

good practice guidance - consultation with equalities groups



GOOD PRACTICE GUIDANCE CONSULTATION WITH EQUALITIES GROUPS

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This guidance document can be viewed on the Scottish Executive website at www.scotland.gov.uk. Alternative formats and community language versions of this document are available on request from the Equality Unit at the address below.

A summary of this document has also been published and is available from the Equality Unit. Alternative formats and community language versions of this summary paper are also available from the Equality Unit.

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PART 1: INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this booklet is to provide some basic guidance about how to ensure that “equalities groups” are not excluded from public consultation exercises.

Equalities groups include:

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

The guidance is aimed at those undertaking consultation and not at those being consulted. The guidance is relevant to all staff within the public sector who may be involved in consultation. It is also relevant to those in organisations within the voluntary sector (for example housing associations) which are increasingly carrying out such work.

THE NEED FOR GUIDANCE

Consultation has been increasing in recent years throughout Scotland. Organisations (often in the public sector) have recognised the benefits of working with communities. Consultation, in all its forms, can improve and inform the development of policy and practice by drawing on a wide range of experiences and views.

There is currently a national emphasis on improving policy making and practice in public organisations. There is a focus on “modernising government” and providing “best value” in services. Public participation, accountability and openness in decision making are central to this, and consultation is a key element of effective central and

local government. The Scottish Executive, at the start of its own internal consultation guidance, suggests that “an effective consultation process is fundamental to good government”. It is also important to other local organisations working in areas such as health, housing, criminal justice and economic development.

There are many reasons why consultation is useful. Identifying the views of a wide range of community groups can lead to better policy. The decisions made are more likely to reflect the needs of communities and be supported by them. More issues will be raised and more solutions identified through consultation than by centralised policy making. There will be more transparency and accountability, and members of the community will have a stake in the development of policies that affect them.

It is vital that public policy does not reflect only the views of part of the population. Social justice is a shared national and local priority across Scotland. It cannot be achieved without engaging the groups who are often currently excluded. Those undertaking consultation must ensure that the process and the way it is undertaken does enable equalities groups to take part.

As these issues have been recognised by organisations, there has been a growing focus on the need for equality in consultation. Many local authorities are working with groups experiencing discrimination and exclusion and have done so for many years. The Scottish Executive is also committed to promoting equality and to “mainstreaming”, which involves considering equalities issues in all aspects of policy and practice. The Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000 also requires designated public sector organisations to consult with minority ethnic communities in a range of policies and service delivery issues.

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. Some exercises will be wide-ranging (e.g. seeking the views of a large random sample of the population) while others may be aimed at a particular target group (e.g. those most obviously affected by a policy). Every issue, however, will have an equality dimension which needs to be identified and the necessary steps taken to ensure that it is reflected in practice. That is the focus of this guidance.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE GUIDANCE

The guidance is based on the experiences of the Scottish Executive and local authorities in consulting with equalities group. The need for the booklet was identified by the Executive, based on feedback from “grassroots” meetings with a number of groups, as part of the development of its equality strategy. The feedback from the meetings suggested that some equalities groups had poor experiences of consultation, with an inconsistent approach and a lack of awareness of the issues they faced.

The guidance highlights examples which were raised at these meetings and information from other sources. Examples of methods used, “what works” and suggested

improvements for the future were also collected from local authorities in Scotland and divisions of the Scottish Executive. The guidance was circulated in draft to Scottish Executive departments, local authorities and the main national equality organisations, and their comments informed the revision of this guidance.

THE NATURE OF CONSULTATION

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

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

This is based on the definition used by the Scottish Executive, broadened to include other ways in which public agencies and equalities groups might interact.

It is recognised that consultation is only one part of the relationship between public agencies and equalities groups. There are many other forms of working which are also vital, including, for example, capacity building, community empowerment and the development of longer-term joint working arrangements. These are described briefly in Section 3, but the focus of the guidance is mainly upon consultation, as defined above.

EXCLUSION FROM CONSULTATION

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 the organisation undertaking the consultation does not take account of the requirements of all groups who may have an interest in the process. The way in which consultation is conceived, arranged and undertaken can create or remove barriers to participation and the Scottish Executive Equality Unit has identified a number of such barriers, including:

- **methods** used (for example, by relying on methods which use IT, or which focus only on written communication)
- **physical** barriers (for example the inaccessibility of venues or the lack of facilities at events)
- **attitudinal** barriers (the ways in which staff approach or respond to groups and individuals and the assumptions they make)
- **financial** (many equalities groups lack resources and this often affects whether they can respond to consultations)
- **cultural** (for example, using inappropriate facilities or language)

It is important when planning consultation to think carefully about who might be excluded by such barriers and to act to address this. **A checklist approach to**

identifying barriers or excluded groups will not work. These must be identified on a case-by-case basis.

OVERVIEW OF THE GUIDANCE

This guidance covers:

- The nature of consultation and the need for guidance
- Preparing for consultation
 - Choosing how to consult
 - Preparing to consult
 - Identifying and reaching “hard to reach” groups
- Carrying out consultation
 - Staff attitudes and skills
 - Timing
 - Accessible and appropriate information
 - Access to meetings and venues
 - Information sharing and feedback
 - Consultation fatigue
 - Capacity building and longer-term work
- The main guiding principles for consulting equalities groups

This booklet is not a general guide to consultation or a theoretical account of the process. There is already a large literature on methods available for consultation, and on the benefits and drawbacks of consultation techniques. The Scottish Executive, for example, has produced a guide for its own staff entitled “Good Practice Guidance on Consultation” detailing the options and methods for work of this kind. About half of Scottish local authorities also have written guidance on consultation and CoSLA published good practice guidance in 1998.

The promotion of equality is often mentioned, but rarely in detail, within the more general guides. This booklet focuses specifically upon this aspect of consultation.

It is not possible for the booklet to identify every potential issue for every group. This would inevitably miss some aspects of groups’ experience. It would also risk a tokenistic approach to equality. Instead, the issues raised and the examples given can provide a starting point for organisations developing their own work.

PART 2: PREPARING FOR CONSULTATION

Many equalities groups report quite negative experiences of consultation. They often suggest that their views have not been taken into account, or that the issues that they face have not been addressed. It has also been suggested that some consultations in the past have sought the views of equalities groups as an “afterthought”, making the consultation tokenistic. These issues were raised at the Scottish Executive grassroots consultation events held with disabled people, people from minority ethnic communities, women and LGBT groups as part of the development of the Equality Strategy.

To address these issues, there is a need for a serious commitment from your organisation to seek out the views of equalities groups effectively, and to use these meaningfully. At the start of a consultation process, you should express a clear commitment to include equalities groups in the process. You should also consult them before key decisions have been made, when there is a real opportunity to have an input to the process. Your organisation should be able to demonstrate, at any stage, the methods which have been used to ensure that equalities groups will be/have been given the chance to participate.

It is also important to make the aims and objectives of the consultation clear at the start. You should provide information about how you will use the views which are expressed, making it clear to participants (without raising unrealistic expectations) that they have a genuine opportunity to bring about change. You should also state at the start that you will feed back the results of the consultation to those who have been involved.

CHOOSING THE WAY TO CONSULT

Barriers to participation can occur at all stages of consultation, but they can also be considered and addressed at all stages. One of the most important considerations is the choice of consultation method, with many methods now available.

The main methods of consultation

There are many potential methods of consultation, but the most common fall into two broad categories:

- **written methods** (involving giving some form of written comments)
- **face-to-face methods** (involving direct contact between those seeking and those giving views)

There are a range of choices and options within each group.

Written consultations can involve, for example:

- circulating papers or other written material (including “formal” research techniques such as questionnaires)

- using the internet
- comment and complaints cards
- ballots
- press and other written media

Some forms of written consultation involve innovative approaches, such as asking young people to write on a “graffiti wall”. In other cases, they can be combined with face-to-face methods (for example, by carrying out a written exercise at a meeting).

Face-to-face consultation may be through:

- public meetings
- large-scale conferences
- citizens’ panels and juries
- other formal groups
- workshops and discussion groups
- one-to-one interviews
- telephone contacts

Face-to-face contacts may be more or less structured and more or less focused directly on the consultation questions. Some also use informal techniques such as role-play and games.

Choosing the method

A number of factors will guide the choice of method, including:

- general good practice in consultation
- how much involvement and participation you require
- your objectives
- the requirements of specific group
- any constraints you face
- the overall context of the consultation

There are no rules about the choice of method to use. The key issue for the promotion of equality in the process is whether each method may be appropriate for some groups (and likely to get a response from them) but may exclude others. The most important issue is to consider carefully whether any groups will be unlikely or unable to respond using the combination of methods you choose. **At this stage, the decision is about the overall choice of methods, not the ways of ensuring that each individual part of the process is fully inclusive.** This is discussed later.

As part of a rapid appraisal of health needs in rural Moray, **Grampian NHS Board** used a range of methods. These included mapping, graffiti boards, storytelling, word boards, “draw and write” and individual interviews. These were particularly helpful in gathering young people and elderly people’s views. **Highland NHS Board** also used “individual testimonies” (as well as focus groups) as one part of a consultation on mainstream services for patients with a range of chronic diseases. **South Ayrshire Council** used “graphic communication techniques” to help people with learning disabilities give their views as part of developing a Joint Learning Disability Strategy.

It is impossible to provide a straightforward “list” of the methods most suited to specific groups. Many of these issues affect more than one equalities group, and groups are not homogenous. It is possible, however, to point to the *types* of issues which may help in considering the suitability of different methods.

Written methods may:

- be less suitable for people who are not familiar or comfortable with giving their views in writing (or who may find reading a consultation document difficult)
- exclude people whose first language is not English
- exclude people with a visual impairment or those who find text difficult to read
- exclude individuals and smaller groups which do not have the resources to reply by fax, email or send typed responses
- if they have tight deadlines, exclude community groups which need to undertake further consultation with their members (and may require to have materials translated or to arrange specific meetings)
- exclude people with literacy problems and those with learning disabilities

There are also issues with **face-to-face** methods, for example:

- some groups and individuals may never have taken part in this type of work before and may lack the confidence to express their views in a formal setting (or in some informal settings)
- any groups or individuals who are not familiar with formal meetings are unlikely to be comfortable with “business” meetings
- conversely, groups and individuals who are more used to formal settings may be unhappy with informal techniques such as role play
- some of the methods used in face-to-face consultations can be difficult for some people (for example, role-play and brainstorming)
- groups which have experienced discrimination and exclusion may be uncomfortable outwith their own environment (e.g. young people may prefer to be in youth groups, on the streets, or in play areas)
- the physical arrangements (discussed later) may be inappropriate and may exclude potential participants

- some participants will be unable to attend meetings or events because of location, timing, cost, physical or mental health issues, caring responsibilities, being unable to leave the house or other factors
- the issues which may come up in some consultations may be sensitive or personal and unsuitable for group discussion
- individuals may be uncomfortable participating in a mixed sex or mixed community group, for cultural or other reasons
- face-to-face meetings can be time consuming and expensive (there may be a need to remind staff of the wider benefits of the process)

There are also some issues that apply to **both** methods, for example:

- many community groups are under-funded and do not have the time, nor the resources to provide detailed responses to consultations (such groups may require additional support to participate because they lack resources)
- some individuals do not have the time to provide detailed responses
- groups of all types, which have been excluded in the past or have not been closely involved with the policy process, may not be familiar with the issues or the way they are being presented
- there may be people who want to participate in a consultation, but who are concerned that they may be victimised or identified in a way that has unwelcome consequences for them

There are many other examples of benefits and drawbacks of methods of consulting with equalities groups. The common issue is that the method used may, in an unintended way, make it less likely that a specific group can participate. This is most likely when only one method of consultation is used.

Three key questions on the choice of method

Given the diversity of the Scottish population, each single method will inevitably exclude some participants. The best way of choosing the method is to consider how it will affect the groups you intend to involve. It is important to consider the issues faced by groups which might make the method suitable or unsuitable.

It is useful to ask three key questions:

- **Who are the people most likely to respond using this method?**
- **Are there any ways in which the method might be inappropriate for any groups?**
- **What additional methods might be appropriate to gather the views of those who are excluded by this method?**

Seeking advice

The best way to answer these questions is to ask the groups who might be affected how best to ensure that their views will be included.

In Orkney, the social work service is developing a Children's Services Plan and has given potential participants a range of consultation options, letting them identify the best way for them to be consulted.

There are local and national umbrella organisations which can be asked to comment on proposed methods. (It is worth bearing in mind, however, that umbrella organisations may not, themselves, be representative of all interests.) In relation to specific equalities issues, examples of major national organisations which may be asked to provide advice include the Equal Opportunities Commission, the Disability Rights Commission, the Equality Network or the Commission for Racial Equality.

At a general level, the Scottish Civic Forum may be asked to provide advice or guidance on methods of consultation. Scottish Civic Forum is an independent membership organisation considered by the cross-party Consultative Steering Group as a key mechanism to help promote effective civic involvement in government policy development. The Forum can offer advice and support to Scotland-wide consultations and can advise on drafting consultation papers and on distribution lists. It may also hold policy forums involving its members and others to allow discussion of your consultation document. It can also be commissioned to manage more widespread participatory consultation exercises. The Forum does not claim to represent views but maps what views there are, so that policy makers can identify the areas where there is consensus or strong support and where there are alternative views. It has also built a reputation for acting as a neutral convenor to allow discussion of "difficult" issues.

At a local level, there may be forums that can be approached. You can hold informal discussions with local expert groups (such as, women's groups or the relevant Race Equality Council). These groups can make comments and suggestions on the proposed methods. They may also suggest methods that you have not considered and they may identify additional local contacts. There are many benefits of local networks, and these are discussed later.

The Scottish Executive Equality Unit, the national organisations mentioned above and local authority departments (for example, equality or community development teams) can provide advice on identifying and contacting national and local organisations. Contact information for local groups changes frequently (which is why no lists are included in this booklet), but these organisations will have up to date details.

Using a range of methods

You should bear in mind that, even with the best mainstream policies on consultation, some groups might not participate in general consultation events. In some situations

(for example because of the subject matter or the way it impacts on a particular interest group), you will have to make other arrangements to consult them. One approach is to hold meetings for specific communities of interest.

In Fife, a major consultation exercise was undertaken in relation to the budget, through the organisation of public meetings. The Council believed that minority ethnic communities were unlikely to attend these meetings, and the Race Equality Council organised a **special meeting for the minority ethnic community** in the Council Chambers, with halal food available and many interpreters. The leader of the Administration and the Chief Executive attended and the community did the talking, asking questions of the Chief Executive and the Leader, who listened and responded (turning around the usual format for meetings).

There are other examples of statutory organisations involving the voluntary sector in arranging specific events. There are also examples of asking different parts of the voluntary sector to pool their resources and work together to gather views of a particular issue.

Arranging specific events or commissioning specific pieces of work to identify the views of hard to reach groups is being used more often in consultation. This type of work can help to reach groups which may not otherwise respond to the consultation, or where issues which will be discussed are particularly sensitive.

A Scottish Executive consultation on the development of an alcohol plan for action commissioned **separate pieces of research** to explore the views of children and young people, and alcohol service users, drinkers, their friends and family. As part of a consultation on the development of National Care Standards, the Executive also commissioned consultants to collect the views of service users and carers through focus groups and surveys.

In order to be fully inclusive, you need to use a range of consultation methods in combination. You need to consider imaginative techniques, but also to recognise that not all groups will be able to respond through one method.

North Lanarkshire Council has received an award for work undertaken to include young people using **open space events**. (An open space event is a day-long workshop where participants themselves direct the issues to be discussed and the solutions identified. It usually ends with a vote to set priority issues and solutions.) The Council has also used techniques including **drama** to target hard to reach groups, as well as lone parents who are young people.

It is inadvisable (and may be counter-productive) to try to bring together representatives of a wide range of equalities groups in one event. Groups face different issues which might not be fully explored at one event. In the longer term, developing continuing dialogue with organisations will help to address many of the issues raised in this section.

Once you have chosen the combination of methods to be used, there are many additional considerations affecting specific groups. These are discussed below.

Identifying “hard to reach” groups

Identifying the groups which are likely to be excluded from a consultation process is the first stage in developing an open and inclusive process. Although some groups may be identified as “hard to reach” (from an organisation’s perspective) there is no reason why any should remain “hard to reach”. With some effort on the part of an organisation undertaking a consultation, they can be contacted and included. As organisations become more experienced (and contact networks expand), the number of groups seen as “hard to reach” will decline.

A number of methods can be used to “recruit” people to a consultation process. There are certain common principles whether the purpose is to find Scotland-wide groups for a large-scale consultation (written or face to face) or local groups for a small meeting. As with the choice of method, the key is to use all of the sources available.

It is often best to start by identifying existing Scotland-wide or local umbrella groups and organisations. Whatever method of consultation you are using (written or face to face), umbrella groups can participate directly and can also be asked to involve their own members. They can also be asked to help to identify and invite people to events, or to let people know about the consultation process. Similarly, they can provide a way of “snowballing”, where they circulate material to their members and communities. They can also provide advice about other appropriate ways to reach their members. All of these methods allow you to reach a broader community.

Grampian Police recently undertook a consultation with a wide range of equalities groups using a range of methods. They worked closely with local representative groups to ensure that as many people were included as possible. The force facilitated meetings in a range of community venues, including Aberdeen Mosque.

Through umbrella groups, you can then make contact with a target population group. Some Scotland-wide organisations (such as the Commission for Racial Equality, Disability Rights Commission, Equal Opportunities Commission, the Equality Network, and the Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations) can provide advice on the range of groups that should be engaged and how to reach them.

Central contact lists are now becoming available for some groups (although there are unfortunately no ready-made, Scotland-wide databases of contacts for all groups).

Examples of contact details which have been developed include a list of minority ethnic community groups maintained by Positive Action in Housing (see box below) and a list of women's community groups held by the Scottish Executive Equality Unit. The Equality Network also maintains a list of around 90 community groups and individuals.

A Glasgow-based voluntary organisation, Positive Action in Housing, has developed and maintains a **list of many local community groups** across Scotland that work with people from minority ethnic communities. The Equality Network maintains a list of LGBT groups and individuals and can provide assistance with consultation exercises where appropriate.

Other organisations hold contact lists relevant to their own area of interest (although you should always check that they are comprehensive and up to date). In some cases, because of the need for data protection, these may not be made available to people outside the organisation. Where you cannot get comprehensive information, there are a number of other options:

- The internet is a useful place for identifying specific equalities groups. Many national organisations now include links to local community groups on their pages. Most local authorities have extensive links pages which are often listed by area of interest. These rarely claim to be comprehensive, but are a useful starting point.
- Councils for Voluntary Service can also generally provide lists of local equalities groups, often sorted by their areas of interest.
- Many local authorities also keep information about local groups. Most local authority guidance suggests that you contact the Council's Equality Unit for this information. Most will also provide advice, and may be able to provide contact information to other organisations intending to undertake consultation in their area. Where there is not an Equality Unit, there may be a designated equalities officer (or similar) who will be able to help. The Council's library service may also be a good first point of contact. Some authorities are developing information specifically to help with consultation. In others, information gathered for different purposes, such as community profiling or service monitoring, may be a useful source of information.

Edinburgh City Council has established a **consultation database** to help to co-ordinate activity in this area. It is being rolled out across the internet and intranet and is being made available to partners, so that everyone, including the general public, is aware of what is happening. The Council also maintains a "**community groups register**" listing groups in the area and has developed a "**consultation handbook**", which provides specific advice in relation to contact with groups within the city. The Council is also developing a framework for evaluating consultation exercises, documenting and learning from good and bad practice.

Where organisations compile their own lists of groups for consultation, it is important to keep these up to date and to make sure that new community groups are told how their information can be included. Improving consultation in the future depends on developing more information about local and national groups. Identifying equalities groups (and classifying them by their areas of interest) should be included in any information system which is developed. It may be worth considering conducting an annual or regular audit, sending out a standard letter to individuals or organisations on your database, asking them if they still would like to be on your database and whether any of their contact details have changed.

Reaching “hard to reach” groups

Taking these steps will clearly help to include a range of communities in consultation. It is not always sufficient in itself, and there is a danger of missing valuable views by relying only on umbrella groups and mailing lists. There are a number of reasons for this, including that:

- Often those who respond to consultation are those who are already in groups.
- Not all groups with an interest in issues are included on lists.
- Not all groups consider that umbrella groups reflect their views.
- Not all individuals with an interest in the issues raised in consultation will be members of groups.
- The groups consulted may be those already known and “comfortable” to the consulting organisation.
- Groups (e.g. minority ethnic communities, women, disabled people, LGBT groups, etc.) cannot be considered to be homogenous. Different members within a group will experience specific issues (e.g. black women, disabled women, lesbian women).

These issues apply to both written and face-to-face methods. The process should be made more widely available than just through the circulation lists. There is a particular need to identify ways of reaching “grassroots” individuals and groups.

As part of the development of the Equality Strategy, the Scottish Executive undertook a series of “grassroots” consultations with disabled people, people from minority ethnic communities, women and LGBT groups. The purpose of the events was to discuss the issues raised in responses to the Equality Strategy consultation paper and to learn from those who had experienced barriers to participation.

It is essential to identify ways in which grassroots organisations can have access to the consultation materials and can give their views. One way of doing this is through outreach work within communities. An example of this would be where a local development worker would enable groups to build their “capacity”. They may then be able to participate both in specific consultations and more widely in shaping and commenting on new work. The use of specific events for particular communities can also help to reach “grassroots” groups.



The social work service of Falkirk Council runs a programme of “**listening lunches**” as part of the consultation process for community care plans. These events involved service users (who responded to public invitations) being split into small groups of three or four people sitting round a table in an informal setting, with various professionals such as social workers and health visitors going around and speaking to them. The Council claims that the format seems to encourage more people to come forward and the lunches are successful in involving wider groups.

You can also make the consultation process more widely available by specifically **asking a third party** (for example, a local umbrella group or voluntary organisation) to carry out work on your behalf. This may be by asking them to undertake research, or convene meetings or identify the views of a wider population in other ways. You will often need to provide resources to allow them to do so. Equalities umbrella groups can then act as a “conduit” for wider consultation.

As part of the Scottish Executive’s Mental Health Review, The Scottish Association for Mental Health organised a **consultative day for users and carers** to consider and respond to the White Paper on Mental Health. This was held in a walled garden and included a barbecue, which offered a secure, peaceful and relaxed environment. In addition to a fairly mainstream format of presentations and workshops, people could also use a graffiti wall and a video box to make comments.

Technology also has an increasing role in making consultation available to those who are not members of established groups. Although the inappropriate use or reliance of technology can exclude people, many organisations see the internet as a key part of a consultation process. Many consultation exercises now put papers and materials on the internet, and these can be accessed by groups and individuals that are not on your circulation list. Although there are many people who will not be able to take part in this way, it can be useful to use this as an additional method, in combination with others.

As part of a consultation on the development of a checklist on women’s transport issues, consultants working for the Scottish Executive made information papers available via a **dedicated website** and gave women the opportunity to both respond to an **on-line questionnaire** and provide details of their experiences. Glasgow City Council is developing an **equality website** which will allow information on consultation exercises (e.g. what is current and ongoing) to be shared. An audit of the voluntary sector capacity within the Glasgow areas to look at the best way to establish the website is currently underway.

Other methods may be required for geographically isolated areas.

Argyll and Bute Council has used **video conferencing**, and Highland Council, as part of a range of means of addressing the geographic spread of communities within its area, has successfully piloted the use of **live radio phone-in** programmes with councillors and officials in Lochaber.

As with the overall choice of method, the key to reaching equalities groups is to use a range of means.

Publicity

It is important to publicise consultation events through a variety of routes, such as:

- media interest
- newsletters
- leaflets
- community radio

You should also use a range of newspapers, for example:

- the national press
- local and free press
- talking newspapers
- specialist publications
- the minority ethnic press
- disability press

Even if you do not organise specific events, you can make sure that the consultation process is widely publicised. This can make people who are not “the usual suspects” aware that it is going on and give them details of how they can take part.

When you are identifying appropriate publicity for the consultation it is important to ask:

- Where does this community/group get information from?
- Where are they likely to see/hear/receive information?
- What forms of publicity are likely to be available to/used by the community?
- Are there any specialist media for this group?
- Are they likely to have access to the publicity provided or are there other media that can be used?

Any publicity which is developed should identify a contact person who can provide further information. That contact person should be able to provide appropriate information in an accessible way. You should also consider the format of any publicity material (these issues are discussed further later).

Information can also be displayed in public places where members of equalities groups access services (such as G.P. surgeries, post offices, etc.). You can also ask staff from departments which routinely visit or have contact with excluded groups to distribute information.

The Frae Fife Social Inclusion Partnership has recognised that Fife's minority ethnic community often do not use local libraries, council offices or leisure centres, and has, in conjunction with departments of Fife Council, begun undertaking outreach visits to alternative ethnic community locations such as, Asian and Chinese businesses.

“Small numbers”

It is important to recognise that whether or not to include groups in consultation should not be based on the number of individuals involved. Smaller authorities and organisations in rural areas often say, for example, that there are few residents from a particular minority ethnic group in their area. This should not be used as a justification for ignoring their views. When developing a consultation event it may be possible to link to groups in nearby cities in order to get a big enough number to make it viable. The effective use of group and plenary sessions at the event can then provide an opportunity to comment on local issues. You may also need to find other ways to identify the views of these groups, using individual interviews or outreach work, or by commissioning someone from within the community to gather views. Qualitative methods are a valuable source of information and a good consultation will reflect a range and depth of views. It is also important to provide individuals, as well as groups, with the opportunity to participate.

Once you have chosen the methods you will use and the ways in which you will reach the groups, there are also further issues to consider. Each of the techniques should itself be used in a way that is widely accessible. The next section outlines some practical issues that you should take into account.

PART 3: CARRYING OUT CONSULTATION

This section sets out some of the practical issues that are important in making consultation inclusive. The following issues are covered:

- the importance of staff attitudes and skills
- the timing of consultation
- the way in which information is provided
- accessibility of venues
- the importance of providing feedback

STAFF ATTITUDES AND SKILLS

Every consultation will involve a number of staff to different degrees depending on the methods chosen in different roles. The attitudes of staff can have a significant impact on the accessibility of the process (written or face to face). Most organisations now provide equality awareness training to staff at a variety of levels and although all staff should understand and promote equality, this is not always the case. Some staff involved in the process may have neither experience nor understanding of equalities issues.

You should ensure that any staff likely to be directly or indirectly involved in consultation have been trained. Equality training and staff awareness also need to be refreshed regularly, as the issues and acceptable standards change over time. One council gave an example of using staff newspaper articles to draw attention to ways of enabling equalities groups to participate in consultations and wider council issues.

Staff attitudes to groups and individuals can create barriers or can enable participation. There are many issues which staff need to be aware of when communicating with groups, and the most important are:

- **to avoid making inappropriate assumptions**
- **to avoid any discrimination in their language or behaviour**
- **to avoid any approach which can be seen to be patronising**

Staff should be familiar with the good practice and etiquette examples provided throughout this section. Staff training in equalities issues, and the use of this guidance, can help, but the best people to provide advice are the people who are affected by the issues – they are the experts.

Staff may also find that they are “gatekeepers” to consultation processes. This will often be the case in large centralised organisations and in local office networks (which may be the first point of approach). The staff who deal with routine public enquiries should always be aware of any consultation that is taking place. They should be made aware of how, and where, to seek help and should be asked to refer queries to the appropriate contact.

PROVIDING ENOUGH TIME TO RESPOND

The Scottish Executive grassroots consultation events identified that it is time-consuming to respond to a consultation document and there is often not enough time allowed to consider materials properly. This can be an issue for any organisation, but may be particularly important for equalities groups. There are a range of reasons for this, including:

- the need to obtain translated materials
- the need to convene special meetings of wider community members
- the need to avoid specific religious holidays

The best way to make sure that equalities groups will be able to respond is to consult with them about how much time they will need before you set a deadline. They will therefore be aware of your timetable restraints too.

PROVIDING ACCESSIBLE INFORMATION

The ways in which you provide information can have a major impact on whether equalities groups can take part in consultation. Information should always be provided in a way that is easily understood and allows the widest access to it.

There are a number of common problems with information, which were summarised in a report prepared by Reid Howie Associates after the grassroots consultation events (*Equality Unit, Scottish Executive 2001*):

“The **format of the materials for consultation** was identified as a major barrier. The material was seen often to be English-based, written in a dry manner and particularly difficult for some groups to respond to. It was suggested that documents can be off-putting and are regularly too dull and bureaucratic.

There is often a lack of translated information (as well as insufficient interpreters, a lack of understanding of how to use these effectively and a lack of funding for this). Groups stressed, however, that people cannot participate meaningfully if they do not know the language or have access to the appropriate equipment, technology or support.

The lack of imagination in the process was also mentioned, with information often not provided in places seen to be appropriate to the groups. A perceived lack of willingness to consider alternative means of information provision was also mentioned.”

The need for plain language

Information should be in plain language, which is jargon-free and straightforward, easy to read and understand. The Plain English Campaign can provide advice about this.

You should not refer to structures or systems which respondents may not be familiar with. The same applies to terms that people will not understand unless they are involved with an organisation.

The need to write clearly applies to all of the written materials that you may use. This includes not only paper documents, but also PowerPoint presentations and any materials or resources used in meetings. Feedback from meetings (including minutes and action notes) should also be clear.

If you ask written questions, you should make clear exactly what information you are looking for. You should break long documents down into separate, manageable sections, and provide background information where this is needed.

Appropriate language

It is important that the way your materials are written (and the language used by staff) reflect a clear commitment to equality. They should never imply that discrimination or exclusion are acceptable or inevitable. This applies to all parts of the material – the text of documents, the images on covers and the examples used. Graphics and designs of materials should never stereotype or caricature groups. Staff involved in consultations (however peripherally) should be aware that using discriminatory language can make it seem that their participation is less valued. Examples of this include referring to women as “girls” or to disabled people as “the disabled” and can exclude or disempower them.

Practical steps to accessible information

You should provide all of your material in a range of formats. For written materials, a minimum of 12-point type should be used (14 where possible). Addressing the following points will make documents easier for all respondents to access:

- using clear fonts (sans serif is recommended by the Plain English Campaign)
- using medium or bold type
- avoiding the use of italicised fonts
- even type spacing
- avoiding hyphenation
- using appropriate colours to allow contrast

Further considerations include:

- text with poor vertical spacing can be difficult to read, so the space between the lines is as important as the size of the typeface
- paper should be matt, not glossy as unwanted reflections from glossy paper can make even clearly printed text difficult to read
- you should print only on one side of the paper or on paper which is heavy enough to prevent the print bleeding through
- colour and background styles should be used carefully, for example, highlighting text in a colour or using highly stylised backgrounds may make it very hard to read the text

Using clear language is also important if information is to be translated. You should avoid idioms, slang and colloquialisms. You should also avoid using any terms or references that may be offensive to particular cultures or religions. Where you are in any doubt about the languages to use, or other issues relating to translation, it is best to seek specialist advice.

People with learning disabilities may require information in easy-read. Pictures, symbols and graphics can make information more accessible and can make material clearer for anyone who finds formal written consultation problematic.

For the review of services for people with learning disabilities carried out by the Scottish Executive, a users' and carers' group meets to give information on the services they receive. The notes from the meetings are **turned into easy-read** by ENABLE (a national voluntary organisation).

People with visual impairments may require copies of written documents in Braille or Moon, in large print (at least 16 point) or on audiotape or floppy disk. Some respondents may prefer to receive documents by e-mail.

If you are sending information on disk, the entire document should use one common typeface, such as "Arial", which most people will have. You should completely avoid using symbols from other fonts (even popular fonts such as Wingdings). The respondent may not have these on their computer and it may cause confusion. Disk copies should not contain other layout devices (such as boxes) as these do not necessarily appear on screen or print in the same way on all computers. Where layout is critical, Adobe Acrobat is a good choice, but bear in mind that you may have to let users know how to access this programme. It is freely available from www.adobe.com.

Although Microsoft Word is by far the most popular word processing software in the public sector in Scotland, smaller groups may not use this programme. Many groups use Apple Macintosh, rather than Microsoft Windows-based operating systems. You should always offer alternative versions of material, such as rich text format, or raw (plain) text where you are using disk (or internet) delivery.

Any written documents should let recipients know (in appropriate formats) how to get the material in other formats and what can be supplied. For example, in publications which are produced in English, a number of local authorities now include the title in a range of community languages. There is often a standard panel describing how a copy in another language can be obtained. If you do this, you should make sure that any phone number given can be answered in an appropriate language, and that the document which you have offered is readily available, or ready for translation. Any video materials used should have subtitles and sign language.

This is not an exhaustive list and you should seek advice from specialist organisations. For example, the RNIB can advise on translation to Braille and how to prepare taped

information. Local community interpreting services can provide advice on the main community languages in different parts of Scotland. ENABLE can provide advice on easy-read.

Minority ethnic community languages

People from minority ethnic groups may require information translated into languages other than English. There are six languages in Scotland, in addition to English and Gaelic, which are frequently used:

- Arabic
- Bengali
- Chinese
- Hindi
- Punjabi
- Urdu

Other languages will sometimes be required (for example, British Sign Language, or where refugees or asylum seekers may be involved).

Preparation

Preparation of materials in other formats may take a number of weeks, and this needs to be built in to the consultation timetable. Translation and proof reading, for example, take at least six weeks (and may take longer).

You do not always need to have every format available at the start of every consultation. You do need to be ready, however, in every case, to respond quickly to requests for another format. You can then get the material prepared and delivered in enough time for the consultees to respond, or anticipate extending the response deadline.

The main consideration is to make sure that the information is appropriate, relevant and accessible to all groups (including different age groups). This will require a range of complementary approaches.

ORGANISING INCLUSIVE EVENTS

Where meetings and events are held, there are a range of access issues. For larger events, it may be worthwhile having a planning group which includes representatives of all organisations and/or departments involved, along with representatives of equalities groups to consider how appropriate the facilities are.

You should always provide information about the venue and other arrangements, and ask people who want to participate to let you know in advance what their individual

requirements are. One means of doing this is to include a space on registration forms inviting people to specify their requirements.

Preparation for staff, speakers and facilitators

An event is more likely to be successful when all of the staff who will participate are well prepared. Every member of staff involved should have had appropriate equality awareness training, and should understand the principles set out in this booklet. They should be aware of how best to provide support, and when it is not appropriate to do so. They should also know how and where to get information or help which they cannot provide.

If staff are facilitating a discussion or other group activity, it is important that they:

- ensure that participants are comfortable
- allow all participants to have a say
- ensure that the activities and timing are appropriate
- explain where the activity fits in the overall consultation process

They also need to be prepared to listen to groups (whether or not they agree with the issues raised) and to seek clarification of any issues that they do not understand.

It is also important to check that invited “experts” (for example speakers) are comfortable with the fact that their contribution may be challenged by participants who have a great deal of personal or practical expertise and experience of the issues.

Physical access

The location of any consultation meeting or event should be accessible to people with a range of impairments. Again, although it is impossible to provide an exhaustive checklist, some examples include that:

- There should be step-free access to and within the venue through the main door.
- The entrance should be wide enough for a wheelchair user (both manual and electric) and should not have heavy doors.
- Ramps should not be steep.
- There should be sufficient parking at the venue and this should be close to the entrance.
- Consideration needs to be given to the surfaces, contrast and obstacles for people with visual impairments.
- Good lighting is important for visually impaired people and for interpreters and lip speakers.
- The height of reception desks, lift buttons, telephones, etc. should be suitable for use by wheelchair users.
- The toilets and lifts should be appropriate for disabled people, and alarms should be provided.

- There should be verbal and Braille indications in the lifts.
- There should be appropriate and sufficient signage and staff should be prepared to provide assistance, if requested.
- The distance between rooms/areas should be short, as distance may be difficult for people with mobility impairments.
- Different types of chair (e.g. with and without arms) should be provided.
- There should be suitable fire alarms for hearing impaired people (or staff available to assist).
- There should be enough stewards to provide information and meet other requests. There will be a particular need at key times, such as the start and end of the event, when groups sub-divide for discussion, over lunch and other breaks.

Undertaking an access audit

One way of checking physical access is by undertaking an access audit before an event. Some disability organisations, such as Centres for Independent Living, or local Access Panels, can advise on this. An access audit is undertaken by a trained and experienced specialist, and generally covers a range of issues at the venue, including, for example:

- physical access
- seating
- signage
- lighting
- amplification
- sight lines
- means of emergency escape

You should avoid buildings that cannot be used by disabled people. If a building has access, but there are some remaining issues, you should let participants know. If you have an access audit carried out for a venue, it is good practice and common sense to provide the results to the venue owner/operator. They can then address any issues, and make it available to other groups using the venue.

Where an access audit has been carried out a long time ago, it is best to re-do it. It is potentially very damaging to assume that nothing will have changed, and it may now be inaccurate. It is always worth checking whether any changes (positive or negative) have been made.

Location and transport

It is also important to consider the geographical location of groups and not to exclude them because of this. If a consultation is Scotland-wide, or region-wide, it is important

to use venues in all parts of the area, not only central ones. You should also consider providing transport to events (or reimbursing costs). Both can be a barrier to people on low incomes. There may also be financial barriers for people who have to give up a day at work to participate. Wherever possible, reimburse out-of-pocket expenses on the day of the event.

Some issues particularly affect island areas. In some cases, limited transport means that attendees may not be able to travel to and from an event in one (or even two) days. You will need to consider meeting these additional subsistence costs. For disabled people living in island communities, both air and ferry travel can be at least difficult and often impossible. You may need to hold specific events in island areas or consider other ways of getting their views (see example on page 19).

The physical safety of locations, and the availability of safe transport and parking are also important. You should always provide information on public transport and safety, along with a map of the area.

The timing of events

The timing of events is also important. You should make sure that the day chosen does not coincide with a major event for a particular community (e.g. a religious event or festival).

People who have childcare or other caring responsibilities can be excluded from breakfast or evening meetings. For adults with school-age children, day events should end at a time which allows them to collect their children. Children of school age and people who are working will often not be able to attend daytime events. Participants who are concerned about their personal safety at location or getting to and from the venue, may not be willing to attend evening events. Bear in mind that darkness falls before 5pm during much of December and January, and even earlier in the northern isles.

Choosing a venue suitable to the audience

The venue needs to be a place where people will be comfortable and confident expressing their views. It needs to be safe, accessible, appropriate and familiar to participants. Groups with little experience of formal meetings and consultation may be uncomfortable with “business” meeting methods, or venues such as conference centres. A suitable room should be made available for prayer, if required.

Caring responsibilities

It is important to provide crèche facilities or other forms of childcare support, particularly at events involving women. A number of organisations can provide crèches at events. You should only use registered childcare providers (who can be contacted via local authority social work services) who will also take into account all relevant Child Protection considerations. Crèche provision should be accessible to disabled children and should use materials that reflect a focus on equality. The crèche should also take

account of the needs of children from minority ethnic communities (including their language requirements).

Before the event, you should provide information about the crèche to parents so that you can make any changes needed or answer questions that they have. If you intend to separate children by age groups, you should make this clear to parents before they register.

Some parents may prefer not to use a crèche but to make their own childcare arrangements. You should provide the option to do this and to have the costs reimbursed. If your organisation (particularly a local authority) has a policy on this (for example, a maximum cost, or a need for parents to use a registered childminder), make it clear at the start. If the policy is likely to mean that some people cannot take part, you should consider, on a case by case basis, how that can be addressed.

Some participants may have other care responsibilities. You should consider how to provide support with any additional costs (or practical issues) which participants face because of the consultation process.

Communication

You should always consider the best means of communication, both in presentations at events and in discussion groups.

Some people from minority ethnic groups may require an interpreter. These are generally available through local community interpreting services. People with hearing impairments may require a British Sign Language interpreter or a lip speaker. Some participants may need a deafblind guide. You should use only trained interpreters and always contact them in good time to explain your requirements. If you have not worked with interpreters before, you should talk about how the process will work in practice (for example, how you will identify the person who will be using their service).

You should use a microphone and provide a hearing induction loop or infrared sound amplification system. Bear in mind that you should also use a microphone not only for the speakers' contributions, but also to amplify questions asked by the audience. Test all equipment prior to the event.

Notetakers should be provided in groups, as it is very difficult to take notes while concentrating on an interpreter. Copies of the notes can be distributed with the Action Points or Minutes.

You should also bear in mind the need for good practice and etiquette in all your communication. Examples include:

- speaking directly to a participant when they are using an interpreter
- speaking at an appropriate speed
- keeping your hands away from your mouth and avoiding eating when someone is interpreting what you are saying or lip reading

- not shouting at hearing impaired people
- providing assistance only when this is desired
- not patting or feeding a guide dog
- not leaning on a person's wheelchair
- sitting to talk with a wheelchair user

Again, this is not an exhaustive list, it provides some examples of the ways in which you can improve participation.

Refreshments and arrangements for eating

Some groups and individuals may have particular requirements for food or refreshments, for example:

- some will require vegetarian food
- some foods may be forbidden to particular groups
- some people may have specific dietary requirements for health reasons

You should identify any requirements and take these into account – caterers will usually be able to accommodate requests. You should check with the caterer on the day (even where requirements have been properly specified in advance), that the food provided is the food you requested. It is worth reminding caterers that requirements for vegan or vegetarian foods apply not only to sandwiches and quiches, but also to cakes and biscuits. A high proportion of any refreshments should be meat-free. Different foods should be on separate plates and clearly labelled. Make sure that sufficient serving spoons are provided. You should provide water and juice along with tea and coffee and you should not provide alcohol.

Buffet arrangements will be inappropriate for some disabled people (e.g. wheelchair users and others with problems walking or balancing), as it will be impossible to gather food and eat without a seat and a table. Some disabled people have restricted hand movements and may require cups with handles or drinking straws and you should also provide these. People who have guide dogs will almost certainly require refreshments for the dog (e.g. water) and you should provide this. Again, you should check with participants in advance.

Women-only groups

At events involving women (particularly Muslim women) where there is discussion in mixed sex groups, you should offer the option of a women-only group. Do not assume, however, that all women will want to participate in this way.

Specific support

Some participants will bring someone with them to give them particular support or personal assistance. When assessing the number of participants (for refreshments or

allocating spaces) you should count these individuals. You should also count others, such as interpreters.

Always bear in mind when you are arranging events that people will have a wide range of individual needs. While you should never make assumptions about these needs, the best way to identify them is to ask participants to specify their requirements in advance (see page 25). This will allow you to make the most appropriate arrangements and help to avoid finding on the day that some people cannot take part.

INFORMATION SHARING

It is good practice, in any consultation process, **to make the views that have been expressed available to everyone**. You can provide for this by either:

- making the responses available at a central location
- providing copies on request

It is important, however, that if you intend to do this, you make it clear to respondents at the start. Some groups or individuals may wish (for a number of reasons) not to be identified. An obvious example is where an individual or group may face victimisation if they were identified. Other examples may include people with medical or mental health problems who do not wish this to be identified, or groups who make suggestions that they do not wish to make public. You must offer the opportunity for responses to remain confidential and respect their **confidentiality** totally.

Where a summary of responses is prepared, check thoroughly before publication that the report does not identify (directly or indirectly) respondents who wish to remain anonymous.

PROVIDING FEEDBACK

Groups have identified that the lack of feedback from consultation is a major source of frustration. You should feed back the outcome of the consultation to participants and the reasons, as far as possible, for including or not including their views.

The Scottish Partnership on Domestic Abuse, following a consultation exercise on the draft National Strategy to Address Domestic Abuse in Scotland, prepared a report of the ways in which **views expressed by respondents had been incorporated (or not) into the next draft of the document, and the reasons for this**. This report was then made available to respondents.

The format and dissemination of feedback is just as important as for the initial consultation materials. All of those who took part should be aware of how to get information about the outcome. You should also consider whether, and how, you will involve groups in monitoring and reviewing policy changes that have been implemented as a result of the consultation.

REVIEWING THE PROCESS

After the consultation, it is a good idea to ask those consulted about the process and ways it could be improved in the future. Participants can provide invaluable information for future planning. You should carry out both an internal review of the process and, where possible, discuss it with those consulted. It is also a good idea to review who actually responded to your consultation, to see whether there are any patterns or obvious gaps. This may help to pinpoint any groups which were not reached by the methods you used.

It may also be worth looking at the effect of the methods on the outcomes. If, for example, one method provided a set of views or respondents which varied significantly from others, you should consider whether this is due to differences in the method or actual differences in the views.

CONSULTATION FATIGUE

Many groups now feel that they are being consulted on everything. Equalities groups receive many invitations to participate in consultation on a range of issues, because organisations recognise that it is important to identify their views. They will not, however, always be able to take part. A lack of time and resources may mean that groups have to prioritise and respond only to issues that are centrally relevant to them. This should not, however, stop you inviting them to participate. Groups themselves should be allowed to decide whether they wish to respond. Be flexible – even if your consultation needs a written response, an organisation which does not have the time or resources to do this may be able to provide their views succinctly in a single telephone call.

Establishing partnership working with groups on a longer-term basis is one way of overcoming these problems. That way, their views are collected regularly, rather than only through one-off consultations. Another method is centralising consultation in an organisation, where a number of questions on different issues can be asked at one time, through the same process. This can reduce the number of individual consultations without losing the breadth of the coverage.

LONGER-TERM ISSUES/CAPACITY BUILDING

One-off consultations clearly have a place and can serve a useful purpose. Many local authorities and some Scottish Executive departments are, however, recognising that time, resources and longer-term work with organisations will enable them to become more involved in the consultation process.

The Scottish Executive Equality Unit has established Scotland-wide fora around particular issues affecting groups. Examples of this include the Women in Scotland Consultative Forum and the short-life Race Equality Advisory Forum. The Executive recognised the value of having access to groups of those likely to be affected by policy proposals and decisions. Many local authorities and agencies have also identified the benefits of working with communities of interest to, for example:

- identify priorities
- provide advice
- discuss ideas
- formulate policy proposals
- monitor the impact on communities when policy is implemented

The capacity of groups needs to be built up over time to develop these arrangements. All of the participants (public bodies and groups) need to understand their roles and limitations. Bridges need to be built to reduce the cynicism which can develop from persistent exclusion or which can exist through public authorities assuming that only they have the appropriate expertise.

It may be appropriate to begin to develop networks (or representative groups) with particular sectors of interest (e.g. women, disabled people, LGBT and minority ethnic groups). The format in which material is provided, the timing, accessibility, etc. of meetings should also be considered in this work. These networks (or representative groups) can make it more likely that there will be longer-term, continuing consultation. They also have a place in one-off consultations (as specialist umbrella groups).

In South Lanarkshire an **Older People's Assembly** has recently been established (which is developed from the Better Government for Older People pilot). The Assembly is aimed at keeping older people in South Lanarkshire informed of their rights and up to date with policies and services in their area as well as involving them in policy and service development. Membership of the assembly will include older people and representatives from various agencies.

Capacity building work with groups can take place over a longer period but can provide a way of keeping up to date with the concerns of specific groups at all stages.

In Aberdeen, LGBT issues are being addressed through a process of **capacity building** for longer-term consultation. A key group representing the community was identified (in this case the Gay Switchboard) and given expenses to facilitate meetings on behalf of the Council. Several meetings have been held and the issues presented to appropriate officials within the Council. The capacity of the LGBT community has been built through the process and there are moves to establish a forum. The Council also supports the Aberdeen Disability Advisory Group, bringing together local and national groups, as well as individuals to meet with the Council and other agencies to address issues of mutual interest.

A number of other authorities have also established groups and networks specifically to assist in the consultation process. Clackmannanshire, for example, has a group that considers access to polling stations and buildings.

Fife has four **equality networks**, all of which receive copies of all major consultations. They receive funding from the Council in the form of a lump sum as part of their service level agreement, and this allows them both to participate in consultation and to undertake outreach/capacity building work for the Council on some issues. The City of Edinburgh Council supports five equality networks.

This type of work is most likely to be co-ordinated centrally within organisations, for example, by an Equality Unit or a central Policy Unit. Individual parts of an organisation can then contact these groups when they want to consult with them, helping to “mainstream” their involvement.

The point made throughout this document, **that no single method is ever likely to provide the answer to consultation**, should be stressed again. It is vital that consultation with central groups (although useful) is an addition, not an alternative to other methods involving “grassroots” individuals and groups.

In the longer term, including greater numbers of people from equalities groups in the policy process (as decision makers), will make it more likely that the issues which they face are taken into account in policy and practice.

PART 4: OVERVIEW

This booklet has identified many considerations for ensuring that consultation processes include all members of the community. From the many examples provided by statutory and community-based organisations, it is clear that consultation works best when equalities issues are considered from the start, and the ways of including groups are identified. This should be beneficial for all participants, not only equalities groups.

The best approaches involve improving access to mainstream consultation processes combined with specific methods to get the views of “hard to reach” groups. Ongoing, regular consultation, based on capacity building and support to groups, is also considered successful and can enable groups to participate in one-off consultations.

The following are the **main guiding principles** that underpin consultation with equalities groups.

- Equalities groups should be included in all consultations.
- Effective consultation with equalities groups requires careful planning, making sure that there is enough time at each stage of the process.
- Consideration of equalities issues should be built in from the beginning of any process.
- It is important to get beyond the “usual suspects” and take proactive steps to identify and include “hard to reach” groups which are not traditionally involved in consultation.
- It is important to recognise that the inclusion or exclusion of groups should not be based upon the numbers of individuals involved.
- In virtually all cases, the best way of identifying how to involve equalities groups in a consultation is to include them in the planning process.
- Each method chosen must be appropriate for the group involved, for example, in some cases written methods may be suitable, in others face-to-face methods or a mix of methods may be better.
- Many equalities groups lack resources and this often affects whether they can respond to consultations. It is important to take steps to ensure that all views can be included by providing support (financial or otherwise) to allow them to participate.
- At the very least, it is important to allow some flexibility in how people can respond to a consultation, for example, by accepting telephone comments.
- Long-term relationships between the public sector and equalities groups (often involving support) are now developing. These can enable groups to take part in consultation, as well increasing the overall understanding of wider issues.
- Accessible information is central to good consultation, but needs careful planning and can be time-consuming. Assistance should be sought from specialist organisations to identify, for example, which formats or languages will be required and how the information should be presented.

- It is critical that inclusive language (verbal and written) is used.
- Images used in documents, or in presentations, must reflect diversity. If not, the process will suggest that the participation of equalities groups is not valued.
- The way that inappropriate staff attitudes and behaviour can affect the involvement of equalities groups should be acknowledged. Appropriate training and guidance should be provided.
- There is no justification for any consultation event being inaccessible to any group. Venues should be physically accessible and support for interpretation, transport or care responsibilities should be provided.
- Good practice suggests that consultations should be open and transparent. There are, however, good reasons why some equalities groups might require confidentiality and this should be offered and respected.
- It is good practice to provide feedback 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.

The number and range of consultations in Scotland is likely to continue to grow (given the current focus of local authorities and the Scottish Executive). Organisations need to take account of all of these issues. This booklet has not provided an exhaustive “checklist” of considerations, as this could never be comprehensive. It does, however, help to identify and address some potential barriers before they arise. It is important to continue to share experience. Organisations need to learn from each other, and, most importantly, from communities. It is also important to continue to improve consultation practice to make it more inclusive. Consultation, when carried out effectively, is neither straightforward, quick nor cheap. It can, however, help to ensure that policy and practice reflect the issues and requirements of all groups in the community. As such, it will continue to be an essential part of the democratic process in Scotland.

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