

Consultation Strategy

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London Borough of Newham

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1.0 Introduction

1.1 Overview

The Council's Executive is committed to a consistent and sustainable approach to engagement with others. Consultation is one of the key ways the Council engages with others to understand their needs, views and opinions.

This document builds on the solid foundations established by the London Borough of Newham's annual corporate, directorate and divisional surveys to provide a framework for the delivery of future consultations undertaken at all levels by the London Borough of Newham. In addition this document demonstrates the Council's commitment to be open, accessible and to involve local people and stakeholders in shaping their area and the services they receive.

In future the policies and procedures presented in this document will be the starting point for all consultation projects and evidence of its use will be seen as a performance measure.

The development of this strategy is informed by specialist in-house expertise, from experience gained from a wide range of consultation exercises, and from best practice observed in other authorities and organisations.

1.2 The need for a Consultation Strategy

All local authorities have a statutory duty to consult on specific areas of service delivery. Public consultation is a key element of both the council's sustainable community strategy and central government policy. Since April 2009, as part of the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007, all councils have a duty to "*consider, as a matter of course, the possible information provision, consultation and involvement opportunities they need to provide people across all authority functions*". Therefore, it is now a legal requirement that a council should 'inform, consult and engage' local communities in everything that they do.

Authorities must, as a minimum inform people about services, and should consult, involve or devolve when appropriate. The nature of involvement will depend on the service concerned and the issues at hand. The outcome of implementing the Duty will be measured by (NI) I4: the percentage of people who feel they can influence decisions in their locality.

This Consultation Strategy sets out where we are now and a way forward, to ensure that we have the insight and evidence we need to achieve our Strategic ambitions and to meet our ongoing commitments to our residents and stakeholders both within Newham and beyond.

The potential benefits of this strategy are:

- Services can be targeted to provide what people want, and avoid what people do not want
- Take-up of services can be improved, lowering unit costs
- User satisfaction can be monitored to provide performance and quality of service indicators
- Problems that may arise from proposed changes to services can be pinpointed and avoided
- Consultation can ensure that decisions, policies and strategies are founded on evidence
- Local people can be involved more in decision-making, augmenting the democratic process.

1.3 National and Local Context

Local Context

Newham's Sustainable Community Strategy outlines ambitious plans to make Newham a place where people choose to live, work and stay. To achieve this vision we will look to transform the area, both in terms of regeneration and the types of opportunities available to residents. We are committed to improving people's lives, helping them fulfil their potential and boost aspirations.

A co-ordinated and effective approach to consultation is required to ensure that we understand the needs, views and opinions of those who live and use the councils services and those who work and stay in the borough.

The Consultation Strategy is linked to a number of other strategies within the council. It is aligned to the Sustainable Community Strategy; forming part of the Active & Connected Newham theme to achieve Newham's priority of Building Community. The Consultation Strategy also links with the Community Engagement Strategy, Events Strategy and the Equality and Diversity Strategy.

National Context

Focus on consultation and customer and community engagement in public services is increasing nationally, with the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act of 2007. This encompasses the design of services around customer needs and preferences (choice) and the drive to encourage active citizen participation in how services are delivered in democratic decision-making (voice).

The national agenda is very clear about this area with the Local Government White Paper 'Strong and prosperous communities' seeing community consultation as key to enabling residents to have more control and say over their services. Indeed, the second chapter of the white paper focuses on responsive services, and commits councils to this through a new duty to inform, consult, involve and devolve. In addition, there is the new 'Communities in Control: real people, real power' white paper which focuses on deepening involvement with a specific requirement to allow people to have a say and having an influence (source: Communities and Local Government).
<http://www.communities.gov.uk/communities/communityempowerment/communitiesincontrol/>).

1.4 Consultation a Definition

Consultation is the process of asking for and listening to the views of local people or groups with the aim of influencing decisions, policies or actions. Consultation does not include the routine collection of management information nor the daily dialogue with our residents and clients on the part of our front line staff.

Definitions from a variety of public bodies are provided below;

The Consultation Institute offers a useful definition:

"The dynamic process of dialogue between individuals, groups or organisations, based upon a genuine exchange of views and normally with the objective of influencing decisions, policies or programmes of action."

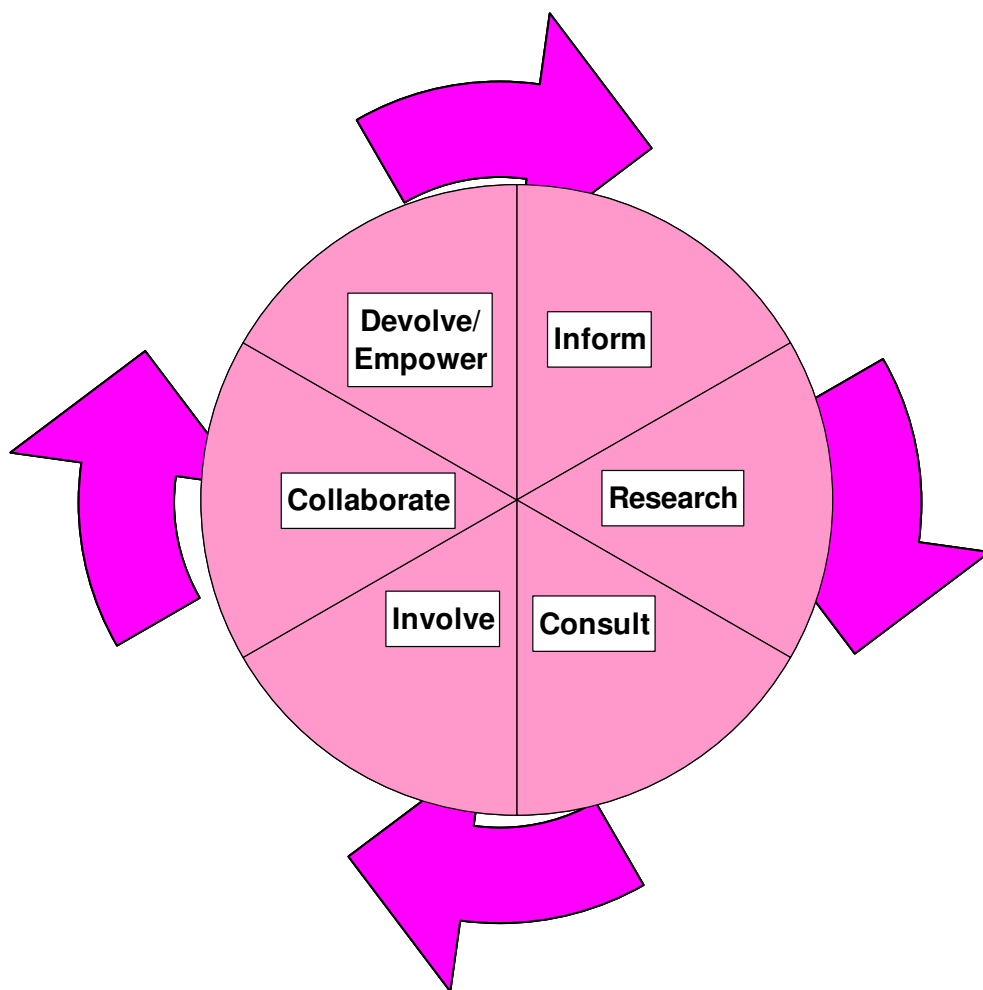
The Audit Commission also provides a good working definition of consultation:

"A dynamic process of dialogue between two or more parties that leads to a decision based on an exchange of views and information"

Consultation places users and stakeholders at the centre of any decision. Consultation provides information to the target audience so that they can decide on the issues and make an informed choice and does not need to be completely representative. Consultation is used to investigate and address complex issues, to test ideas or approaches, or to introduce scenarios or detailed options to participants. It is far more than the one-off systematic collection of information from or about users and stakeholders that typifies the majority of market research projects. These market research projects are also embraced by this strategy, resources permitting.

1.5 How Consultation links to Community Engagement

There are clear links between the consultation strategy and the community engagement strategy. Consultation is an important community engagement method. This is illustrated in the diagram below. It is a specific element of the statutory duty to involve as described on page one. There are particular links between the two strategies in relation to certain deliverables, in particular the calendars of activity, the toolkits and the network/ reference groups. It is the intention that these will be developed in tandem and that the Community Leadership and Engagement (CoLE) team and the research and policy team will work closely together to avoid duplication and ensure joint working.



2.0 Delivery Principles

2.1 Key Principles

The following principles are in accordance with the Government's Code of Practice on Consultation 2008 and the Market Research Society's Code of Conduct. When carrying out consultation within the borough of Newham the Council will:

- Identify the need to consult
- Choose the appropriate methodology
- Be clear about the purpose and scope of each consultation
- Provide clear information
- Ensure consultation is inclusive and representative
- Ensure consultation will be open and honest
- Ensure that feedback on the results of consultation are widely disseminated
- Ensure consultation is linked clearly to decision making
- Ensure consultation is coordinated
- Consult ethically
- Conform to legal standards
- Ensure that key staff are trained in consultation techniques
- Liaise with key partners
- Evaluate Each Consultation.

Identify the need to consult

Consultation will not be carried out unnecessarily. We will ensure that before consulting the public that a thorough search will have been made internally to make sure that the same questions have not already been asked within the last 12 months. We will avoid unnecessary repetition and duplication of resources. Consultation should also relate to decision-making so the results can be meaningful. We will not consult if the decision has already been made and external consultants will not be contracted before consent to do so, by the Corporate Consultation Governance Group has been given.

Choose the appropriate methodology

The method of consultation will be appropriate to the aims and objectives of the consultation and the methodology will ensure the best possible response rate. The method of consultation will be chosen with due regard to its appropriateness for the needs of those being consulted to ensure a consultation is fully inclusive by being accessible to all and the Council will use existing consultation networks (e.g. The Citizen's Panel) where appropriate.

We will continue to explore new and innovative methods of consultation to ensure that we stimulate public participation and raise the level of response we receive. We will embrace the principles of the E-Government Strategy and Route map in using technology to engage and include all residents, stakeholders, partners and staff.

Be clear about the purpose and scope of each consultation

Specific and focused consultation should take place while proposals are at a formative stage. We will be clear about the scope of consultation, what we are to consult about, the time scale for the process and how the results of the consultation will be used. When we begin a consultation we will provide the following information:

- Why we are consulting
- What we are consulting about
- Who we are consulting with
- The context, options available and the pros and cons on each
- The decision making process and how the views given will be used to inform this
- How feedback will be given to those being consulted on the findings and actions/decisions
- The name and contact number for the person managing the consultation.

Provide clear information

We will ensure that the public understands and is clear about the purpose of consultation and the background to the issue being discussed. This will build public trust in the Council and will allow for the collection of higher quality information. We will avoid jargon and information will be presented in plain language and in formats that meet the differing needs of those being consulted.

Ensure consultation is inclusive and representative

We will ensure that consultation is flexible and sensitive to the needs of those we wish to consult with. To ensure this, consultation must be carried out within the Council's equality scheme and relating to other equalities strategies to ensure it is as representative and inclusive as possible in terms of people who are socially excluded and people with specific characteristics and demographic profiles. We will use targeted consultative mechanisms that will shape the consultation exercise to meet the specific needs of the targeted audience. Positive account will then be taken of the needs, interests and contributions of those groups.

The Council will consider possible barriers to involvement, such as time, methods used, geography and mobility and consider measures to overcome these in its consultations. We will strive to effectively involve those individuals and groups considered to be "hard to reach" by removing these barriers.

Ensure Consultation will be open and honest

In any communication we will use language that is suitable for its audience and avoid jargon. Where required, we will provide material that supports the diverse needs of our community. This will mean providing written, spoken and image communications in a variety of formats. This should include providing documents translated into other languages, written in large text or Braille.

Provision may also be made for audio presentations, sign language, interpreters, type talk and minicom.

The timescale for carrying out the consultation should be clearly defined and adhered to as closely as possible. However, where possible, flexibility should be allowed to meet the needs of the consultees. Consultees will be provided with contact information to allow them to enquire about any issue / concern they have in relation to a consultation.

We are committed to recording and analysing the information we receive accurately and with sensitivity. Where the data from paper questionnaires has been inputted onto an electronic database the hard copies should be retained for twelve months. After this time they can be destroyed.

Ensure that feedback on the results are widely disseminated

We will demonstrate the purpose and achievements of consultation through effective feedback. The results of a consultation will be presented in a clear and concise manner. It should include the response rate, a summary of the responses and a list of the groups of people who have been consulted.

At the end of every consultation we will produce a report summarising the views and opinions that have been expressed and what has happened as a result of the consultation. This will be published on our Internet site and made available to those who have taken part in the exercise.

Ensure consultation is linked clearly to decision making

We will aim to ensure that consultation takes place as early as possible in the decision-making process and provide clear links between consultation results and the decisions we take. This not only means explaining how views have been incorporated and/or actions taken but also providing reasons for why this is the case.

The Council will provide an explanation where it takes decisions that are contrary to the views expressed by those consulted.

Ensure consultation is coordinated

We will ensure that consultation is coordinated across the council and adopt a coordinated, strategic approach to consultation which avoids duplication. Coordinated consultation will not only add value to exercises, but will help avoid the risk of consultation fatigue.

Consult ethically

Whilst the Council is not a member of the Market Research Society (MRS), we will recommend that the MRS "Code of Conduct" is considered (see: <http://www.mrs.org.uk/standards/codeconduct.htm>) when consultation is being undertaken by or for us. Observing the code helps ensure that consultation work is carried out in accordance with professional standards and reassures the general public and interested parties that consultation is carried out in a professional and ethical manner. We will also recommend that any consultation taking place takes into account the Code of Practice on Consultation 2008.

Conform to legal standards

We will ensure that all aspects of the strategy and consultation that emerges from it comply with relevant legislation such as the Race Relations Act, the Disability Discrimination Act, Data Protection Act, Freedom of Information Act and the Human Rights Act. We will respect the confidentiality of all consultees and comply with the relevant legislative frameworks.

Ensure that key staff are trained in consultation techniques

We will provide staff with the necessary support & training to carry out effective consultations.

Liaise with key partners

We will ensure that we work in partnership, when appropriate, and engage them early in the planning of consultation.

We will work with partners, key stakeholders and other agencies and interest groups to ensure that good practice is shared; to undertake economical and efficient consultations and to avoid any duplication of consultation efforts. We will share the results and experiences of our consultations with our partners to encourage communication and information sharing.

Evaluate each consultation

The Corporate Consultation Governance Group will monitor the success of consultations to ensure we have followed the principles set out in this document and that we have lived up to our commitments.

An evaluation of the consultation should be undertaken by the project / initiative team in consultation with a member appointed by the Corporate Consultation Governance Group.

Identified strengths and weaknesses of the consultation will be recorded onto the Consultations database. This can then be used to inform and improve future consultation by taking on board the lessons learnt.

We will maintain an accurate database which provides information on all past and current consultations. Each service will identify a member of staff to act as a co-ordinator for consultation activity who will liaise with the Corporate Consultation Governance Group.

3.0 Consultation in Newham

3.1 The Purpose of Consultation in Newham

Newham's Consultation Strategy will ensure that:

- Consultation becomes an integral part of service planning and policy development
- Engagement with others becomes clear, simple and transparent
- We consult at a level and in a way that is appropriate to the issue and inclusive
- We do not over consult and do not consult when we already have the answers
- Consultation undertaken is fit-for-purpose and an appropriate mix of methodologies are utilised
- Those participating in consultation are provided with information to make an informed decision
- Feedback is provided to residents on actions taken following research and consultation
- Consultation is efficiently co-ordinated and activities are targeted to maximise its value.

Effective consultation will enable the Council to:

- Be open and responsive to the views of all stakeholders
- Understand the needs of local people
- Make more efficient use of public resources
- Improve service delivery and outcomes for local people
- Practice evidence-based decision making
- Reduce inequality of outcomes e.g. addressing issues to reduce barriers to access of services
- Measure performance of the Council in delivering high quality services and improving life for local people, and
- Demonstrate that the Council actively seeks and values the residents and stakeholders input and actively seeks to ensure that these are representative of the community as a whole.

3.2 Key Initiatives

Focused, Appropriately Scaled and Inclusive Consultation

Many of our consultation exercises are borough-wide and cover generic issues. However, approaching all groups in all consultations will not deliver high volumes of good quality information every time. In the pursuit of efficient and meaningful consultation there will certainly be occasions where resources should be focussed on engaging those with specific links to the issues and relevant experience to share.

Consultation exercises may also require the input of a wide range of people or organisations outside the Council. The diverse needs, cultures and experiences of those we wish to engage with must be appreciated when designing consultations. 'Culture' can be taken as meaning the traditions and needs of not just people, but of organisations.

It is vital that a combination of consultation methodologies are put in place that are appropriate and commensurate with the scale of consultation being undertaken. The various approaches that should be considered are illustrated in Section 5.0. Detailed advice on these approaches can be found in the Research & Consultation Toolkit and from the Corporate Research Team and SSPI.

Coordination and Prioritised Consultation

Coordinated consultation will not only add value to exercises, but will help avoid the risk of consultation fatigue. This is an important confounding factor in engagement processes, and no matter how well designed the exercise, consultees will have practical limitations to their own participation and if necessary will rationalise their involvement. Over-consultation can result in precisely this situation, and we could easily experience the following:

- Reduced response rates and levels of participation
- Poor quality feedback and input (particularly from organisations that we consult with, who may need to discuss with their membership before responding)
- Reduced inclination of key contacts to participate in later consultations
- Feedback that includes criticism of our consultation demands
- Diminishing returns for the investment in the consultation exercise.

To minimise the risk of consultation fatigue, and the significant damage it can do to the perception of the Council's consultative approach, divisions and directorates should notify each other through the research governance framework of exercises they undertake with appropriate notice given, so that if appropriate, other divisions and directorates can utilise and ask the questions they need to.

Research & Consultation Toolkit

This Consultation Strategy sets out the guiding principles that should underpin consultation carried out by the Council. To complement the Strategy and to provide practical advice on how to undertake consultation a comprehensive Research & Consultation Toolkit has been developed.

This Toolkit is intended to act not only as guidance for service areas who may only consult occasionally, but also to provide a defined process for assessing the need for consultation exercises, and the best methods for undertaking them.

This toolkit of guidance and technical advice should be referred to as early as possible when considering a consultation exercise. It should become pre-reading for quality processes, and evidence of its use should be key in any project initiation documents relating to research and consultation with residents and stakeholders.

Further specific advice on all issues can be obtained from Research and SSPI teams, or from the online resources that will be developed as part of the consultation strategy.

A Citizens Panel for Newham

A focussed, inclusive, co-ordinated, and efficient consultation can be achieved using a Citizens' Panel. This will involve a carefully selected group of approximately 1,000 local people who are representative of various experiences and interests, who agree to take part in regular surveys or can be recruited to take part in focus groups or other consultative events. Care will be taken to ensure that the panel is refreshed on a regular basis to ensure we are talking to a wide-range of residents. We will also ensure that it is representative of the local population and that members of the panel are not over-consulted, as over-burdening members can lead to panel 'exhaustion' and panel members can become too informed or sympathetic of the council and therefore, less representative. A Citizens' Panel in Newham will complement other approaches to consultation and provide an opportunity for the Council to consult regularly with a statistically robust and representative body of the population of the borough, in a cost effective and co-ordinated way.

4.0 Who/When To Consult

4.1 Who to Consult

There is no set list of who to consult. This is a key issue for determination when designing and planning consultation. Whenever consultation is undertaken consideration will be given to which groups should be consulted and the most appropriate method for consulting for each group of the area of consultation taking place.

Consultation can involve a wide range of residents and stakeholders dependent on the issue at hand. When considering our stakeholders, it is essential not to forget the hard to reach groups in our community, internal and external stakeholders. This includes – residents at Borough-wide level, specific service users, targeted groups of the local community, the voluntary and community sector as well as our partners on the Local Strategic Partnership.

The people that the Council is committed to consult with fall into a number of ‘stakeholder’ categories;

All Residents Including Council Tax Payers

Council-tax payers contribute to the funding of the Council’s services and they have pre-elected representatives – councillors – making day-to-day decisions on their behalf. Generic issues such as crime and disorder, quality of the environment and long-term growth and development of Newham affect them.

Clients, Potential Clients, Families or Their Carers

These are the groups of people that the Council probably spends most time consulting and involving in decision-making. Across most departments, the long-term involvement of service users is key to providing efficient and effective services which meet their needs and wants.

Local Businesses

Local businesses, through business rates, also contribute to the funding of the services that the Council provides and have an interest in a variety of subject areas. The Council may regulate local business under trading standards legislation and has influence over issues that may affect the long-term growth of industry and commerce, such as education, transportation, training of local people and the availability of land for development.

‘Hard to Reach’ Groups

As well as the general groups outlined above, the Council also consults with specific groups to ensure that we represent all sections of the community, who for a variety of reasons, do not tend to take part in consultation activity and for them a more targeted approach is required. These groups are often described as ‘hard to reach’ because they are less accessible to consult with than others as more time and effort is usually required to find the most effective ways to establish and maintain contact with them, so that their views are not overlooked. Of course, for Newham, a particularly diverse area, the definition of ‘hard to reach’ will be different than for other communities. Some examples may include:

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- Ethnic minority groups, particularly those who speak little or no English
 - Refugees and asylum seekers
 - Young people in care
 - Adults with learning disabilities
 - Older people, particularly those who are housebound
 - Travellers.

Non-Borough Stakeholders / Visitors and Workers

These groups of people should be consulted for specific issues such as place shaping, economic development, planning frameworks, etc.

Other Groups

In addition to the above, Newham also consults regularly with staff, service managers, councillors, local partner organisations, voluntary and community bodies, visitors and tourists and suppliers, plus statutory bodies and those with a specialist interest in the area.

4.2 When to Consult

We recognise that consultation is not always appropriate, e.g. where the Council is limited by statutory or budgetary restrictions. It is also important to avoid “consultation fatigue”. Therefore, consultation will only be used (a) where it is possible to influence decision-making; (b) when we need to identify user satisfaction or add to our stock of knowledge or (c) when we have a statutory duty to consult. Areas for consultation include:

- Evaluating a service
- Service improvement
- New services
- Statutory consultation
- Scoping a policy area
- Major policy decisions where not much is known about people’s views
- Controversial decisions where there is likely to be a high level of public interest
- Shaping a political decision
- Understanding residents / businesses attitudes and behaviours
- Understanding long-term trends.

Consultation may need to take place

- At the start of the process of planning services
- When options are being narrowed down
- At the final stages of the process – when a preferred option is being proposed or considered
- During review of services and any formal inspection of services
- As part of regular customer satisfaction surveys to improve service delivery
- As part of regular residents and business surveys to understand their views and satisfaction with services
- If there is a statutory duty to do so.

5.0 Consultation Methods

Although this is not a “how to” guide of research and consultation, it is relevant to outline briefly the different methods of consultation available. There are two broad methods of consultation – quantitative methods and qualitative methods. Many factors determine when a particular method should be employed such as the aims and objectives of the consultation and practical considerations such as time and budget. There may be instances where a mixed consultation method is required. Some of these factors will be outlined and elaborated on in the development of our Research and Consultation toolkit planned for production in the next few months.

There are a wide variety of methods available which can be used for consultation. These include:

Focus Groups

Focus groups are normally made up of around 8-10 people led by a trained facilitator in a one-off discussion on a particular topic. Like individual interviews, focus groups allow us to explore issues in considerable depth and have the advantage that people can bounce ideas off others. Focus groups are particularly useful if we want to find out what specific groups of people, such as non-users or minority ethnic groups think about a service.

Face-to-face Interviews

Interviews, like other forms of qualitative research, can tell us what people think and why and allow us to explore in detail their views, attitudes, behaviour or motives. They might help you to decide on what issues we wish to cover using quantitative research or provide views on a service that we are proposing. What they cannot give us is statistics about users' opinions. In depth, one-to-one interviews can help us to explore particularly sensitive topics. They allow a rapport to be built up, which enables the interviewer to probe into the feelings and thoughts that someone may not reveal in a group discussion or on paper. But they are time consuming and difficult to analyse. They are normally a structured interview, normally on a one-to-one basis.

Face-to-face, postal, telephone or web-based questionnaires

Quantitative research provides statistics in response to set questions. For instance, what proportion of users would like you to extend your opening hours to 6pm, or the aspects of your service that users would most like to see improved. It allows views to be taken from a widely representative group of users, and non-users, and if sampled well and with a good response rate can give statistically reliable information, e.g. we can be reasonably certain that the answers given by the sample represent those of the entire group. It allows us to compare information year on year if you ask the same questions. Quantitative surveys can be face-to-face, postal or conducted over the telephone. Quantitative research will tell you what proportion of people think something but, unless planned carefully, it won't tell us why.

Events

Open meetings are meetings arranged for members of the community to find out about and express their views on a particular issue. Attendance is open to any interested member of the public. Meetings are usually held at a public place such as a school, church hall or local sports centre that is convenient for people to get to. The issue to be discussed is usually publicised in advance through posters, leaflets, letters, invitations etc.

Open Days / Road Shows and Exhibitions

Open days and exhibitions can be relatively informal occasions when users and potential users can find out what you do, meet staff, ask questions and so on. Or they can be more structured, with formal presentations and discussions. Road shows are similar, except that you go to communities rather than expecting them to come to you.

Mystery shopping

Mystery shopping can provide us with very specific and detailed feedback on areas of our service. Someone commissioned by us tests the service, looking at a number of predetermined areas, and then reports to us. This should give us a picture of the type of experience a real user would have.

Citizens Panel

Citizens Panels can be used to consult on complex issues if members are properly briefed and the membership can be structured to be fully representative of the community. They can be used for quantitative or qualitative consultation.