

Undertaking Community Consultation



Rural Community Network
SUPPORTING RURAL COMMUNITIES

Introduction

Rural Community Network has produced this fact sheet as an annex to its Rural Community Consultation Manual¹. The fact sheet provides guidance for both consultation initiators (the Government Department, Agency or other Authority wishing to undertake the consultation exercise to help them formulate or implement a specific policy) and consultation facilitators (those managing the consultation process on behalf of the initiator). The guidance sets out how to ensure that everyone has the opportunity to get involved, especially those who do not traditionally participate in such processes, such as farmers, young people and the unemployed.

Sherry Arnstein² developed a model known as Arnstein's Ladder in order to demonstrate levels of citizen involvement in the decisions affecting their lives. Arnstein depicts eight rungs on the ladder: three levels of non-participation (manipulation, therapy and informing); two levels of tokenism (consultation and placation) and three levels of citizen power (participation, delegated power and citizen control). The ladder places 'consultation' within the realm of 'tokenism', which may be uncomfortable reading for individuals about to facilitate a consultation process. But it is worth remembering that policy consultation often begins with a statutory body presenting a document or proposal and seeking reactions to it – in this way, consultation is a 'top-down' and reactive process. It is not usually initiated by people or community groups setting the agenda themselves and feeding views back up to the responsible body.

The aim of RCN's work on consultation, the Rural Community Consultation Manual and, indeed, this fact sheet is to contribute to pushing consultation further up Arnstein's ladder, away from tokenism and into the realm of citizen power. Good practice in consultation can help to do this.



Values underpinning Community Consultation

Rural Community Network considers the values underpinning its work on consultation essential to effective and meaningful consultation. To get the best from the process, initiators and facilitators need to demonstrate similar values. These include:

Transparency: The need to be clear and frank about issues such as decisions already taken, non-negotiable issues and about the use to which people's views will be put.

Openness: The need to be open to making real change based on views expressed by people in consultations. There also needs to be openness in the process itself. Initiators should be flexible about the process according to the needs and circumstances of the people with whom they are consulting. A statutory recommended 12 week consultation timeframe may not always be appropriate.

Equality: The need for inclusion of all relevant parties to the consultation and the need to seek to address any form of discrimination which may prevent people

from participating in consultations.

Empowerment: Consultation should incorporate a commitment to giving people ownership of the decisions relating to their lives, especially those currently experiencing a lack of ownership.

Best Practice

There is often a tension between the ideal consultation (best practice) and the best possible, given the circumstances (good practice). For example, a particular issue may require a nine month consultation process and a budget of £100,000. However the facilitator may be given a timescale of three months (Government guidance to statutory initiators recommends a consultation period of 12 weeks) and a budget of £20,000. Within such timeframe and financial constraints, the facilitator may decide to do the best he/she can rather than not undertake the consultation at all. After all, the issue for consultation may well be an issue of great significance to their constituency. What is important, however, is that limitations in terms of time and budget are not used to excuse bad practice.

¹ Rural Community Consultation Manual, Rural Community Network NI (2002)

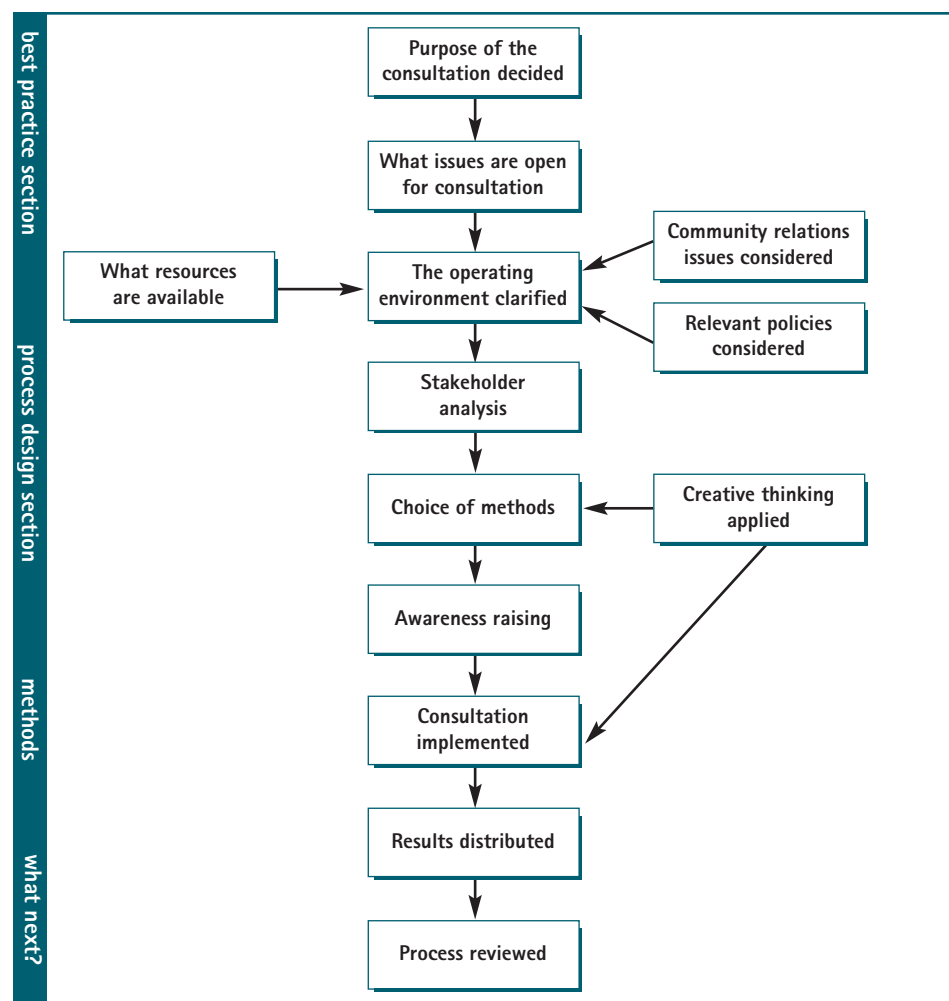
² Sherry Arnstein, A Ladder of Citizen Participation, Journal of the American Institute of Planners, (1969)

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The Consultation Process



Preparation

The initiators and facilitators need to have a close working relationship in the preparatory stages of the consultation process. Both sides should agree a schedule to meet and also what information needs to be transferred. The key issues for consideration between initiator and facilitator at the outset are outlined below.

Agreeing the Purpose of the Consultation

- Why is the consultation being undertaken?
- Is it concerned with identifying needs or issues?
- Is it concerned with gathering views on a broad strategy?

- Is it concerned with gathering views on a specific policy proposal?
- Is it concerned with gathering views on the implementation of an already agreed policy?
- Is it concerned with evaluating an old policy or approach?

Agreeing the Objectives

Objectives should flow logically from the agreed purpose and might look like the examples below.

- To identify and prioritise the health needs of people living in disadvantaged rural areas.
- To gather the views of stakeholders on

developing policy proposals in response to the health needs of disadvantaged rural areas.

- To identify responses to a range of policy options for addressing health needs.
- To explore ways of implementing the policy for addressing health needs.

Agreeing the Outcomes

What does the initiator want from the consultation? In other words, what is the desired outcome of the consultation as far as the initiator is concerned?

- A list of views and opinions?
- Specific responses to a specific issue or policy proposal?
- A consensus view from consultees on the issue or proposal?
- Proposals on how specific issues/needs should be addressed?

Stakeholders: Who needs to be consulted?

A stakeholder is any person, organisation or agency affected by and involved in the issue, or having a specific interest in the issue under consultation. In identifying the range of stakeholders who have an interest in the issue (a stakeholder analysis), the initiators and facilitators of the consultation need to consider the following.

- Who will be impacted by this issue?
- What are the requirements of the relevant Equality Scheme?
- What is the wider policy context including, for example, New Targeting Social Need and the Compact between Government and the Community and Voluntary Sector?
- Are all stakeholders involved to the same degree? It may be appropriate that different forms or intensities of consultation are appropriate for different stakeholders.

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Parameters & Other Factors

Limitations

There may be limitations to the process which are beyond control – legal, technical, time or financial constraints. It is important for both initiators and facilitators to be clear and explicit from the outset on the understanding of the limitations. For example, some limitations may rule out a particular methodology.

Boundaries

It is important to consider whether there are issues which have already been decided upon, or which will be decided upon only by the initiator therefore not open to consultation. What are the givens?

Other External Factors

- There may be regional, national or European legislation which impacts on the issue.
- There may be overarching government policies such as New Targeting Social Need which need to be borne in mind.
- Relevant equality schemes and legislation also need to be taken into account. Consider how these impact upon the planning and focus of the consultation process. For example, how would equality legislation affect your choice of venue and choice of consultees?

Community Relations

Initiators and facilitators need to consider the implications of holding a consultation in a divided society. It may be useful to address the following questions before embarking on the consultation process.

- Does the subject of the consultation raise specific community relations issues? For example, if a consultation is to be undertaken on the proposed location of a new recreation facility in a rural area which is significantly divided,

how will this be dealt with in the consultation? How will the views of both communities be represented?

- Does the consultation process itself have community relations implications? For example, if your consultation involves meetings, will the venue be perceived as neutral? Will people have to travel through 'hostile territory' to get there and, if so, is this acceptable, or will this prevent participation of one community?
- Will perceptions of the initiators' or facilitators' identities influence or suppress the way that people express themselves? If so, how might this be addressed?

The Decision Making Process

Initiators and facilitators should be clear at the outset about the decision making process and how this consultation feeds into it. Participants in any consultation process will want to know what the subsequent stages in the overall process are, so it is important to clarify the following.

- What will happen to their responses?
- How and why will consultees receive feedback on their input?
- Where does consultees' input fit with the overall decision making process?
- Who will make the final decisions and when? Will there be final opportunities for consultation before then?

In preparing for the consultation process, try to get as much clarity as possible on these issues. If full information is not available, be clear about this too.

Practicalities

Information Provision

Agencies and departments consult because consultees have information and experiences which are invaluable to the

process of reviewing or formulating a new policy. For this input to be most effective and meaningful, consultees need access to information held by initiators. In some cases, the initiator may have undertaken some research, data collection or prior consultation exercises, which have led to the decision to review or prepare a policy. It is a requirement of equality legislation that this information should be available in readily accessible formats. This is also good practice.

Resources and Organisation

The following types of resources will be required for most forms of consultation.

- Input by staff from the initiating agency or department - who is the key contact there and how much time are they giving to this process?
- Background information or papers on the issue(s) - who is providing and distributing this to stakeholders?
- Independent facilitation of the process - who is doing this and what are the costs, including staff transport and material costs?
- A budget for advertising, venue hire, communication, promotion, refreshments, transport, childcare and translation – who will pay for these and who will organise them?

Flexibility

It can be difficult to assess the level and nature of response to a consultation process. Planning for flexibility is, therefore, essential. Stakeholders may challenge the very purpose of the process; question the scope of the objectives or the methodology; require more information, time or resources. Initiators and facilitators need to have procedures in place to respond to these eventualities. These need to be robust enough to allow for quick decisions and changes of plan and, if need be, for a review of the overall approach and aims. Stakeholders are,

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however, pivotal to the implementation and success of the policy and it is important to respect and value their involvement.

Evaluation

Evaluation is key to the improvement of your consultation practice. It is important that it is built into the consultation process from the beginning, rather than only at the end as is often the case. Generally speaking, evaluation is carried out by asking participants for feedback on their experience of the process, either in writing by completing a form, face-to-face in an interview or in a group during or after the event or process.

What do you want from evaluation?

The first issue to consider when planning the evaluation is what you want to get from it. For example, you may wish to know the following.

- Was the process successful in reaching and involving people considered to be excluded?
- Did we get good quality responses?
- Did sufficient people engage with the consultation process?

Instant Evaluation: Plus/Delta

It can also be useful to carry out a simple evaluation of any particular event or method used as part of the consultation process. A technique at consultation events called **plus/delta**, could be used. This involves asking participants to comment on what was good about the meeting or event [+], and how they would change the process for the better next time (**delta**, [Δ] is the Greek symbol for change).

Process Design

Only after careful consideration has been given to all of these factors are you ready to select methods which will enable you to run the most effective and meaningful consultation process possible. Section 3 and 4 of RCN's Rural Community

Consultation Manual provide details on novel and creative ways of informing the selection of methods and the design of the right process for your consultation based on the *Planning to Achieve*³ model. The detail and scope of which is far beyond what is possible to present here.

What Next? – After The Consultation Recording & Processing Feedback

Obviously the point of any consultation is to get people's views on the issue or problem at hand. In any consultation process, it is important to be clear about how the responses and results will be recorded, processed and presented to the initiator. It is important when trying to encourage those considered to be 'excluded' from consultation processes that your methods of recording, processing and presenting feedback are clear and transparent.

Following up with Participants

It is often the case that participants' involvement with a consultation process ends the minute they have completed a questionnaire or left a focus group meeting. Consultees give their views, anecdotes and information and rarely hear anything further about where those views have gone and to what extent they have influenced the specific policy or practice in question. It is likely that offering people recognition for their input, by following up with them on the issues, may encourage their participation in consultation on a more regular basis. People and communities can be empowered by the knowledge that they have been able to influence decisions relating to their lives. Some pointers on how this can be done follow.

- Ensure people are clear about the importance of their contribution (the purpose, how views will be recorded and how views will be used).
- Provide opportunities for participants to be involved in the actual hand over of the results to the initiator – a powerful

indication that their views are going to the appropriate decision makers.

- Hold a review event after a reasonable time period to review progress since the consultation process took place.
- Keep a mailing list of consultees and send out a letter to each one, thanking them for their participation and reassuring them about the next steps.
- Remember that it is important to negotiate with the initiator at the outset about the extent to which they can engage in follow up with participants, or to what extent they can support the facilitating organisation to do so.

Conclusion: Managing the Outcome of the Consultation

Often there is more to be done after a consultation process is complete than just to keep participants informed about the results. Of necessity, in this fact sheet we have discussed the consultation process as a linear one - with a beginning, middle and end. We have focused on what to do before you begin, signposted you to RCN's Rural Community Consultation Manual for ideas on selecting methods and designing processes and have made some important suggestions about what needs to happen after the end of the process. The best possible outcome for both initiators and participants must be the development of closer relationships, as well as the ongoing development of consultation processes which harness with increasing effectiveness the voices of all, including the voices of those who have rarely been listened to before. This fact sheet, RCN's Rural Community Consultation Manual and ongoing consultation work act as important stepping stones in that development.