adjustments to the way that repairs were done, these changes reduced the overall cost of the repairs service.
Not all consultation exercises will help authorities to be more cost effective. Consultation about overall policy priorities, about whether or not to have a mayor, or about spending and council tax levels, are unlikely to have immediate financial benefits, and they will certainly have a cost. That does not mean, however, that this type of consultation cannot be good value for money. It is reasonable for good quality decision-making to have a cost, and the key question is whether the benefits of consultation outweigh these costs. There are a number of ways in which authorities can make consultation cost effective.

**Making consultation cost effective**

Authorities can increase the cost effectiveness of their own work by making sure that they do not duplicate consultation exercises, and that they make the widest possible use of consultation results. They should also take opportunities to spread the costs by consulting jointly with other agencies. Carrying out consultation jointly with other agencies (see paragraphs 40-2) is often a good idea in itself, but it can also increase the cost effectiveness of each agency's work. But there are other ways in which agencies can get the best from the resources devoted to consultation, such as:

- incorporating public consultation with other initiatives; and
- using members of the community to carry out consultation.

**Incorporating public consultation with other initiatives**

There may be other policy initiatives being pursued by the authority that involve contact with the public, and which can therefore be combined with public consultation. For example:

- health authorities may be conducting programmes to make women aware of the need for cervical cancer screening;
- councils may be conducting programmes to raise awareness about food hygiene and safety; and
- police forces may be talking to people about crime prevention and how to make their homes safe from intruders.

In all these cases, contact with the public can be used as a way of getting information from people, as well as giving it [CASE STUDY 6]. There may be other routine opportunities for authorities to obtain basic information from people. They can do this, for example, when housing applicants fill in an application form, or when the police interview victims of crime. Getting information at a point of contact that the organisation already has can be very cost effective. It cannot, however, substitute for consultation with people who do not use the service.

**Carrying out consultation jointly with other agencies is a good idea in itself, but it can also increase cost effectiveness**
CASE STUDY 6

Integrating consultation with other initiatives

Mid and West Wales Fire Brigade
The fire brigade has two primary aims when it communicates directly with local people: to consult about the way that it provides fire services, and to raise awareness about fire safety. When it carries out face-to-face consultation with local people, it combines these two objectives by using questionnaires that ask questions about the fire service and people’s expectations of it, alongside questions designed to raise awareness about fire safety. For example, as well as asking for views about the location of fire stations and response times to fire calls, they will also ask people when they last changed the batteries in their smoke alarms, and if they know how frequently they should do this.

Involving members of the community directly in carrying out consultation

59. Where consultation processes and structures are well established, it may sometimes be possible to involve members of the community directly in carrying out consultation exercises. This is especially true in delegate structures, where the delegates can go back to the communities they represent and recruit local people to interview their peers and neighbours. This can be a particularly useful approach when working with ethnic minority communities, if outside interviewers lack the language skills, cultural knowledge or local credibility to collect useful information. It can also be an effective method for reaching socially excluded people.

Managing vocal minorities

61. It is possible for consultation to produce results that do not represent the views of local people as a whole, although this risk can be dealt with effectively if consultation is well planned and executed. The main potential problems are:

- using consultation mechanisms that allow a minority of people to dominate the process;
- not taking steps to ensure that a wide range of people participate; and
- using unrepresentative samples.

62. The key to tackling these problems lies in selecting appropriate consultation tools. There will always be a risk that articulate, well-educated people will be better able to use available consultation mechanisms than other sections of the community. Nonetheless, there is a range of steps that authorities can take to manage this risk. One of the most important is not to rely on methods in which consultees select themselves. Any method that uses a statistically representative sample of the population (or the service user group, where this is appropriate).
reduces the likelihood that the loudest voices will be the ones that are heard.

63. Some consultation mechanisms, such as neighbourhood forums or public meetings, are much more likely to be dominated by an unrepresentative minority than others. That does not mean that these methods should never be used – they do sometimes have a valuable role to play – but they do need to be used with care. Problems can also be reduced by good chairing and organisation [BOX C]. Section 4 looks in more detail at ways of making consultation inclusive.

BOX C

Some people will try to dominate meetings. But a good chair can use the rest of the people present to help quieten them down, make it clear that other people want to have a say. There’s not much point in coming to a consultation meeting if you’re just going to shout and not listen. Most people can see that.

Former councillor,
London borough

Any method that uses a statistically representative sample of the population ... reduces the likelihood that the loudest voices will be the ones that are heard.
Public expectations

64. If consultation is properly designed and organised, it will not generally raise unrealistic public expectations that cannot be met. When authorities consult, they need to make it clear what's on offer, and what options are available to local people. If there are constraints on what can be done, say so at the start and explain why this is so. Nonetheless, consultation, by raising people's awareness of services, may prompt people to question the type and quality of services on offer. This kind of reaction can be used positively, generating new ideas that can be used to develop existing services and create new ones. The extent to which authorities can do this will be limited by the availability of resources, but if what local people want really cannot be provided, then it should be possible to provide consultees with convincing feedback that explains what can and cannot be achieved [CASE STUDY 7].

CASE STUDY 7

Managing public expectations

East London and The City Health Authority
The Health Authority needed to consult about major changes to children's services. The proposals included the possibility of closing the Queen Elizabeth Children's Hospital, and developing a new model of care outside inpatient facilities.

The Authority distributed 10,000 leaflets to local people explaining the argument for closing the hospital and asking them for their views on how children's services should be provided in the future. A more detailed booklet was also available. The leaflet made it clear what decisions had already been taken, and what future decisions could be informed through consultation. Information was given on other hospitals in the area with options for improving them. Seventeen consultative meetings were then held, using not only managers and doctors from the closing hospital but also bilingual advocates to lead discussions.

The consultation identified a range of local concerns; primarily that money saved from the closure would not be spent on improving children's services elsewhere. It also identified other related problems – for example, people felt that liaison between primary care services, the hospital, and social services staff was poor.

Following the consultation, the Health Authority distributed a feedback leaflet to every household in the area (with copies translated into local minority languages), and to every schoolchild, summarising the results of the consultation, and explaining what the arrangements for children's services would be following the closure. The leaflet also explained the Authority's commitment to ring-fence money saved from the closure for improved children's services elsewhere, and to set up an audit and evaluation project on liaison between local children's services. The leaflet also served to inform people about the closure, and so avoid children being taken to the site of the Queen Elizabeth Hospital's accident and emergency department once it had closed.
Does consultation result in popular services that are impractical to deliver?

65. If there is a conflict between making services administratively easy to deliver and designing them around what local people say they want, then the priority should be to provide what people say they want. So, although it may be simpler for administrative purposes for all management offices on housing estates to open and close at the same time and on the same days, for example, that may not suit the different communities living on the different estates. Large numbers of single parents, people from particular ethnic minority communities, or older people, may mean that different opening times on different estates are more appropriate. Only consulting the people who live on these estates will reveal this, and enable appropriate opening times to be set.

66. In some cases, meeting diverse local demands in this way may give rise to costs that are unacceptably high. In such cases, authorities should explain the problem to consultees and look for the best available compromise. But the fact that changes to a service make it look difficult or impractical to the provider should not in itself be used as a reason not to consult, or not to act on the results.

If there are constraints on what can be done, say so at the start and explain why this is so.
4 The principles of good practice

67. There are four main principles of good practice in this area. Consultation should be:

- related to a decision that the authority intends to take;
- competently carried out;
- inclusive; and
- used in practice.

68. Each of these principles needs to be applied if consultation is to be effective – there is no point in carrying out a well-designed survey and then taking no notice of the results, or consulting only some sections of the community when looking at overall priorities. This section looks at these principles in turn, with some good practice examples showing how they can be applied in practice.

Relating consultation to decisions

69. Some authorities carry out consultation without having a clear idea about why they are doing so. This kind of ‘suck-it-and-see’ consultation, finding out what people think about services without having a plan for what you are going to do with the results, is of limited value [CASE STUDY 8].

70. All community consultation should therefore be planned with the ‘decision principle’ [BOX D, overleaf] in mind. Testing proposed consultation against this principle makes sure that:

- consultation can be designed so that it will inform the decision to be made;
- it is clear to consultees what they can change by responding to the consultation; and
- clear feedback can be given to consultees on how their views were taken into account.

CASE STUDY 8

Consultation that is not linked to decisions

A health authority set up a research project to discover children’s views about how they were looked after in hospitals. The research was detailed, seeking the views of children in several hospitals, and using innovative techniques to consult very young children as well as older children. The results of the research were compiled and published in a glossy report.

However, the research was not designed to inform any forthcoming decisions that the authority needed to make on children’s care, and was not intended to be used in the authority’s decision-making processes in future. So the published research, although widely welcomed as ‘interesting’ and ‘innovative’, had no effect on authority policy, and no changes were subsequently made to the way that children’s services were provided, even though the research revealed that change was needed.

BOX D

The Decision Principle

All public consultation should relate to a decision that you are intending to make, and that can be influenced by the result of that consultation.
There is little point in consulting unless the exercise is designed and carried out in such a way that the results will be valid.

71. The decision principle is important, but it should be intelligently rather than rigidly applied. Quarterly surveys of public satisfaction with a service, for example, do not need to be accompanied by major changes every three months, but it should still be clear how this information is used over time to plan improvements.

72. Being clear about why consultation is taking place can also help make sure that consultees’ expectations generally match those of the authority that is consulting. If the consultation relates to a particular set of options, then consultees will be able to see what’s on offer, and what can, or cannot, happen as a result of the consultation.

73. In some cases, relatively open-ended consultation may still be necessary to get initial ideas in advance of more detailed consultation – when planning the redevelopment of a local park or a programme of environmental improvements, for example. Open-ended approaches are useful when local people do not value a service or policy, but it is not known why. In such cases, authorities may want new ideas to come directly from local people, rather than presenting them with predetermined options. Some consultation methods (action planning meetings or ‘Planning for Real’) are particularly well suited to this purpose. This type of open ended consultation could be followed up with further consultation on specific proposals.

Carrying out consultation competently

74. As authorities respond to increasing statutory requirements to consult, there is a risk that some – particularly those with little experience – will do so ineffectively. To avoid this, authorities need to consider:

- how the exercise will be designed and carried out; and
- how consultees can be encouraged to participate.

Designing and carrying out the consultation exercise

75. There is little point in consulting unless the exercise is designed and carried out in such a way that the results will be valid. Indeed, poorly designed or executed consultation exercises can be harmful if decisions are then made on the basis of misleading results. So, the importance of carrying out consultation competently cannot be overstated.

Consultation skills

76. If the staff undertaking consultation lack appropriate knowledge and skills, they may inadvertently make the kind of mistakes that will undermine the credibility of the results. Common problems include:

- using a method that is not appropriate to the topic for consultation;
- designing surveys in ways that do not address all the relevant questions;
- phrasing questions in ways that are likely to skew the answers given;
• using a sample that is too small to give reliable results; and
• using samples for surveys or panels that do not accurately reflect the make-up of the population (or of service-users, where this is the relevant measure).

77. It is equally important to analyse the results properly. Staff involved in this work should have a good understanding of the margins of error relating to survey results, for example, and should be able to explain their significance to non-specialists. When consultation results are presented to members or senior managers, it is vital that they are given sound advice about how to interpret them. This does not mean that researchers or statisticians should be telling decision-makers what to do with consultation results, but decision-makers are entitled to sound advice in understanding the results, particularly if the consultation was complex.

78. Some authorities are large enough to employ people in-house with appropriate expertise in designing consultation exercises, who can carry some of them out. But many authorities, particularly small district councils or hospital trusts, may not historically have employed anyone with this type of expertise. Growing statutory requirements may make it more cost effective in future for them to do so: it is difficult to commission work from external suppliers if no one in an authority has the skills to act as client for the work. Small authorities may want to consider working in partnership with other bodies to share expertise, or forming local consortia of neighbouring authorities.

79. Few authorities will have sufficient internal expertise to design and carry out all their own consultation work: large-scale surveys involving face-to-face interviews by trained staff, for example, are almost always carried out by external suppliers. Using specialist public opinion research organisations clearly has a cost, but it also brings some significant advantages, such as:
• confidence that exercises will be properly designed and carried out;
• ready access to trained interviewers;
• knowledgeable analysis and presentation of results;
• confidence for consultees that the exercise is unbiased, which may be particularly important on controversial issues; and
• results that can be compared with those of similar organisations that have employed the same firm.

Authorities do not have to employ the market leading firms to get a valuable product, but should only use suppliers that comply with the market research industry professional codes of conduct.

I A short guide to constructing a sample is available free from the Commission performance indicators helpline on 0171 828 1212; the guidance is also available on the Commission’s website.

II The Market Research Society can help authorities to identify firms that do so.
Selecting consultation techniques

There are no absolutely hard and fast rules about when to use particular consultation techniques, although many of the publications listed in Appendix 1 contain valuable guidance on how to choose. All techniques have advantages and disadvantages, so the most important thing is to select the right one or combination for the particular exercise that you have in mind. Authorities should be wary of relying extensively on a narrow range of techniques or of concentrating on so-called innovative methods. The fact that authorities appear to be increasingly ready to use these newer approaches is welcome, but a technique should not be used simply in order to ‘keep up with the Joneses’.

Consulting about controversial topics

Some consultation techniques may not be suitable – at least, not on their own – for tackling issues where strong feelings or prejudices already exist in potential consultees’ minds. Holding a public meeting about a proposed local travellers’ site or the siting of a bail hostel may be essential for giving local people a chance to let off steam, and convincing them that those making the proposal are willing to hear people’s concerns, but it is unlikely to produce a considered debate.

Techniques that are both participative and deliberative, such as citizens’ juries, can be much more useful for tackling thorny topics. Deliberative techniques usually take time to set up, so may not be appropriate if a controversy blows up suddenly. However, authorities are often aware well in advance of making a decision that they will need to consult on a potentially controversial issue, such as a school or hospital closure. It should therefore be possible to plan appropriate consultation in time.

A useful approach when dealing with a controversial topic is to try to gain consensus first for a general principle about how the problem should be addressed. Once this has been achieved, it may be possible to resolve ‘nimbyism’ by bringing together representatives from different neighbourhoods in as non-confrontational a way as possible [CASE STUDY 9].

Occasionally, a legal challenge may be mounted by someone who objects either to the way in which an authority is consulting, or to subsequent decisions. Responding to such a challenge can be expensive. It may also make it more difficult to foster a considered public debate on the consultation proposals. When planning consultation on a controversial topic, authorities should therefore consider whether their plans would withstand such a challenge.

Techniques that are both participative and deliberative ... can be much more useful for tackling thorny topics
Encouraging participation

85. Getting people to participate in consultation can be difficult, especially where there is no history of public involvement. Some authorities have rejected public meetings or similar kinds of open-invitation consultation as ineffective, because so few people attend. It can also be difficult to recruit people to panel surveys or to find volunteers for other forms of direct participative consultation. Overcoming this initial reluctance cannot be achieved simply by advertising events and expecting people to attend, unless the issue is of such local significance that it has already aroused local passions to fever pitch.

86. There are ways in which authorities can encourage participation. Some of those that have been tried and have worked are:

- ‘taking the consultation to the people’, talking to people at venues that they already attend rather than expecting them to come to the authority’s chosen venue;
- direct incentives – for example, offering modest prizes or gifts which local firms may be willing to sponsor;
- providing refreshments, particularly proper meals rather than just tea and biscuits;
- providing childcare facilities, which can also help to create more of a ‘community event’ atmosphere; and
- making the event more entertaining, by using participative consultation methods, rather than just having speakers ‘talk at’ those who attend.

CASE STUDY 9

Consulting effectively on a controversial topic

In one London borough, the council needed to make a decision about where to place a travellers’ site. While there was general local agreement on the need for a site (problems had been caused by unofficial sites in inappropriate locations), it was much more difficult to get local people to agree that the site should be in their neighbourhood. Eventually, the council shortlisted two possible sites.

Local campaigns sprang up to oppose the proposal in both potential site areas. Eventually, the council invited representatives from both local campaigns to discuss together which area would be best for the site. They made it clear that the council had (at that time) a legal obligation to establish a site, and that it had to be in one of the two proposed neighbourhoods. Travellers were also involved in the meeting, which helped to reassure local people. After some initial hostility, local representatives from both areas agreed that one of the proposed sites was the best location. The representatives from this area were then able to explain to local people why the site could not be set up anywhere else. While local people did not welcome the decision, the consultation process helped to temper local hostility.
Getting people to participate in panel surveys can also be initially difficult although, again, it is possible to encourage them – some authorities offer payment in kind or enter panel members in a regular prize draw. Panel members can be encouraged to stay on the panel by making them feel a part of a ‘club’; for example, through regular meetings of local members. These events can serve a double purpose, by also helping the authority to get more detailed qualitative feedback from panel members about authority services and about how the panel is run. The experience of most authorities is that, as panels become more established, more people volunteer to join them. In some cases, the flow of volunteers more than keeps pace with those dropping out of the panel and means that recruitment costs can be restricted to ensuring that the panel continues to represent all sections of the community.

In those areas where public consultation is already well established, it is easier to get people to participate, because there is more of an expectation among local people that they should be consulted. Building this expectation can be hard work and will only succeed, of course, if people who have participated in the past feel that services improved as a result! This means providing thorough and honest feedback of the results of consultation, and making it clear how those results have been used to change things. And it means carrying out consultation in such a way that consultees feel that their views are valued.

It is worth remembering that when an expectation of consultation builds up in an area, people may expect it of all public services, whoever provides them. So if one department within an authority begins to consult successfully, members of the public will expect other departments and service providers to do the same.

This planning officer came along to our community forum to tell us about the traffic-calming scheme. He said he’d consulted us about the scheme already. But he hadn’t, he hadn’t been to any of the tenants’ association meetings, we’d seen nothing about it on the estates. All he’d done was display something at the town hall and advertise it in the paper, and he called that consultation. That’s just not good enough. We sent him away with a flea in his ear, telling him to do it again and do it properly.

Tenants’ representative, consultation forum in a south east district council

When an expectation of consultation builds up in an area, people may expect it of all public services, whoever provides them.
Making consultation inclusive

90. Historically, some authorities have downplayed the value of consultation by arguing that it gives articulate but unrepresentative minorities too great a say. There is a risk of this happening if consultation is poorly planned or carried out (see paragraphs 61–3). Other authorities, including those who are enthusiastic about consultation, say that they have found that it is easier to consult some groups than others. They cite a number of possible reasons for this, including:

- some groups, such as working single parents, have less spare time than others, such as retired people;
- some people do not understand written or spoken English well;
- some groups feel culturally isolated from the mainstream of the authority’s activity;
- some groups feel alienated from, or even suspicious of, the organisation that is consulting them;
- some communities are geographically isolated;
- some people have no permanent address; and
- some people may just not be interested in being consulted by public bodies.

91. Some of these reasons may apply specifically to identifiable sections of the community. These groups are sometimes bundled together and termed ‘hard-to-reach’ groups. This is an accurate description to an extent – it may well take more imagination or more effort to consult people who speak little English or are alienated from an authority. Nevertheless, labelling some people ‘hard to reach’ implies that the problem lies with them when, in reality, it is an authority’s job to make sure that its consultation exercises are inclusive.

92. It is easy to assume that the groups that authorities say they have struggled to consult effectively are made up of people who are disadvantaged, but the picture is more complex than this [EXHIBIT 4, overleaf]. Some groups that include a high proportion of relatively poor people are considered easy to consult. Older people, for example, tend to respond readily to postal questionnaires, are more likely to be at home when interviewers call, and have more time to get involved in panel surveys. A large majority of authorities have found consulting young people difficult, in affluent and poorer areas.

93. Making consultation inclusive is important because:

- consultation exercises often need to find out the views of an accurate cross-section of the population as a whole; and
- different sections of the community, particularly minorities, may have needs or views that are different from those of the majority and, if they are not consulted effectively, these needs or views may remain invisible.

The rest of this section looks at ways in which authorities can overcome obstacles to inclusive consultation. These are not exhaustive, but include examples to show what sort of barriers can exist and how authorities might overcome them.
Consulting rural communities

94. Around five million people in England and Wales live outside identifiable towns and villages, and around nine million live in rural areas. Apart from using postal surveys, it can be difficult to consult remote rural communities, particularly in areas like mid-Wales and north-west England, where a significant proportion of the population is dispersed in settlements of just one or two dwellings.

95. To try to overcome these difficulties, some authorities have built their consultation activities around the parish or community council structure, or used important rural events as a focus [CASE STUDY 10]. Panel surveys could also be particularly useful in rural areas – after the initial, relatively high, costs of constructing a panel that has representatives from the remote farms and communities in the authority area, consulting an established panel is relatively inexpensive.

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**EXHIBIT 4**

Authorities find some groups harder to consult than others

Percentage of authorities reporting difficulties

![Graph showing the percentage of authorities reporting difficulties for different groups.](image)

**Source:** Audit Commission

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1. Definition of ‘rural’ as used by the Office of National Statistics.
Consulting young people

Around ten million people in England and Wales are under 16. But young people do not readily respond to general consultation, so their views are often not taken into account. Most authorities that have constructed survey panels or other representative consultative groups have found it particularly difficult to get young people involved. However, some authorities have successfully set up special consultative forums for young people, either as a way to consult about a particular topic, or as permanent panels that can be used for consulting young people about a range of issues.

Traditionally, young people, especially children, have not been consulted about the services that they receive, largely on the grounds that children are not able to make proper decisions about the kinds of services that they need. But that view is changing. Children of all ages do have views about the way that they are cared for or educated, and these should be taken into account. Some authorities have now begun to establish structures that represent the views of young people, and have been able to bring the views of children as young as seven into their consultation exercises.

Consulting minority groups

People with disabilities

Some two million people in England and Wales are registered as disabled, and many more have a disability that affects their day-to-day lives, but are not registered. As consumers, disabled people need services to be designed with their needs in mind, and direct consultation with them can help to achieve this. As citizens, people with disabilities may find it difficult to participate in consultation exercises such as public meetings or citizens’ juries, unless they are planned with disabled people in mind.

CASE STUDY 10

Consulting in rural areas – Mid and West Wales Fire Brigade

Mid and West Wales Fire Brigade covers the most rural and sparsely populated area in England and Wales. This makes it difficult to consult people, many of whom live in remote settlements of less than a dozen homes.

To consult cost-effectively, the Fire Brigade has concentrated on consulting people at regional events, particularly agricultural shows. Covering five events, the Brigade was able to interview over 500 people, including children and young people who are often hard to reach. In this way, the Brigade can conduct ‘resource-intensive’ consultation methods such as face-to-face interviews with lengthy questionnaires, in a way which would not be possible through traditional door-to-door interviews.
99. In many areas, non-statutory organisations represent the needs of people with disabilities. Such bodies may be able to consult disabled people on behalf of an authority, or to identify disabled people who can participate in panel surveys or other consultative groups. These representative groups can be very valuable, but it is also important that public service-providers make sure that their consultation processes are designed so as not to exclude people with disabilities. Ways of doing this include:

- making large-print or taped versions of questionnaires available for survey panel participants;
- making sure that public meetings or neighbourhood forums are held in accessible buildings with induction loop systems, and that lifts to the venue are offered to those who need them;
- printing Braille and large-print messages on postal consultation forms telling people with poor eyesight how they can participate;
- making sure that face-to-face interviews are carried out in a way that enables people with hearing difficulties to participate; and
- carrying out consultation exercises at health authority, voluntary and council day centres that are used by disabled people.
Consulting ethnic minority communities

100. Around three million people in England and Wales are from ethnic minority communities, and most authorities will have some ethnic minority residents, even if their numbers are relatively small. Ethnic minority communities are extremely diverse, but many have a range of organisations that represent them. Authorities can consult directly with these groups on a delegate basis, but this should not be considered an adequate substitute for consulting individuals as well. One way of reaching individuals is for community organisations to encourage people within their community to get involved in the authority’s consultation processes. Successful consultation can also be a way of getting people who have not used services, but who might benefit from them, to start taking them up [CASE STUDY 11].

CASE STUDY 11

Consultation can encourage minority groups to make use of services

Lambeth, Lewisham and Southwark Health Authority

The Authority found that women from the local Asian communities did not attend breast cancer screening clinics, and did not respond to general community consultation about health needs and the way that services were organised.

By targeting consultation specifically on women in these communities, using materials translated into appropriate languages, the Authority was able to identify the reasons why Asian women did not attend breast cancer screening clinics – largely because of taboos about healthcare, and concerns about examinations by male doctors. By working directly with women from these communities, the Health Authority was able to educate local Asian women about the importance of breast cancer screening. It also made changes to ensure that medical examinations would be carried out in a culturally appropriate way.

As a result, the Authority was able to produce a significant increase in the number of Asian women attending cancer screening clinics, with the proportion eventually matching that of the community as a whole.
Consulting gay men and lesbians

101. It may be difficult for local service-providers to consult some groups because they are not readily identifiable, and their special needs may relate to a small range of services. Gay men and lesbians do not necessarily perceive themselves as having different needs from the rest of the community for most local services, so may not want to be separately identified for consultation. But for some services, such as aspects of healthcare and policing [CASE STUDY 12], they may feel that they do have specific needs.

102. In larger towns and cities, local support networks may exist that can be used for consultation, and which can help to break down some of the prejudices and misunderstandings that local service providers may have.

CASE STUDY 12

Consulting gay men and lesbians

Greater Manchester Police

Greater Manchester Police was concerned about the number of assaults on gay men and lesbians that were not being reported to the police. So it used its existing Community Consultation Groups initially to find out why gay people did not report attacks. The reasons seemed to be that gay people did not have confidence in the police, and did not believe that they would take action in response to reported assaults. At worst, they believed that they themselves would be victimised by the police. So the Greater Manchester Lesbian and Gay Policing initiative was established – an independent community-led organisation that was intended to involve the police more closely in the problems of the gay community.

The police hold bi-monthly open meetings at a bar in Manchester’s ‘gay village’ and, in alternate months, detailed discussions are held with community leaders and a chief superintendent. Regular surgeries are also held in the village, where gay people can talk confidentially to a police officer. A freepost referral form is also circulated, through which victims can remain anonymous.

Because of the initiative, new training has been introduced for police officers and the level of reporting of assaults on the community has increased significantly, enabling the police to act against more of the perpetrators.
Consulting people who have no permanent home

103. The minority groups that authorities report most difficulty in consulting are those who are itinerant or who have no permanent home. These groups will be poorly represented locally by representative groups. They may also be too concerned about finding a home and dealing with day-to-day problems to get involved in consultation. But people without a fixed address are likely to have particular needs that will not necessarily be met through mainstream services such as schools and primary healthcare.

104. Around 166,000 households were registered as homeless in 1997. Some authorities have used council lists of people placed in temporary accommodation as a way of consulting homeless people. This can be a valuable approach, but needs to be carried out sensitively – homeless people are often vulnerable and their responses to questions may be skewed by the response that they think the authority wants to hear. So authorities need to make it clear that responses are treated in confidence and will not be linked to individuals’ applications for services.

105. There are an estimated 50,000 ‘traditional’ travellers in Britain, with an additional 5,000 new age travellers. Travellers present a particularly difficult challenge for public sector service-providers. In addition to being poorly represented through consultative structures, travellers have different needs from the majority of the population for even the most basic services, including refuse collection and sanitation. While identifying and finding the relevant communities may be relatively easy, gaining their trust may be more difficult – travellers are used to seeing the approach of a council, police or health authority official carrying a clipboard as a sign of trouble, not as someone trying to help. One way to get over this hurdle may be to co-opt members of the travelling community to help with consultation.

Consulting socially excluded people

106. Public service-providers that have undertaken comprehensive public consultation programmes have identified one particular group of people that they have been least successful in consulting. These are the people who do not participate because they are having too many problems with their day-to-day lives to take notice of attempts to consult them. These problems may have arisen due to poverty, poor education, poor health, or more likely a combination of these factors.

107. Because socially excluded people do not form an identifiable group, there are few representative structures or local organisations that can be used to involve them. Because these people are also likely to be poorly educated, they will lack the skills to articulate their needs effectively or to understand the structures and systems of local public service-providers. Nevertheless, because they are likely to be heavily dependent on public services, it is often particularly important to include socially excluded people in consultation.
Even authorities that have successfully included minority groups in consultation exercises report difficulty in getting socially excluded people involved. However, a few have made some progress by working closely with specific geographical communities over a period of time [CASE STUDY 13]. This is more likely to have happened in relatively small consultation projects, where members of the public have effectively become part of the consultative structure, and can identify and involve socially excluded people within their own community.

People who do not want to take part in consultation

Some people may never want to take part in consultation exercises, however imaginatively agencies try to encourage them to participate. If people resist getting involved because they are suspicious of the organisation’s motives or feel that their participation will have no impact, then agencies may need to try again, particularly where people are heavily dependent on local services, or would be likely to benefit significantly from using them. But if individuals who do not need to rely heavily on local services genuinely have no interest in getting involved, there may not be much benefit in continuing efforts to encourage them to do so.

CASE STUDY 13

Consulting socially excluded people

Hastings Council and 1066 Housing Association

The Ore Valley Project was set up in 1993, initially in response to unrest among young people and to consult about improvements to the housing stock on two estates. However, the project was extended to two other estates in the Ore Valley area and into other areas of activity. Consultation centred on a forum made up of representatives from local residents’ associations, the police, health authority, council and (after transfer of the council’s housing stock) the 1066 Housing Association.

Residents were involved in carrying out a series of surveys, using carefully monitored, structured door-to-door interviews. A resident was also employed as co-ordinator of the forum. Through this process the views of virtually all the valley’s residents were gathered, including people who would not normally respond to ‘external’ consultation. The strength of this local consultation and involvement project has since been used successfully to gain capital and revenue for a variety of projects, including locally based community health workers, homework clubs, baby clinics, a community education project run by Sussex University, a Sure Start project for young children and a residents’ services organisation.

It is particularly important to include socially excluded people in consultation
Using the results of consultation

110. Many authorities report that much of the consultation that they carry out is not used effectively. Nearly three-quarters of authorities surveyed for this paper thought that a failure to link the results of consultation with decision-making processes prevented the results from being used effectively. The Commission’s recent report on service and financial planning in local government (Ref. 6) found that the failure to link consultation with decisions was particularly apparent in resource allocation [EXHIBIT 5].

111. The main way in which authorities can use the results of consultation is to take consultees’ views into account when making decisions. These decisions might be one-off decisions, or they might concern the shape of policies, the detail of service delivery, or the targets set for services. How easy it is to link consultation and decision-making will depend on the sort of consultation undertaken and the care with which it has been planned.

EXHIBIT 5
Consultation and resource allocation
Making consultation count in resource allocation decisions remains an aspiration for most councils.

‘How important do you think community consultation is in influencing resource allocation decisions:
(a) Ideally?
(b) In practice?’

Source: Audit Commission
In some circumstances, authorities say that it is difficult to link consultation directly to decisions. For example:

- when carrying out regular testing of satisfaction with services; or
- when approaching the public with an open agenda, seeking views on what changes local people would like to see.

In both these cases, consultation can still be linked to decision-making so long as authorities work out at the planning stage how consultation fits into the bigger picture.

Balancing conflicting results

Local communities are not homogeneous entities, so consultees will frequently express a range of views. On a controversial issue, views may be sharply polarised. Where more than one consultation technique has been used, it is particularly likely that conflicting views may be expressed. This may happen, for example, if a facility is deemed to be ‘a good thing’ by the population as a whole, but no one wants it in their own back yard [CASE STUDY 14].

In resolving these conflicts, authorities should take the nature of the different kinds of consultation used into account. If, for example, the subject was complicated, or needed background information to understand it fully, the views of a small but well-informed sample (such as a citizens’ jury) may be more relevant than a larger uninformed sample. Where interactive methods are used, it may be useful to record how participants’ views changed as a result of being presented with clearer arguments and additional information.

Resolving these conflicts will always be a matter of judgement – there are no fixed rules about what particular kind of consultation should take precedence over another. Ultimately, this is part of the decision-making role of authority members. When consultees’ views diverge, it is particularly important to provide clear feedback: individuals who do not like the decision that is eventually reached may still feel that the process has given them a fair hearing.

CASE STUDY 14

Dealing with conflicting views

Brighton & Hove Council

One of the most controversial issues in Brighton and Hove over the past few years has been the lack of a stadium for the local professional football club, which has played its ‘home’ games in Gillingham.

However, very few sites were even possible, and all were opposed by some sections of the community on environmental, traffic, safety or other grounds. The Council linked a referendum on the issue to local elections, doubling up on publicity. The referendum asked people whether they supported the objective of trying to bring Brighton and Hove Albion back to the borough, and had a second ‘Yes/No’ question on the Council’s preferred site.

Turnout was high, with a strong ‘yes’ vote on both questions, though a majority of people living near the proposed site were opposed. The Council used the strength of feeling city-wide to justify allowing the Club to bring forward plans for developing the site.
Providing feedback to consultees

116. Providing feedback is vital. Good feedback tells consultees what the overall findings of the consultation were and explains how they have been taken into account. It does not have to be costly: existing communication mechanisms, such as council newspapers, can often be used.

117. It is important for feedback to be honest, especially when consultees were critical, or when the authority has decided to do something that the majority of consultees did not support. By demonstrating that the authority has paid attention to what consultees have said, feedback can help authorities to strengthen the credibility of their consultation work. It can also increase the likelihood that consultees will respond to future exercises.

Other uses for consultation

118. Although consultation’s main function is to inform decisions, it has other uses too. Over time, consultation results can add significantly to an authority’s stock of knowledge, particularly if work is co-ordinated over a number of years, so that time series data on local people’s views are available. This type of information can then be used in policy development and in communications, for example. Consultation results can also be a valuable tool for managers who need to encourage staff to focus on the issues of greatest concern to service-users. When consultation is generally positive, it can be a morale booster for staff. Even when the news is less good, it can still be used to galvanise an authority. One London borough, which had some of the lowest public satisfaction ratings ever recorded for a local authority, made achieving specific improvements in ratings a cornerstone of a major programme of organisational change.

It is important for feedback to be honest, especially when consultees were critical, or when the authority has decided to do something that the majority of consultees did not support.
5 Evaluating effectiveness

119. Evaluating the effectiveness of consultation exercises can help authorities to:

- know whether consultation is genuinely helping them to listen and respond to the public;
- plan how to improve future consultation exercises; and
- use resources that are spent on consultation wisely.

120. Evaluating consultation is not an easy task, but it will be increasingly important as the number and breadth of consultations undertaken grows. At the moment, few authorities attempt to evaluate the effectiveness of their consultation programmes (Ref. 1), and relatively few know even how much they cost.

Evaluating individual consultation exercises

121. Evaluation is not something to think about only at the end of an exercise. Deciding how you will assess effectiveness is a fundamental part of consultation design. Judging whether an individual exercise has been a success depends largely on its objectives. However, there are two main dimensions to consider:

- the quality of the exercise, including the extent to which target audiences were reached; and
- the cost.

122. Keeping an eye on costs is important. Consultation can be expensive, and money invested in it may be wasted if the exercise is not properly planned or well used. The amount spent on a consultation exercise should also be considered in the light of the overall cost of the service to which it relates, and the opportunities that exist for improving value for money by making the service fit users’ needs better.
The cost of different consultation techniques varies significantly (see inserted Wallchart), and this should be taken into account when choosing a method. There are ways in which costs can be reduced or spread (see paragraphs 56-60), and these may be particularly valuable where the most appropriate tool for an exercise is one of the more expensive types.

The Local Government Improvement and Development Agency (IDeA) has produced a valuable, detailed checklist of questions to ask when planning evaluation (Ref. 7). Although this framework was designed with councils in mind, it could easily be used by the police, fire and health services. The key questions are:

**KEY QUESTIONS**

**Process**

- Did the exercise reach a representative sample of the population or, where this is appropriate, all the target groups?
- Was the response rate high enough to give reliable results?
- Were the results disseminated to:
  - consultees?
  - the wider public, if only a smaller group was consulted?
  - relevant staff in the organisation, including front-line staff?
  - relevant partner organisations?
- If the exercise did not meet its objectives, why was this, and what steps can be taken to prevent similar problems in future?
- What did the exercise cost, both directly and indirectly?
- What proportion is this of the overall cost of the relevant service?
- How does the cost compare with other similar exercises in the authority or other similar authorities?
- Has the cost been shared by designing the exercise to be valuable to more than one service or organisation?

**Outcome**

- Has the exercise helped to improve the cost effectiveness of the service by making it match users’ needs more closely?
- Did the consultation directly inform a decision, or shape policy or service delivery arrangements?
- Were the consultation results used to set local performance standards and targets?
Evaluating an overall programme

125. The principles that should underpin the overall evaluation of a consultation programme are similar to those that apply to individual exercises, but the issues that need to be taken into account differ. Again, the IDeA has produced a valuable checklist-based evaluation framework (Ref 7). The key questions are:

KEY QUESTIONS

- Has the programme been planned to cover both corporate and service area priorities?
- Has the programme been planned jointly with partner or neighbouring organisations?
- Is information held corporately about consultation exercises that are either planned or underway across the organisation and, where this is appropriate, across partner organisations?
- Is consultation being carried out to a consistently high standard across the organisation?
- Are organisation-wide standards for consultation in place and being met?
- Are the results of exercises made available to other services or organisations that might find them helpful?
- Has the programme resulted, over time, in an increase in the percentage of local people who say that the authority listens to their views?
6 Conclusion

126. New legislation is requiring many parts of the public sector to consult their communities more extensively than they have in the past. The challenges for authorities will be to:

- carry out all consultation work to consistently high standards;
- take advantage of new technology and methods, alongside the best of traditional techniques;
- ensure that no part of the community is excluded from consultation;
- demonstrate that consultation is being used to inform decisions; and
- consult jointly with other organisations, so that single exercises can feed into a number of agencies’ plans.

127. As consultation becomes more widespread, the agenda may be set increasingly by local people, and less by authorities. Authorities should not necessarily see this as a threat: it is also an opportunity to draw on the freely available expertise that exists in their communities and use it to improve local services.

128. Consultation can be a powerful tool for improving both the quality and cost-effectiveness of services, so its growth could bring significant benefits. However, this potential will be realised only if consultation exercises are carefully planned, imaginatively designed, competently carried out and then used to inform decision-making. Early indications from best value pilot work are that this is not always the case now. The extent to which authorities are achieving value for money through consultation is something that the Commission is likely to keep under review over the next few years.

Consultation can be a powerful tool for improving both the quality and cost-effectiveness of services, so its growth could bring significant benefits.
Appendix 1: Sources of information on consultation methodology and practice


Local Government Information Unit (LGIU), *Spotlight on Best Value: Community Consultation*, 1999.


Health authorities have to consult the public on ‘significant changes’ to health provision – for example, hospital closures. They must consult community health councils (CHCs) on ‘any substantial development of the health service in the Council’s district and on any proposals to make any substantial variation in the provision of such service’ (Community Health Council Regulation, 1996). The health authority decides what is substantial, and can by-pass the CHC to consult the public directly if it is in ‘the interest of the health service’. But the CHC can appeal to the Secretary of State if it considers the consultation to have been inadequate.

Local councils had no overall requirement to consult the public before the introduction of best value. Under best value, they must consult council tax and business ratepayers, service-users and others with an interest in their area ‘for the purpose of deciding how to fulfil the duty’ of making arrangements to secure continuous improvement (Ref. 8).

The 1999 Local Government Act does not specify how best value consultation must be carried out, although the DETR expects to issue guidance. The White Papers that preceded the Act (Ref. 9 and 10) stated that the best way of consulting should be determined locally, although the Government would keep under review whether existing specific requirements should be maintained or expanded.

These new duties are in addition to consultation requirements relating to specific decisions, plans and arrangements. For example, councils must consult the public on:

- school closures;
- planning applications;
- local structural plans;
- early years development plans; and
- education development plans.

The nature of the consultation required varies according to the legislation that imposed the requirement, but generally more recent requirements have a more prescriptive, and more comprehensive, consultation requirement.

Police authorities are subject to best value. The Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984 also requires that ‘arrangements shall be made in each police area for obtaining the views of people in that area about matters concerning the policing of the area and for obtaining their co-operation with the police in preventing crime in that area’ (Ref. 11). However, the Act does not stipulate what form this consultation should take.

Under the 1998 Crime and Disorder Act (Ref. 12), both councils and police authorities must consult on local joint plans for reducing crime and disorder. The Audit Commission’s report on community safety, Safety in Numbers (Ref. 13) and the related website (www.audit-commission.gov.uk/comsafe), include advice in this area and examples of good practice.

Fire authorities are subject to best value.

Parish and community councils will be subject to a modified form of best value.
The progression from consultation to involvement was originally described by Sherry Arnstein, working in the USA in 1969, in her ‘ladder of participation’. However, this model assumes that ‘citizen control’ must always be the ultimate desirable end. It does not recognise the decision-making role of authority members. In reality, the desired end is more complicated than just reaching the top of the ladder. The extent to which authorities should involve local people in their decision-making processes is therefore rather more complex than a straightforward devolution of power.

### Appendix 3: Sherry Arnstein’s ladder of participation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Degree of citizen power</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Citizen control</td>
<td>Local people handle the entire job of planning, policymaking and managing, with no intermediaries between them and the source of funds.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delegated power</td>
<td>Citizens hold a clear majority of seats on committees with delegated powers to make decisions. Public now has the power to assure accountability of the programme to them.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partnership</td>
<td>Power is redistributed through negotiation between citizens and power-holders. Planning and decision-making responsibilities are shared – eg, through joint committees.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Placation</td>
<td>Through, for example, co-option of local people on to committees. It allows citizens to advise or plan, but retains for power-holders the right to judge the legitimacy or feasibility of the advice.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consultation</td>
<td>Attitude surveys, neighbourhood meetings and public enquiries – but Arnstein believes this to be ‘window dressing’.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Informing</td>
<td>A first step to participation, but with the emphasis on a one-way flow of information. No channel for feedback.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Therapy</td>
<td>Non-participative, aimed at ‘educating’ the participants. The job of participation is to achieve public support for the authority’s plans.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manipulation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
References


7. Improvement and Development Agency website: www.idea.gov.uk


The Audit Commission has produced a number of reports covering related issues. The following may be of interest to readers of this report:

**Planning to Succeed**  
Service and Financial Planning in Local Government  
Management Paper, 1999, 91 pages, £15

**A Measure of Success**  
Setting and Monitoring Local Performance Targets  
Management Paper, 1999, 60 pages, £15

**A Fruitful Partnership**  
Effective Partnership Working  

**Promising Beginnings**  
A Compendium of Initiatives to Improve Joint Working in Local Government  

**Better By Far**  
Preparing for Best Value  
Management Paper, 1998, 104 pages, £15

**Taking the Initiative**  
A Framework for Purchasing under the Private Finance Initiative  

**Safety in Numbers**  
Promoting Community Safety  

**Measure for Measure**  
The Best Value Agenda for Trading Standards Services  

**PCGs**  
An Early View of Primary Care Groups in England  

**Improving Value for Money in the NHS**  
A Compendium of Good Practice from Audit Commission Reports  
Health Compendium, 1999, 80 pages, £15

**What the Doctor Ordered**  
A Study of GP Fundholders in England and Wales  
National Report, 1996, 136 Pages, £17

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Community consultation is not new, but it is growing in importance, particularly for best value authorities. Consultation is a process of dialogue that leads to a decision. It can be a powerful tool for improving the quality and cost-effectiveness of services, and for ensuring that policymakers stay in touch with citizens.

Consulting effectively is not easy. Many authorities do not manage to:

- get a cross-section of people involved;
- carry out exercises to consistently high standards;
- use the results to inform decisions that members need to take;
- take a strategic approach to planning consultation programmes; and
- let consultees know how their contribution has influenced policies and services.

To meet new requirements, most authorities will need to strengthen their consultation programmes, develop new skills and improve joint consultation arrangements with their partners. All authorities should consider how they will use new communication technologies, alongside the best of traditional consultation techniques.

This paper is designed to help authorities to respond to the challenge. It is aimed at authority members, senior managers and all those who are directly involved in consultation work.

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