

## Consultation Techniques: Advantages and Disadvantages

### Questionnaires and surveys

These are effective means of gathering a wide range of information in small rural communities

#### *Advantages*

- Everyone can have their say
- Able to cover a number of topics/issues or just specific ones
- Can include a mix of open and closed questions to gather both comments (qualitative) and statistical (quantitative) information
- Useful for identifying and evidencing need
- Can form part of a wider package of consultation
- Different formats can be used for different audiences (e.g. online and hard copy)

#### *Disadvantages*

- Labour intensive to produce and write, and to distribute and collect if using hard-copy questionnaires (which have cost implications in terms of printing and postage)
- Not everyone will complete the questionnaires
- Response rates can be disappointing, especially if the purpose is not explained and publicised in advance

#### Top tips

1. Review recent consultations to draw from the responses if relevant before producing a new questionnaire.
2. Provide information at the top of the questionnaire or on a separate sheet explaining why you require this information and what you intend to do with it. (Bear in mind that this can often be sensitive information and should be handled carefully and always in line with data protection law).
3. Think about what you want to find out and decide where you might need qualitative evidence or quantitative detail.
4. Decide on the type of questions needed to obtain this information. Open questions enable people to answer in their own words and are good for capturing people's thoughts and feelings, whereas closed questions allow people to choose from a range of options. Closed questions are effective in capturing quantitative information which can be easily analysed.
5. To gauge the strength of feeling it is useful to use a rating scale rather than a 'Yes' or 'No' answer. For example, make a statement and ask respondents to strongly agree, agree, neither agree nor disagree, disagree, strongly agree.
6. Check you have included relevant questions that will provide you with information you need. Avoid irrelevant or over-complicated questions and don't ask leading questions or questions that are ambiguous.
7. Keep the design of the questionnaire as simple as possible and keep it concise or people will disengage. Select an appropriate font style and size, which is easy to read (e.g. Arial, Calibri) and a minimum size of 11pt.
8. Leave a space at the end of the questionnaire for general comments, topics or concerns that have not already been covered.
9. Ask respondents to provide contact details in case any further information is required, but bear in mind that not everyone will want to do this and so you may want to make this an optional response.
10. Include clear instructions about how to return the questionnaire or how/when it will be collected (collection by hand will get the most returns).
11. Don't forget to thank people for their input and tell them when and how you expect to feedback on the questionnaire results.
12. Test the questionnaire on a small number of people before distributing more widely, making refinements as necessary.
13. An incentive such as a free prize draw may encourage more to be completed and returned. Local businesses may offer a voucher.
14. To protect respondents' anonymity, arrange for someone outside of the community/group to collate and analyse the information from the questionnaires. There is likely to be a charge to do this and so it should be allowed for in the budget.

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