

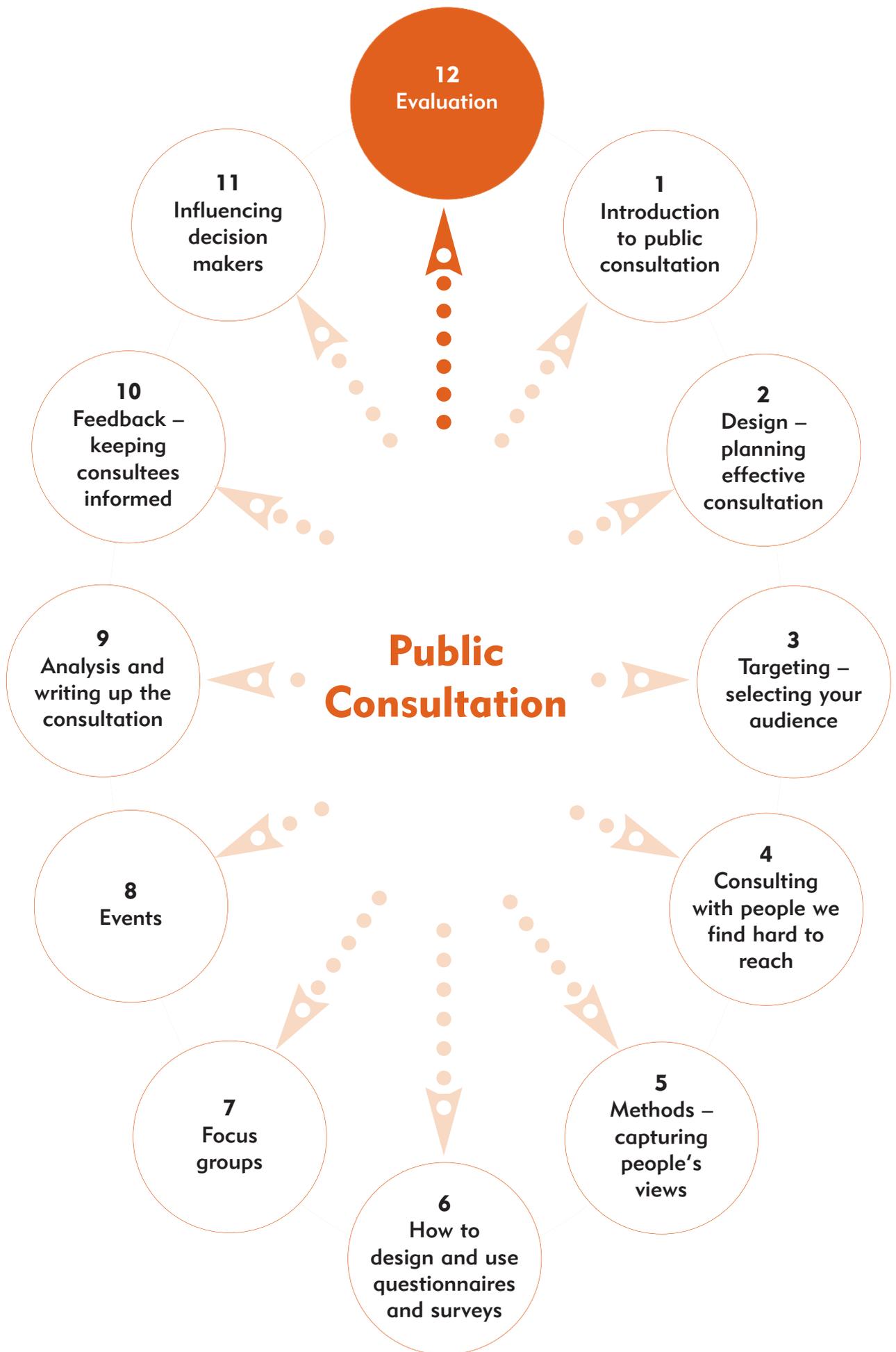


Nottinghamshire  
County Council

# Consultation in Nottinghamshire Evaluation



guide 12





## Contents

1. Introduction	4
2. Methods of evaluation	4
3. How to prepare an evaluation plan	4
4. Focus on objectives	4
5. Effectiveness	4
6. Audience participation	5
7. Independent evaluation	5
8. Sharing what you learn	6

## Appendices

1. An evaluation checklist for consultation managers	7
2. Questions to ask at evaluation meetings with stakeholders and consultees	9

## Introduction

Any major communications projects such as a consultation should be evaluated. Evaluation helps to:

- find out what worked, what did not and why
- increase learning and improve future practice
- assess whether involving the public contributes to improved services, actions or decision making
- judge whether a consultation was cost effective in terms of time and resources.

If you are in a position to be able to answer 'what would I do differently or the same next time?' then your evaluation will have been valuable.

## Methods of evaluation

There are three main approaches to evaluation:

1. Decision audit
  - how the views of consultees affected decisions or action
2. Process review
  - the extent to which plan timescales, budgets and project objectives were met
  - the extent to which the intended audience took part
  - whether the methods were effective
  - whether there is anything that they would do differently.
3. Stakeholder satisfaction
  - the general satisfaction of consultees with the process

The best evaluations use a combination of all three.

## How to prepare an evaluation plan

The evaluation should be considered at the planning stage of a consultation. It should be:

- proportionate to the scale of the project
- done in good time
- have adequate resources invested in it.

## Focus on objectives

Clear objectives provide the basis for an evaluation. For each objective there should be some performance indicator and performance level explicitly stated. This can then be assessed at the end of the consultation to give a strong indication about whether the consultation was a success.

Using SMART<sup>1</sup> objectives helps when it comes to check whether they were achieved.

## Effectiveness

One key question is 'has anything changed as a result of the consultation?' At the end you need to be able to measure whether:

- you got the information that you wanted
- you have used the views obtained
- the consultation has led to some identifiable change in your service or policy
- the consultation has changed the relationship between you and your users and others.

<sup>1</sup> Objectives should be: Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant and Time bound.



## Audience participation

It is good practice to offer participants an opportunity to comment on any consultation because they can offer a unique insight. In particular, consultees can be asked, as part of the consultation process, for their views on:

1. the information provided (adequacy, ease of understanding, availability in appropriate formats)
2. the methods used
3. the timescales offered for responses
4. whether they felt the consultation was worthwhile

Regular meetings with key stakeholders provide a good opportunity to ask them for their view on the way the Council consults generally. They should be asked wherever possible to illustrate their answers with specific examples drawn from consultations they have recently been involved in.



## Independent evaluation

The Cabinet Office and Audit Commission have developed frameworks against which consultations can be evaluated. We have adapted these for use in Nottinghamshire and the checklist appears in Appendix 1 (Page 7).

In circumstances where you are particularly keen to learn the lessons, or where there is the potential for substantial external criticism, it may be worth considering commissioning an independent evaluation of your consultation. The Consultation Institute offers an external assessment based on its knowledge of best practice and can be contacted at 21a High Street, Sandy, Bedfordshire SG19 1AG 01767 689 600 [info@consultationinstitute.org](mailto:info@consultationinstitute.org). or via the Customer Management Team.

Independence can also be brought into the process by establishing a stakeholder steering group to help manage the consultation or by commissioning a third party to summarise the responses and draft the consultation report.

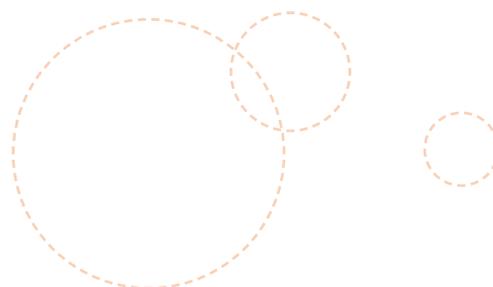




## Sharing what you learn

The Nottinghamshire Consultation Practitioners Forum allows consultation managers to spread best practice within the Council and throughout Nottinghamshire. We all learn from the successes we achieve and the mistakes we make. Sharing what we learn will allow us to improve our performance.

Examples of good practice will be recorded in the relevant section of the Council's consultation database and if you need help with a consultation these examples may well help. In addition help and advice is available from the Customer Management Team.



# Appendix 1

## An evaluation checklist<sup>2</sup> for consultation managers

### Preparation

1. Was the consultation entered onto the consultation database?
2. Did everyone (staff, consultees, partners) understand the objectives?
3. Was the timescale and process transparent and kept to – if not, why not?
4. Were the level of resources and support right?
5. Did you budget adequately – note areas of overspend/savings for next time?
6. What were the costs (including staff time)?
7. Were there any unforeseen costs – what were they?
8. How does the cost compare with other similar exercises in the authority or other similar authorities?
9. Was the consultation planned jointly with a partner or neighbouring organisation?

### Audience

10. Were the right stakeholders involved?
11. Did you successfully reach all your stakeholders?
12. Were you successful in reaching 'hard-to-reach' groups?

### Publicity and methods

13. Did the publicity material you used work (for example, posters to advertise an event, putting material on the internet, press releases)?
14. Did you get the level of information provided right (for example, it was easy to access, relevant to the consultation, produced in plain language, easy to understand)?

15. Was the consultation accessible (for example, were materials available in other languages and formats, such as Braille and audiocassette, where necessary? Were interpreters provided or necessary? Were venues accessible? Did the seating and set up encourage participation)?
16. Were the methods used appropriate for the objectives?
17. Did some methods work better with particular stakeholders than others?
18. If you used more than one method, which worked best and why?
19. Was there the right balance of qualitative and quantitative methods?

### Responses

20. Were the numbers that took part expected – did you reach your targets?
21. Were your response rates high enough to give reliable results?
22. Did you get the information you wanted in sufficient time, depth, and quality?

### Outcomes

23. Did the consultation inform a decision, shape policy or an action?
24. Did the consultation help set local performance standards and targets?
25. Has the consultation helped to improve the cost effectiveness of a service by making it match users' needs more closely?
26. Did it lead to a change of policy or service – be specific about how?

<sup>2</sup> Adapted from *An introductory guide: How to consult your users* (Cabinet Office) and *Listen up. Effective community consultation* (Audit Commission).

27. How many people will be affected by the changes?
28. Has the consultation changed the relationship between you and your users and others?

### **Feedback**

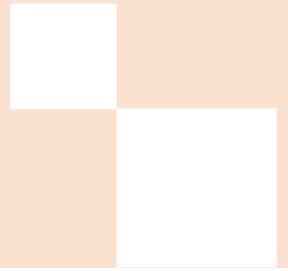
29. Were results made known to consultees, the wider public, relevant staff and partner organisations?
30. Were the consultation findings and outcomes logged onto the Council's consultation database and made available to other services that might find them helpful?

### **Evaluation**

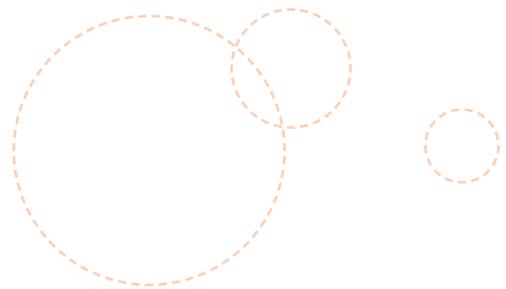
31. Did the consultation reach a representative sample of the population and all the target groups?
32. If the consultation did not meet your objectives, why was this and what steps can be taken to prevent similar problems in the future?
33. What was the evaluation of those who took part; did they see the consultation as fair and useful?
34. What would you do differently next time?

# Useful questions to ask at evaluation meetings with stakeholders and consultees

1. Did you understand why you were asked to be involved in this consultation?
2. Did you know the difference your participation would make, that is, did you understand what this consultation could and could not influence?
3. Did you think you were provided with adequate information about the subject?
4. If not, what further information would have helped you to take part?
5. Was the information given easy to read and understand?
6. Were you told whom you could ask or where you could go if you needed more information?
7. How easy was it for you to give your views?
8. Did you think the information given and the questions you were asked were fair and balanced?
9. Were you given the opportunity to say everything you wanted to say?
10. Did you feel that you needed additional support to participate?
11. What else could have been done to help you participate?
12. What did you think of the practical arrangements for this consultation (for example, meeting venues, refreshments, interpreters, facilitators)?
13. Did you feel your contribution was listened to and respected?
14. Did you feel your contribution made a difference?
15. How do you think this consultation exercise could have been improved?
16. What did you gain from being involved in this exercise?
17. Are you satisfied that we reported the findings of the consultation accurately?
18. Did we tell you the outcome, that is the decision or action the Council took?
19. Do you think the consultation made a difference to the decision?
20. Has being involved in this consultation changed the way you feel about the Council for better or worse?



## Notes



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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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