



A Summary

Consultation can improve and inform the development of policy and practice by drawing on a wide range of experiences and views. It is vital that public policy does not reflect the views of only part of the population. Many equalities groups report negative experiences of consultation. They suggest that their views have not been taken into account, or that the issues they face have not been addressed. As this has been recognised by organisations, there has been a growing focus on the need for equality in consultation. The Scottish Executive identified a need to draw together good practice in consulting with equalities groups in Scotland. The experiences of a range of public authorities, as well as the Scottish Executive and a number of national equalities groups were drawn together to produce this guidance.

The definition of “consultation” adopted for the booklet is as follows:

“Consultation is when opportunities are provided for all those who wish to express their opinions on an area of our work (e.g. identifying issues, developing or changing policies, testing proposals or evaluating provision) to do so in ways which will inform and enhance that work.”

Consultation which includes equalities groups is in everyone’s interests. There is a need to ensure that all relevant groups are able to participate and that organisations can demonstrate how they have consulted. Every issue will have an equality dimension which needs to be identified and reflected in practice.

Equalities groups include:

- asylum seekers
- disabled people
- gypsies/travellers
- minority ethnic communities
- lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) groups
- older people
- people on low incomes
- people with specific health issues
- people in specific areas (such as rural areas or peripheral estates)
- refugees
- religious/faith groups
- women
- young people

Although it is rare that an organisation makes a conscious decision to exclude a group from consultation, this can happen for a range of reasons. The most common reason is that those undertaking consultation do not take account of the requirements of all groups who may have an interest in the process. When consultation is being conceived, arranged and undertaken, the following potential barriers to participation should be avoided:

1. **Methods used** (e.g. relying on methods which use IT, or which focus only on written materials)
2. **Physical barriers** (e.g. inaccessibility of venues or the lack of facilities at events)
3. **Attitudinal barriers** (the ways in which staff approach or respond to groups and individuals and the assumptions they make)
4. **Financial barriers** (many equalities groups lack resources and this often affects whether they can respond to consultations)
5. **Cultural barriers** (e.g. using inappropriate facilities or language)

Since each consultation is different it is essential to plan consultation on a case-by-case basis. **Members or representatives of equalities groups should be involved in planning at an early stage**, ensuring that there is enough time at each stage of the process.

A number of guiding principles were identified as part of the development of the guidance. The principles detailed below should not be seen as a checklist, but used to guide each different consultation:

- get **beyond the “usual suspects”**, taking proactive steps to identify and include “hard to reach” groups which are not traditionally involved in consultation
- recognise that the inclusion or exclusion of groups should not be based upon the **numbers of individuals involved**
- choose method(s) **appropriate for the group** involved, e.g. in some cases, written methods may be suitable, in others face-to-face or a mix of methods may be better
- take steps to ensure that all views can be included by **providing support** (financial or otherwise) to allow groups to participate
- allow **some flexibility** in how people can respond to a consultation, e.g. by accepting telephone comments
- **accessible information** is central to good consultation; assistance should be sought from specialist organisations, e.g. to identify required formats or languages and presentation
- it is critical that all **language used must be inclusive** (whether verbal or written)
- appropriate training and guidance should be provided to staff to **avoid inappropriate attitudes and behaviour**
- images used in documents, or in presentations, must **reflect diversity**
- venues should be **physically accessible** and support for interpretation, transport or care responsibilities should be provided
- although consultations should be open and transparent, there are good reasons why some equalities groups might **require confidentiality** and this should be offered and respected
- **feedback** should be provided to respondents on how their views have contributed to policy and practice, as well as giving reasons why some suggestions may not have not been taken forward
- **long-term relationships** between the public sector and equalities groups (often involving support) enable groups to take part in consultation, as well as increasing the overall understanding of wider issues

There is no single best way to undertake consultation. Each consultation exercise will require careful consideration of which groups form the target audience and how some groups might be excluded. If this is done at the start of the process, and appropriate steps taken, there is no reason why any consultation should not be fully inclusive.

Alternative formats and community language versions of this summary paper are available from the Equality Unit at the address below.

The full guidance document can be obtained from the Equality Unit or viewed on the Scottish Executive website at www.scotland.gov.uk. Alternative formats and community language versions of the full guidance document are available on request from the Equality Unit.

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