

The voice of the Voluntary Arts

Consultation – making it work for you

One of the most straightforward ways in which organisations of any size can influence and change the policies and practices that shape their operating environment is to take part in consultation processes.

This briefing explains what consultation is about, outlines the benefits of both contributing to and organising consultations, and offers tips to help voluntary arts groups to be effective at both. The information will be useful for a wide range of organisations, from local arts groups developing new projects to local authority arts officers consulting on new plans.

What is consultation?

Whereas the Latin noun 'consilium' originally related to consideration, counsel, planning and wisdom, the word has now come to be more associated with 'consultation'. Perhaps it should more often return to its roots!

Defined by the Consultation Institute as "...the dynamic process of dialogue between individuals or groups, based upon a genuine exchange of views, and normally with the objective of influencing decisions, policies or programmes of action", consultation is now a widely used form of public policy development.

There are many different types of consultation including quantitative, qualitative and participatory methods. Each has its pros and cons, and the best method to use will depend on the consultor, the consultee and the context. The following diagram lists a range of forms, though the Consultation Institute estimates that there are over 52 known 'dialogue' methods!



Different forms of consultation can also be classified according to their level of public impact:

- Inform
- Consult
- Involve
- Collaborate
- Empower

Increasing level of public impact



How to get the best out of consultations

consultee: the person responding to – or being asked to respond to – the consultation.

consultor: the person asking others to respond to their consultation.

A. For consultees

Why take part?

For many reasons! Taking part:

- enables you to contribute to and improve policy formulation;
- allows you to influence policies that affect your life;
- makes you part of the evidence provided;
- means all voices and opinions are heard;
- allows you to play a part in the decision-making process;
- can help to generate creative, imaginative, new and relevant solutions to old problems;
- crystallises policy positions for the future;
- gives you more influence in these future policy areas;
- ensures that public issues continue to be discussed and understood;
- ensures that local concerns and circumstances are fed into regional/national policies;
- results in community ownership of decisions;
- builds organisational capacity;
- equips members with skills and knowledge;
- provides publicity for you and your group;
- can be a source of organisational pride;
- improves the external image of your group/organisation;
- provides networking opportunities;
- offers the opportunity for relationship development.

Taking part offers you a vital opportunity to advance your organisation's interests, get issues on the agenda, and improve the profile of your organisation and its own particular issues. Remember that responding to consultations may be just one facet of your wider lobbying agenda.

How to respond well

Some of the issues that need to be considered when responding to a consultation are listed below. However, no matter how you decide to respond, be sure to demand effective feedback from the consultor. This is your entitlement. Failure to gain feedback tops complaint lists from consultees!

Get yourself recognised

As a consultee, you need to get your organisation recognised as a valid stakeholder, so it is important to get yourself onto lists

and networks. Good relationship management with key organisations is essential. It can be helpful to be in touch with the consultor even before the consultation is announced – to help shape it, if possible. Find out if there is a 'pre-consultation' that you could assist with.

What do you hope to achieve?

When contacted regarding a consultation, think carefully about what you hope to achieve by responding. You might speculate about the interests at stake for consultee and consultor – is it appropriate for you to participate? How much effort should you put into the process? How will you organise this effort? What are the implications for your organisation's interests? What information/skills will you need to respond effectively? What might your role be in the overall process – information provider, consultee, partner or supporter?

Effective management

Effective management, prioritisation, and only responding to consultations where your organisation has a significant interest are vital to avoid becoming overloaded with unnecessary work. If you choose not to respond, for whatever reason, it is advisable to make a *nominal* response letting the consultor know – this is polite and also keeps you in the loop and on that all-important consultation list!

The response format

If you choose to respond, it is important to respond well. Remember that fact is stronger than opinion. You can strengthen your ideas by working with other organisations with similar interests – a process sometimes called coalition-building. Consider what the best response format might be and how can you get your message across clearly, concisely and effectively. Is a written submission best? Should you ask for a meeting? Will there be a public meeting where you can express your organisation's views from the floor? Should you bombard the consultor with e-mails? Any one of these, or a mix of response formats, may be the most effective route to being heard and having an influence.

Developing the content

Will the response be based on the 'expert' opinion of one person, a focus group, or the views of your members? Will it need to be approved by the Trustees or the Committee? How will you come to an agreement on your position if your organisation is divided? The Consultation Institute believes that both consultors *and* consultees have a responsibility to act with integrity – this means it is necessary to report any significant minority views within your organisation. Do you need to run a 'secondary consultation' within your organisation / membership to decide on a position? How will you report on this?



Case Study – being a successful consultee – get in early to shape the agenda, especially when it’s not going your way!

A Belfast-based coalition of arts groups show how the agenda can be shaped even during a ‘disappointing’ consultation, in the following excerpt taken from the Belfast Telegraph. (Community Arts Forum’s *Let’s Get It Right* campaign article: *Groups slam plan for Quarter*, Belfast Telegraph, 5 July 2004)

A coalition of arts and community groups today claimed the distinctiveness of Belfast’s Cathedral Quarter is under threat from development proposals. The groups also described plans for a multi-storey car park in the district as ‘a disaster’. Its submission to government ministers and departments aimed a range of criticisms at a blueprint tabled by a prominent developer. Organisations represented in the coalition include the Cathedral Quarter Arts Festival, Community Arts Forum, Students’ Housing Association Co-operative and Women’s Support Network. Well-known playwright Martin Lynch has also endorsed the submission, along with a number of businesses... The groups described the public consultation process on the proposals as disappointing and argue that the overall development scheme fails to address the ‘specific ethos of a cultural quarter’. Their submission argues that plans for 22 new residential units are also inadequate. It also states “*The dearth of small, affordable units in the scheme will force out indigenous businesses that have given the Cathedral Quarter its distinctive character and appeal.*”

The campaign worked, using a mix of techniques such as coalition building, factual evidence, the endorsement of a well-known person and careful media relations.

B. For consultors

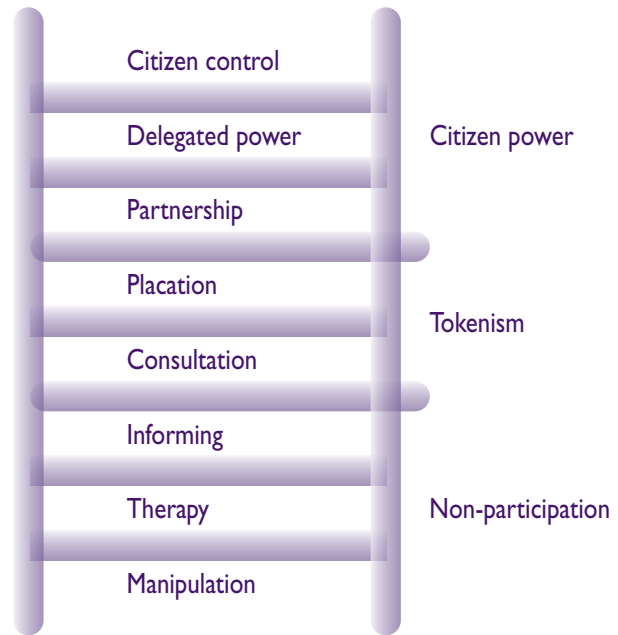
There is a lot to be gained from organising good consultations.

The benefits of consultation

- real engagement which then strengthens relationships between policy-makers, service providers and people on the ground;
- the creation of high quality (evidence-based) policy and services that reflect and are responsive to needs;
- better understanding of the needs and expectations of people;
- it offers the chance to create solutions that will work...;
- ... and solutions that will be accepted;
- it enables capacity building and therefore increased social capital.

Whilst there is a trend across the UK and Ireland towards more consultation, on more issues and involving more consultees, there is an increasing sense that few consulting organisations do it that well. They are also often suspected of running ‘token’ or even ‘sham’ consultations, where decisions have been already made so that the views offered by those consulted do not change the outcome.

This places consultation in the realm of ‘tokenism’ on **Arnstein’s ladder of participation** (below).



This may seem harsh, but since consultation usually begins with an organisation or body presenting a document and seeking reactions, it is evident that the process is ‘top-down’ i.e. it is not usually initiated by citizens like voluntary arts groups/individuals and nor is it they who will be setting the agenda.

On the other hand, as consultors find it difficult to get the public to respond, both consultor and consultee lose out. People have become overloaded with so many requests to respond, involving reams of paper to read through and tight deadlines to respond by, such that consultation fatigue has set in. Groups with limited capacity are finding it increasingly difficult to participate.

So what can organisations do to improve how they consult and how can they ensure that those they are consulting with feel empowered and engaged in the consultation process?

Key principles for successful consultation

- The most important principle is that consultation should have **integrity**. Everyone involved should have confidence in the consultor’s motivation and the process, even if they do not necessarily achieve the result they desire.
- Visibility** is essential to ensure that the process is as accessible to as many stakeholders as possible. You need to tell people what the consultation is about, what the possible implications/outcomes are and why it is important for them to participate.
- Transparency** and **disclosure** obligations are vital (with confidentiality only applying on matters of a personal nature). Consultors must report on all views and responses received and consultees must openly declare differences of opinion. It is important that everybody feels that there is a level playing field and that their opinions will be listened to, *fairly interpreted* and then accurately reflected in the final *published* document which should be made available to participants in an *accessible* format.

For a successful consultation, all three of the following stages need to be carried out in full:

1. Pre-consultation planning

- define the objectives of the consultation exercise;
- identify your target audience(s);
- identify how best to reach them;
- prepare the materials – feedback forms, event planning, scripting adverts, designing posters etc.

2. The consultation process

- consultation events – meetings, online forums, workshops, submission forms etc;
- publicity campaign to ensure the public knows how they can take part;
- on-going monitoring of the various aspects of the consultation – ensure that the website is working, the advert appears in the paper etc.

3. Consultation feedback

- provide feedback to the people who participated in the consultation;
- carry out an evaluation of your consultation to identify the areas which worked best, what didn't work so well and why.

Engaging 'hard to reach' groups

It is important to try to engage 'hard to reach' groups – those who are often excluded from consultation and need additional support to take part. Sometimes, the more accurate term might be 'those seldom heard'!

- **Timing:** giving insufficient time to respond results in consultees feeling frustrated and compromised and consultors do not, therefore, get the quality of information they may wish for. Adequate lead-in and follow-up time will take into account holidays and consultees' resources. The government recommended minimum period for consultation is twelve weeks in the UK and eight weeks in the Republic of Ireland.
- **Transparency:** be open, inclusive and try and create partnerships with key stakeholders in the community who can act as advocates for the consultation. These key people can help to share skill, resources and knowledge, avoid duplication and ease the workload.

Case study – Successful Consultation

Village Enhancement Projects, PEACE II Programme, County Monaghan

The aim of the countywide project was to create public art in designated towns and villages that reflected the experience of local people and their hopes for the future. The chosen artwork would serve as a permanent reminder of the need for a continuing commitment to peace.

Communities played an active role in the project and it was agreed that children and young people would participate in facilitated discussion sessions and art workshops. These would lead to the creation of 180 celebratory banners to be displayed on lamp post in towns and villages.

This creative consultation was successful, because it generated excitement and enthusiasm as well as a sense of pride from all those involved in the project – Monaghan County Council, artists, children and young people, schools, parents and the broader community. Overall, it was fun and everyone had something tangible to show for their hard work.

Further Information & Resources

There is a huge variety of resources available from various public, private and civic organisations. The Consultation Institute itself provides a wide range of articles and papers on various aspects of consultation, and also runs seminars and workshops across the UK and RoI – www.consultationinstitute.org

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