



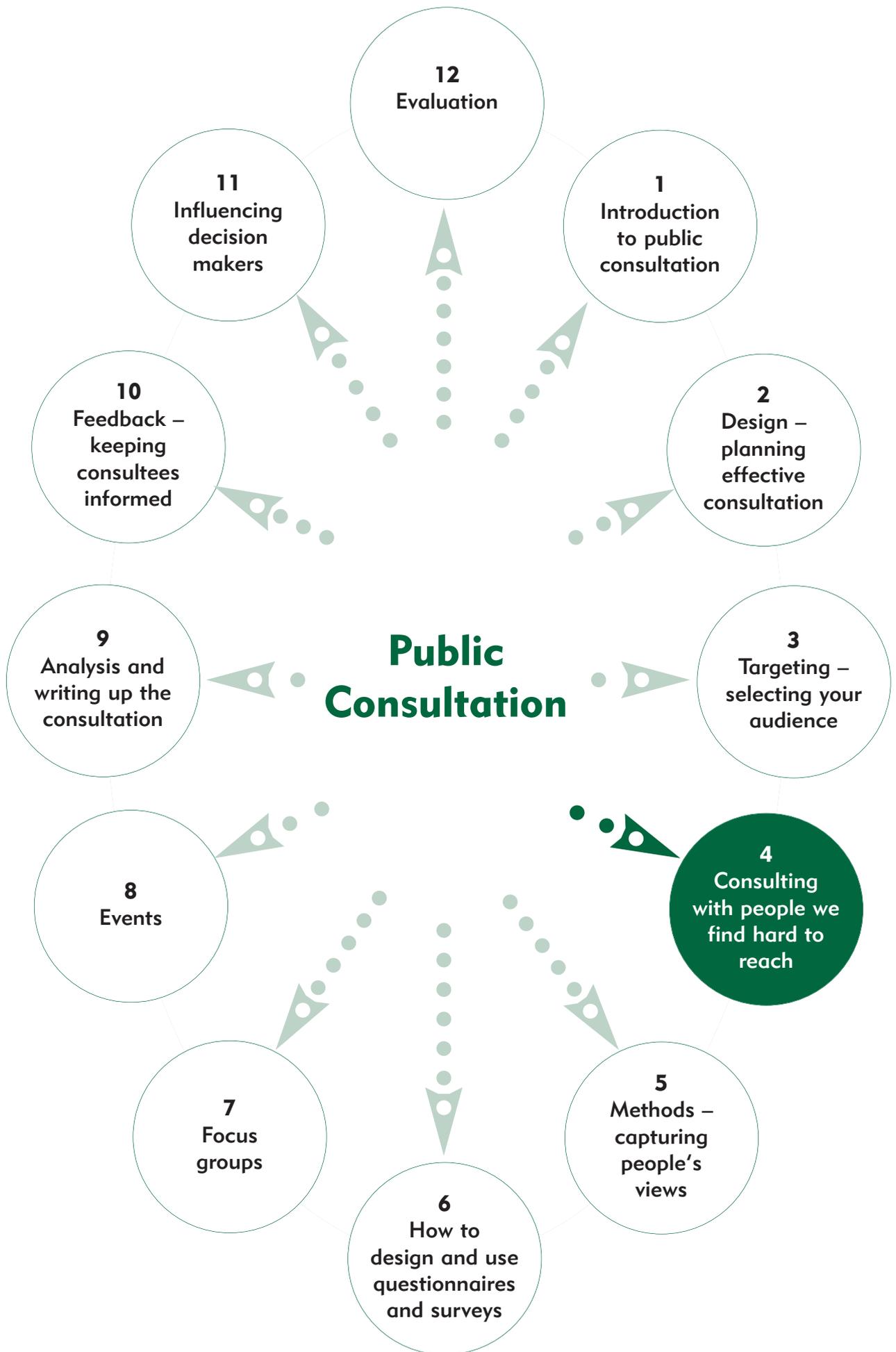
Nottinghamshire
County Council

Consultation in Nottinghamshire

Consulting with people we find hard to reach



guide 4





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Introduction

At Nottinghamshire County Council we recognise that local people should be involved in decisions about public services and the policies that affect their lives. But we also recognise that some members of the community are excluded from public participation exercises for one reason or another. We want to make sure that what we do reflects the diversity of our communities and we take into account all relevant views when we consult.

It is easy to assume that if an individual or group does not respond to a consultation, this indicates a lack of interest or concern about the subject. Assumptions about indifference can be false and when planning a consultation consideration should be given as to how best to overcome the real obstacles that prevent people from taking part.

We need to be sensitive to the different needs of individuals and communities and we must seek out voices that are less likely to be heard and take steps to ensure that they are included.

Who do we find hard to reach?

Some individuals or groups find it difficult (or are unable) to take advantage of available opportunities. This could be, for example, because of an impairment, language or cultural difference, social expectation, time limits or financial constraint.

There is no single list that defines all groups of people we find hard to reach. Even if there was list, it would not be common to every local authority. In some areas, groups that are regarded as difficult to engage elsewhere are highly involved with the local scene.

Hard to reach groups may include homeless people, drug users, refugees, economic migrants and asylum seekers, Gypsies and Travellers, disabled people, people with mental health problems, minority ethnic groups, young people and those who live in relative rural isolation. To engage with these groups well, we have to target them directly.

Many other groups are difficult to contact such as the small business community and young middle-class workers.

All hard to reach groups are made up of individuals. Some may not want to be contacted by 'bureaucracy', others may have opted out because statutory services have let them down. Groups that are hard to reach may lack confidence in the system. Sometimes hard to reach groups are relatively easy to find – what is more difficult is how to engage them.

The social model of disability

The social model of disability, used by disabled people's organisations and adopted by the County Council, considers that it is the responsibility of all individuals and organisations to make the environment, systems and activities inclusive and accessible for everyone. It is not the responsibility of individuals to 'fit in' to a system or environment that excludes them and not their fault if they cannot participate because an event, information, building or environment is not accessible.

The social model promotes equality and independence. It is a positive approach because:

1. it involves everyone in identifying solutions
2. it encourages co-operative problem solving
3. it removes barriers for others as well as disabled people
4. it is an equality as well as equal opportunities model
5. it acknowledges disabled people's rights to full participation in society.

The social model is the best basis for improving consultation with disabled people and others who face obstacles to participation.



Why engage hard to reach people?

Nottinghamshire County Council has made a commitment to consult as widely as possible on the decisions it makes and the public services it offers. There is a wealth of knowledge and ideas that can be used to improve services from people who are not traditionally involved. There is also a growing acknowledgement that some of society's problems are caused or exacerbated by social exclusion. Making consultation inclusive is important because:

- consultations often need to find out the views of a cross-section of the population as a whole
- different sections of the community, particularly minorities, may have needs or views that are different from those of the majority. And, if they are not consulted effectively, these needs or views may remain unrecognised
- not taking account of people's differences could open the Council to claims of indirect discrimination
- consultation is a key element of equality legislation and equality impact assessment (Service Diversity Reviews - SDRs).

In planning a consultation we need to open our minds and involve all sections of the community in decision-making. The result will be better decisions, better policies, better programmes and more people being able to 'buy' into them.



How to engage people we find hard to reach

Step 1. Identify the groups you need to include

Never treat the public or hard to reach groups as an undifferentiated mass. Be clear about who you want or need to consult and get to know your audience.

Know what you want from them. Look at what you are trying to achieve and use this information when selecting your audience and the most appropriate methods of contact.

Step 2. Learn something about them

Know where they meet, what they read, see and hear; find out who is already talking to the people you want to reach.

Think about what gets their attention and look to those organisations that already reach your audience. They can advise on who to speak to and the best means of contact.

Step 3. Identify the obstacles

There are often real barriers that prevent people taking part in public consultations most common of which relate to language and accessibility.

The County Council's translation and interpreter Manager may be able to advise (see Guide 1 for details).

The personal approach

Personal contact at the earliest possible stage of a consultation will help identify obstacles and the means to overcome them. However small you start the first contact is the most important. And once you've started it will be easier to continue a dialogue.

Start early then take your time. It is sometimes difficult to establish an effective relationship with hard to reach groups. Public consultation is often done in a rush at the last minute and it is easy to fail to give adequate time to the relationship building that is necessary to consult well with hard to reach groups.



Establishing an effective relationship with hard to reach groups is more important than the outcome of a particular consultation. 'Parachuting in, asking a few questions and then never being seen again' is often used to describe how large, busy organisations consult with their public.

When people have become involved in a consultation, take the time to listen to what they say. Allow them to talk to you and don't stop listening when you have heard what you came to hear. Identifying the appropriate scope for a consultation is often a delicate art. Hearing more about what groups who may not normally talk to the County Council have to say is essential to understanding their areas of interest and concern.

What works best

Face-to-face meetings are the best means of engagement for almost any group. Whenever considering consultation, initial face-to-face meetings are desirable to:

- set the scene for the consultation exercise
- identify who may be interested in it
- find out how they may wish to participate.

Face-to-face meetings with hard to reach groups before and/or during the consultation should always be considered.

There may already be other people within the County Council and partner organisations such as the Primary Care Trust who have experiences and contacts that will be useful.

Where written material has to be provided, make available consultation documents in word format on the website. This is very adaptable, the font size can be readily increased and some computer programmes are able to read (and translate) word documents quickly into other useful formats.

You should consider providing large-print or taped versions of questionnaires for survey participants and printing Braille and large-print messages on postal consultation forms explaining how people with poor eyesight can participate more easily.

What to avoid

1. Methods that rely on IT or print. They are useful but are seldom sufficient on their own. All consultations should incorporate face-to-face techniques.
2. Reliance on public discussion for sensitive subjects.
3. Inappropriate language, technical descriptions and jargon.
4. Treating self-appointed spokespersons as a substitute for the whole community. Do consider them seriously but look to other potential consultees too.

Printed materials are seldom the best method of contacting hard to reach groups.

Besides the problems of identifying what language to write in and how to get materials in a specific language to your target group, significant numbers of people who speak languages other than English cannot read or write in that language.

As a general guide whenever print methods are used no matter what the target audience, the best written communication is simple and direct and avoids technical words and jargon.

Follow the Council's clear print guidelines (see appendix 2) but also consider alternative formats including the telephone and video/audio tape and large print. Consult members of the target community before spending vast sums on translations and alternative print formats.



Identifying physical and environmental barriers

There are two main ways of identifying environmental barriers: accessibility audits and feedback.

An accessibility audit offers a strategic approach to identifying existing and potential barriers within a physical environment. It generally involves an onsite inspection and an assessment of accessibility against criteria.

Feedback from disabled people through informal comments, complaints or formal consultation is also useful and should always be sought but if relied on as the primary source it can often be received too late.

No matter how much consideration is given to overcoming barriers within the physical environment, it is unlikely that the needs of every user can be anticipated or provided for. Do what you can and take time out to think about how the consultation can be made more accessible. Feedback will also help improve future arrangements.

Overcoming language barriers

Our county is increasingly diverse and a surprisingly large number of languages are spoken by residents. In planning any consultation, the needs of those whose first language is not English should be taken into account.

Translating all materials into all languages is neither cost effective nor useful. Translating on request can also be ineffective and costly. The specific requirements of your intended audience need to be taken into account and that invariably means you need to consult them on what would work best for them.

Alternate means of consulting should be considered that would better enable all sections of the community to participate such as meetings with specific language groups or consultations aided by working with minority language community organisations.

The internet increasingly allows consultation materials in alternate formats to be made accessible to more people – it can act as a repository for documents and offer a range of contact arrangements to suit different language groups. But it is a passive medium and unless people know that the materials and arrangements are advertised or available there it cannot work.

Multi-purpose DVDs allow consultation materials in alternate formats and languages to be brought together in one package and their compact nature allows them to be distributed widely at relatively modest cost.

The County Council has staff with a range of language skills and it may be possible to involve them in improving communications and accessibility to a wider circle. The Council also subscribes to 'Language Line' which may also be able to provide (at a cost) interpretation and translation services.

Interpretation

Where English is not spoken at all or is spoken with difficulty, interpreters are essential. This may be particularly useful for first generation immigrants such as older Asian women, but should also be considered for consultees whose preferred format is British Sign Language.

The best interpreters are people from the target community not just people who may speak their language. Face to face contact with relevant organisations and agencies may help identify spokespeople who may be prepared to act as partners for the County Council in consulting particular groups.



Intermediaries and opinion formers

Engagement may be helped if communications with the target group are done in conjunction with mediators and opinion formers. Essentially the key is to ask for help from those who already have a better relationship with the hard to reach group you are interested in. Mediators may include:

1. Community leaders, people who have already established a formal role for themselves as spokespeople for their communities.
2. Advocates, notably professionals such as lawyers, teachers and doctors who also often act as spokespeople for minority ethnic communities.
3. Activists, generally people without formal standing whose contacts make them useful go-betweens between officialdom and minority ethnic communities.
4. Ordinary people who have a particular interest in the consultation topic and want to see results.

The Council's equality and diversity groups

The County Council has three equality and diversity groups – the black workers group, the disabled workers group and the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender workers group. These groups may be able to offer relevant advice or provide people who are able to assist in engaging with hard to reach groups.



Overcoming cultural barriers

Cultural differences matter and they go beyond issues about how to address individuals from a particular group, how to greet them, how different cultures perceive individual 'space' and the intrusion of it. Cultural barriers can be overcome if individuals are treated respectfully and with flexibility. Particular attention should be given to:

- gender and the sensitivities of some faith communities, possibly addressed by specific single sex groups and meetings
- age – again it may be useful to have meetings on some issues aimed at different age groups.

There is often a need to introduce participants from hard to reach groups to formal consultation processes, explaining the significance of them, the reasons why their participation may be beneficial, as well as reassuring participants about confidentiality.

Consultation is a peculiar activity, its purpose is not self-evident to everyone and people's experiences of it may have already provoked prejudices against participation. In some cases poor feedback or unpopular outcomes may have undermined their natural confidence.





Overcoming barriers due to physical impairment

Barriers to access occur when the needs of disabled people are not fully considered, a limited view of disability is taken or incorrect assumptions are made about their requirements.

Barriers can prevent or impede access to buildings and services and cause irritation, confusion, fatigue and even injury in more serious cases.

Barriers to access are not just physical in terms of the architecture, structure or layout of the building or in its access arrangements. Environmental factors such as the design and materials used in fixtures and fittings, signage, acoustics, sight lines and lighting can also have a major effect on accessibility.

For consultation and event organisers, failure to remove physical barriers can result in embarrassment, bad publicity, criticism and loss of support.

Overcoming barriers due to sensory impairment

Non-statutory organisations may be able to help in consultations with people who have sensory impairments. In particular they may be able to help identify suitable local and countywide organisations whose members may wish to be involved or who could participate in panel surveys or other consultative mechanisms.

It is important to make sure that all our consultation processes are designed to include people with sensory impairments. One simple way to do this is to involve organisations and other services that are used by people with sensory impairments in your consultation.

In preparing for a meeting with consultees who have or are likely to have sensory impairments, take time to consider what pre-meeting communications are necessary, how the meeting itself should be organised, who else you might wish to see present.

For the meeting itself, you may wish to consider what aids and adaptations are necessary, what would be the best environment, how the room should be lit, how best to arrange seating to maximise communication opportunities. You should also consider how to minimise any possibility of background noise and what your own personal support arrangements should be – it is often useful to have other colleagues along to help identify and deal with problems and to help check that the meeting is working effectively.

Book sign language interpreters, if needed, well in advance

Overcoming barriers due to learning difficulties

People with learning disabilities need to have sufficient time to speak for themselves and to enable you to give explanations to them in a way they will understand.

It is essential to be flexible when arranging meetings with consultees with learning disabilities because they do not always turn out as planned. When necessary, be prepared to take longer and arrange more or repeat meetings if you want to achieve your goals. Some people with learning disabilities may find crowds, lack of space and sitting or waiting for long periods difficult. This needs to be taken into account when arranging events.

Consultees may also have limited understanding about the purpose of the event and have little or no idea what to expect or how to participate. Do not assume everyone understands what your consultation is about, what your role is or how they can



participate. Explain the purpose of the event and how it fits into the consultation and decision making process at the start.

Most people with learning disabilities have difficulty with literacy. Information on services produced in small print with complex sentences may exclude people with learning disabilities as well as many people whose first language is not English.

People with learning disabilities need to be encouraged and empowered to speak for themselves - especially when they come with a carer. Always speak to the person with learning disabilities first and always check with the carer if someone is not clear.

Many people with learning disabilities will respond to closed questions by saying yes, perhaps because they do not understand or are unsure. Always try asking open questions or changing the question around to check out if you get the same response.

People with learning disabilities may not understand jargon or obscure terminology. It's bad practice to use it in any consultation – unforgivable where you know in advance that your audience is likely to find it difficult.

Use language that the consultee will understand or use a communication aid such as drawings or hand gestures for example Makaton or Widgit. Similarly, you can encourage consultees with learning disabilities to use audio and video recordings as part of their own contribution, rather than making them rely on written or verbal responses.

Many people with learning disabilities will need support to follow through on anything they are told. Ensure that adequate time and support is available for them and allow them to come back with their response later if they wish. Don't rush their response or make an assumption about what it is or how they would like to respond.

Be particularly careful if someone attends an event without support when you think this may be necessary. Try to make sure that pre-meeting publicity or communications set the scene simply and adequately, so that all consultees that are invited are well informed about what to expect. Use an established method of picture text as well as plain English.

Some people with learning disabilities have difficulty with the concept of time. This may present a problem in terms of attendance, punctuality or clashes with other events that they are interested in or think they are attending. Try to associate your activities with events that the consultee will understand – for example: 'Our meeting will be after breakfast or dinner', 'The changes will only happen after the Christmas holidays'.

Consulting young people

Young people may not respond in significant numbers to a general consultation, so their views can be difficult to identify. Often this is because they have little experience of successful involvement in consultations, they may feel easily patronised by authority or may be genuinely disinterested in the topic.

But young people can be readily involved and when they are they can provide very useful and unique insights'. Targeting young people should not be restricted to topics relating to the way that they are cared for or educated. The priorities the Council sets for its services and how they are delivered can be just as usefully considered with young people.



Some authorities¹ have successfully set up special consultative forums for young people, either as a way to consult about a particular topic, or as permanent mechanisms that can be used for consulting young people about a range of issues. The County and Districts in Nottinghamshire all run Youth Assemblies which can be approached to discuss key issues.

New methods such as text voting, telephone call-ins, websites and email are often regarded as the key to involving young people. But while young people may be greater users of new technology and adopt it more readily, their involvement should not be restricted to such methods. The most important considerations remain: how relevant is this topic to the target audience and how much are their views likely to influence decision-making.

Consultation with children or vulnerable adults can be specialised. Contact the Customer Management Team if you need advice.

Time pressure and commitments

Many people are prevented from being more involved in activities due to prior commitments in respect of:

- work (offer alternate times including evenings and weekends)
- child care (offer crèche facilities)
- calendar clashes (avoid major cultural events and key holiday periods).

¹ For example London Borough of Lewisham.

Feedback

Consultation raises expectations and details of what people said and the decisions made must always be given – with reasons why a particular outcome arose.

This is particularly the case with hard to reach groups whose experience of a successful relationship or consultation with the County Council may be limited. Their continuing engagement may be dependent on being treated properly after the consultation has closed. Failure to provide adequate feedback is hugely disrespectful.

Evaluation

All consultations should incorporate some degree of formal evaluation and it may be particularly helpful to examine how effectively specific hard to reach groups were involved.

One simple way to provide both good feedback and an evaluation of the consultation from the perspective of hard to reach groups is to ask participants to a formal 'wash up' or post consultation meeting. This will provide an opportunity to discuss the outcome of the consultation and examine where to go next.



Appendix 1

Top tips for inclusive consultation

1. Build on what you've got. Use your existing relationships with all sectors of the community to involve them with local initiatives and as a route into other groups. And make sure you use the other relationships that colleagues within the County Council have developed.
2. The voluntary and community sector consists of many, many diverse groups. Do not assume you are consulting all the community or voluntary sector just because you have consulted, for example with the local council for voluntary services (CVS). You need to have other mechanisms that reach out to a wider audience.
3. Prepare the ground - do your groundwork and research. Give hard to reach groups the time and support they need.
4. Get help. Starting small with one or more members of the target group as a mentor or guide can help open doors that you did not know existed.
5. When you approach community groups, put yourself in their shoes – what are they likely to get out of it? But don't be limited by that assumption, the sooner you ask whether they are interested, how they want to be consulted and what they think the better.
6. Practical considerations such as timing and format of meetings, arranging transport, crèche facilities or expenses, may remove barriers that prevent people from taking part.
7. Research has shown that providing feedback is more important for hard to reach communities and groups. Securing any further involvement is more difficult unless hard to reach groups can be shown what happened as a result of previous dialogues.
8. Feedback is essential and needs to be honest – it should never be avoided because the decision taken differs markedly from what the consultee wanted. If anything, this makes feedback and providing an explanation of the County Council's view even more important.
9. Ensure that all parties receive a copy of any report or findings as they are entitled to know what is happening to that information.
10. The personal approach works best, so wherever possible meet hard to reach groups directly and become a familiar face.
11. All examples of successful engagement and good practice need to be shared throughout the organisation.
12. Keeping in touch is really important. Try and build up a rapport with people. They will want to see that their voices have been heard and the outputs of the consultation should be communicated to them. Tell them what is happening.

Appendix 2

Nottinghamshire County Council's clear print guidelines

1. Use a plain "sans serif" font such as Arial, like this document or similar fonts such as Comic Sans, Helvetica, Verdana etc.
2. Most disabled people's organisations recommend using 14 pt print size, as standard for everyone (certainly nothing less than 12 pt should be used).
3. Use ragged right margins, justified to the left. Do not use centre justified text or fully justified text, which has extra spaces inserted between words as both are more difficult to read.
4. Where columns are used, redesign for alternative formats without the use of columns, so information can be followed line by line.
5. Use bold for emphasis instead of words in capital letters. Many people recognise words by their shape. Words made up of capitals create a block, which is more difficult to read.
6. Don't use italics or underline words, as this also makes the words more difficult to read.
7. Don't use fancy fonts in print or on presentations.
8. Maximum contrast between print and background is needed. Use of beige, cream or yellow coloured paper is often preferred, to reduce glare. Avoid placing text in shaded boxes.
9. Don't print over background graphics, which will confuse the eye and reduce contrast between text and background.
10. Use matt rather than glossy paper, which may reflect the light.
11. Be prepared to make written information available in a range of accessible formats. The most commonly requested are:
 - Large print (at least 18 point)
 - Braille
 - Audiotape
 - Computer disk, DVD or email, in Word, Rich Text Format (RTF) or plain text or MS-DOS text without formatting.
12. If you are using email, don't embed attachments in the message, as some software will not be able to transcribe this into voice, text or Braille. Use simple attachments at the end of messages or send as plain text within the body of the message.
13. Put documents on your website, especially if you know that the website is accessible and that participants have easy access to the Internet.
14. Large documents should, where possible, be produced in a spiral bound format, to make it easy to read from a desk or table and to use with magnifiers, without the need to hold them.
15. Avoid abbreviations and symbols, for example, use the word equal rather than =, plus not +, and not &.
16. Keep punctuation to a minimum and avoid using tabs and indents.
17. Describe diagrams, charts and pictures.
18. Present tables and columns so they can be read line by line across a page.
19. Identify sections or paragraphs by name or number, and refer to them in the text in this way rather than by page number.
20. Use summaries and indexes at the beginning and between sections of reports (and minutes for all audiotape versions), so that someone can identify where on the tape they may want to listen.
21. If your computer has a voice synthesiser facility, use it to check the unformatted text to ensure that it reads well.

Appendix 3

Encouraging participation generally

The best encouragements to participation are:

- consulting the right audience
- consulting them on a topic of interest to them
- doing it in the way they prefer; and
- giving them an obvious influence over decision making and acknowledging it.

There are many other ways that help:

1. Using face-to-face contact, as relying on the written word can often exclude people.
2. 'Taking the consultation to the people', talking to people at venues that they already attend rather than expecting them to come to the authority's chosen venue.
3. Recognising the importance of the social dimension, seating people at round tables where they could talk to each other over a cup of tea, organising an awayday at an interesting venue, providing refreshments, particularly proper meals rather than just tea and biscuits.
4. Making the event more entertaining by using participative consultation methods, rather than just having speakers 'talk at' those who attend. There are few enough rewards for users to get involved so making participation fun can really help.
5. Refreshments are often useful for making an atmosphere more congenial and may also help people to fit events into their own tight schedules – breakfast and lunchtime meetings can be very popular with stakeholders and people who you have regular contact with. All food should be clearly marked with descriptions of what it is. The food should be culturally appropriate and cater for special diets such as vegetarian.
6. Crèche facilities may be particularly useful for events aimed at audiences that are likely to have childcare responsibilities. Encouraging the participation of consultees with children can also help create more of a community atmosphere. It can also be useful to have meetings and events specifically aimed at such groups when their involvement in the consultation is key e.g. on educational, school transport, leisure and play issues.
7. Direct incentives for example, offering modest prizes or gifts (depending on the issue, local firms may be willing to sponsor such incentives e.g. shopping vouchers from local supermarkets).
8. Acknowledging that sometimes people may be reluctant to contribute if they have to identify themselves. When appropriate, you may need to allow people to record their views separately from their names.

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Nottinghamshire County Council's consultation standards

1. A consultation mandate should be completed and approved by your departmental co-ordinator/ champion before the start of any consultation. *(Guides 2 and 11)*
2. The consultation should be logged on the County Council's consultation database. *(Guides 2, 10 and 11)*
3. For key decisions a public engagement plan should be published with the forward plan. *(Guides 2 and 11)*
4. In planning a consultation, the specific communication needs of groups and individuals who are often otherwise excluded should be considered. *(Guides 3 and 4)*
5. A minimum of 12 weeks should be allowed for consultation on major decisions. *(Guide 2)*
6. The name, address and contact number of the person responsible for the consultation should be published on all consultation materials. *(Guides 2 and 10)*
7. The consultation material should make clear by what date responses are required, in what format and to whom they should be sent. *(Guides 2 and 6)*
8. The consultation should include a face-to-face element where consultees are able to meet, question and put their views to the decision-maker(s). *(Guides 4, 5, 7 and 8)*
9. Any venue selected for a consultation event should meet the Council's accessibility code. *(Guides 4 and 8)*
10. Any complaints about the consultation, questions asked, materials or time allowed should be noted in the consultation report. *(Guides 9, 10 and 11)*
11. A notice of decision should be published for each consultation. *(Guides 10 and 11)*
12. Feedback regarding the responses, the Council's decision and how the consultation influenced it should be given to consultees. *(Guides 4, 7, 9, 10, 11 and 12)*



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