

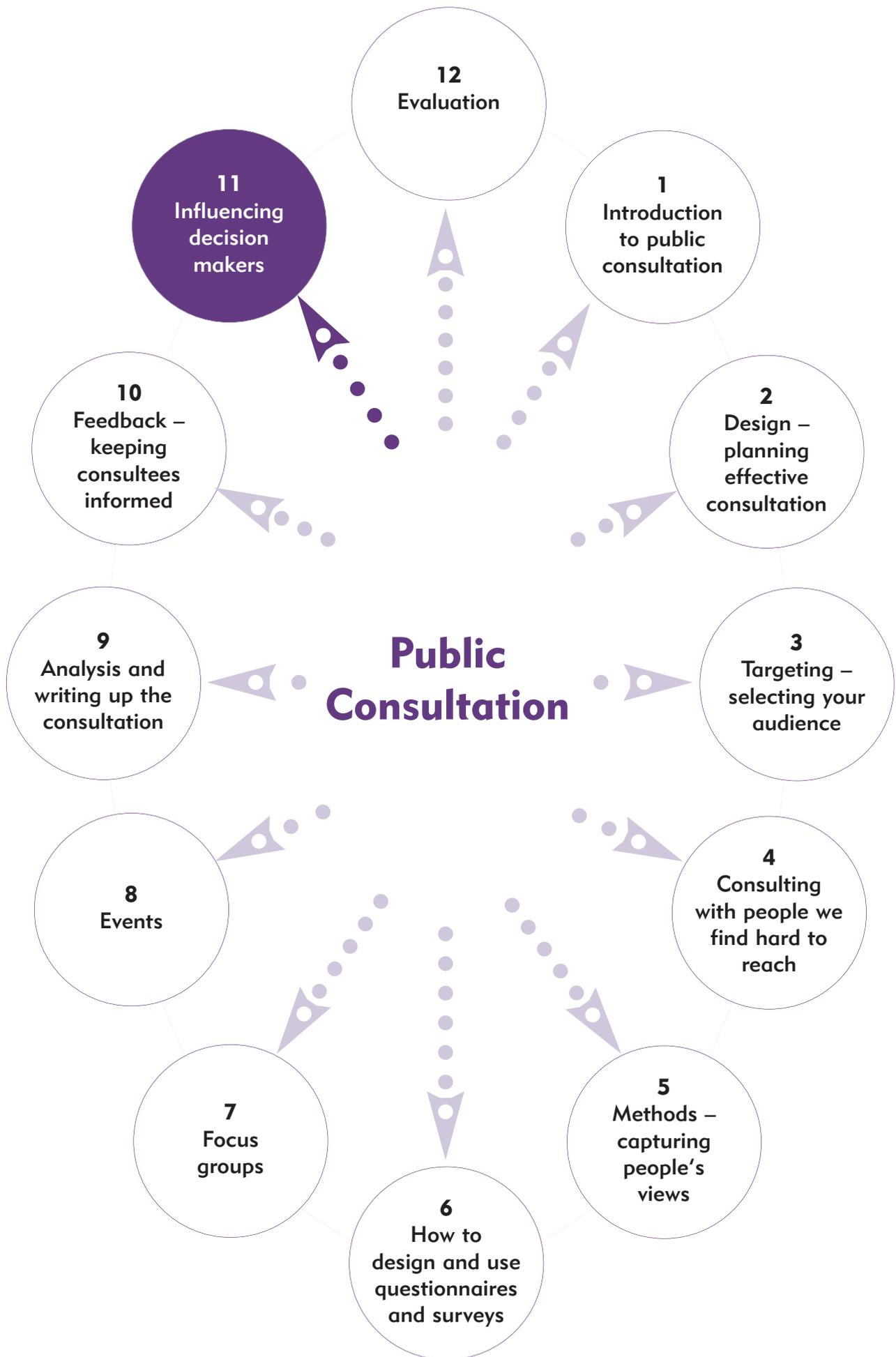


Nottinghamshire
County Council

Consultation in Nottinghamshire Influencing decision makers



guide 11





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Introduction

Influencing decision makers is a critical part of a good consultation. The whole point of consulting with the public and/or stakeholders is to give them the opportunity to affect the decision-making process. That does not mean that the Council abdicates its own responsibility for making decisions or that other issues, such as legal, financial or political constraints, can be waived. The Council can reject the views that emerge from a consultation or may give precedence to one opinion over another if there is conflict or no clear outcome. In all circumstances the reasoning behind the Council's decisions must be made clear.

Good decision making must be transparent and participants need to know that their views have been heard and understood, even if they have not, ultimately, been adopted. Where the Council concurs with the responses received during a consultation this also needs to be evident to encourage future participation in consultations.

A notice of decision should be issued, which explains the Council's position on each of the major issues raised in the consultation and the reasons why a particular decision or action was chosen.

Influencing decision makers

Allowing stakeholders and the public to influence the Council's decision-making process is very important. So our decision-making processes must allow time to consider the results of relevant consultations.

The link to decision-making is often weak. Three-quarters of the local authorities surveyed for the Audit Commission's management paper, 'Listen up! Effective Community Consultation' said they failed to satisfactorily link the results of consultation with decision-making, and this prevented the results being used effectively.

Consultation managers need to be clear about how the information collected will be used to inform policy, strategy and project development. The Council's consultation mandate requires the decision maker to be identified from the outset, but we also need to be reasonably clear about when the decision is likely to be taken. That way stakeholders and the public know where they stand, whom they need to influence and when.

Key decisions are now published in a forward plan and if consultation is going to be used to support the decision-making process this should also be identified.

Once a consultation is closed, it should be reported to the decision maker as quickly as possible. Each of the key or substantive issues raised in the consultation should be addressed in coming to a decision and a record of that consideration made. This may be as simple as keeping the minutes of a relevant meeting but it is better to write a report on the issues and the County Council's response to them. An action plan setting out what steps will be taken as a result of the consultation can then be drawn up and stakeholders should be informed (See example in Appendix 1).

How consultation responses should be presented

The output of a consultation, such as the responses received, should be presented objectively in a formal consultation report. The report should distinguish between the various methods used, and any conflicting outputs should be highlighted together with any explanation for them if known.

All percentages should be of the total number of responses and should be presented alongside the raw number of responses. For example, a consultation receives 1,000 responses with 250 from each of four areas. One of the options (option A) is opposed by 125 people, but they are all from one



area (area A). This should be reported as: '12.5% (125) of all respondents opposed option A but this comprised half of the 250 respondents from area A'; not simply: '50% of people in Area A opposed Option 1'.

Any officer recommendation accompanying the consultation report should seek to address the various issues raised by consultees and identify any additional factors that the decision-maker(s) may need to take into account. It may be advisable to draw the attention of key stakeholders to the report and its recommendations prior to the meeting particularly if they may be otherwise unaware of it taking place. Openness in decision making helps to build trust and reassures consultees that their views are being taken into account.

The Council's notice of decision

The notice of decision should acknowledge the role of stakeholders and the public in helping the County Council come to a decision. It should follow a simple format along the following lines:

Suggested components of a notice of decision

- 1 **We**
Who was responsible for taking the decision or an action?
- 2 **What**
What was the decision or action to be taken?
- 3 **When**
When did this decision or action take place?
- 4 **Following consultation with**
Who were the audiences?
- 5 **Which sought their views on**
What were they asked about?

6 **We are grateful for the response to this consultation and the contribution made by all our participants**
Acknowledgement

7 **Their assistance will help the County Council to achieve**
How does this decision or action help achieve wider project or corporate aims?

The notice must be clear and to the point. Do not be tempted to use unnecessary jargon, remember that statistics can be confusing and need to be used carefully. Consider whether a diagram or chart may provide more clarity than words alone. The public are not likely to wade through lengthy reports so be concise or your key messages will be lost.

It should explain the Council's position on each of the major issues raised in the consultation and, particularly where the Council's decision conflicts with the views expressed by stakeholders, the Council's reasoning needs to be given. This can be done in table form and an example is provided in Appendix 1.

Clarity about the reasons for differences of opinion helps to maintain good relations and encourage consultees to participate again in future consultations. Providing a summary of these to key stakeholders and interested consultees is a good way of demonstrating transparency and increasing accountability.

Thought should be given as to the best way of advising consultees of the decision. A PowerPoint or slide presentation may be useful for meetings with stakeholders or partners if they were not present when the decision was taken.

The results of the consultation should also be logged onto the consultation database.

Appendix 1

Feedback on key issues and action plan

Feedback on key issues

Item	Stakeholder recommendation or concern identified in consultation (from key issues log)	Submitted by	Council's position		
			Accepted (Y/N)	Reasons for decision and mitigation measures proposed	Lead officer for further information
1					
2					

Action plan

Item	Key issue	Action	Lead officer	Target date	Estimated cost
1					
2					

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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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