Research Methodology

Revised June 2018

HOW TO CONSULT: QUANTITATIVE SURVEYS

We are committed to creating an open and accessible local government in Sandwell. Local people expect and deserve good quality services and decisions – consultation can help us to:

- **achieve better services that give users what they want and expect;**
- **prioritise services and make better use of limited resources;**
- **improve service take up;**
- **improve satisfaction measured over time;**
- **ensure that potential problems over changes are identified;**
- **foster a working partnership between service users and the Council, so that they understand any problems involved and how they can help**

It also symbolises the Council's commitment to be open, accountable and to put service first.

The Sandwell MBC Consultation Policy

It is Sandwell Council's policy that all services consult on relevant issues that affect stakeholders and that all consultation undertaken by the Council is recorded on the consultation database. To enable the Council to undertake a strategic approach to consultation, its policy promotes a framework that ensures:

- consultation programmes are co-ordinated so as to make the best use of resources and the public's capacity for consultation
- continuous improvement and innovation is sought in the way the Council engages the public
- the outputs required are delivered. This is achieved through the use of relevant techniques to assess community wishes and needs, the choice of appropriate approaches to service provision, the measurement of satisfaction and access to services. The Council can then assess the plans and prioritise services to ensure they meet the future needs of users

- the consultation exercise includes the concerns of consultees themselves
- the necessary support to consult effectively is provided, including consultation on plans and techniques
- a range of stakeholders are consulted including direct/indirect and potential users, hard to reach groups, specific communities and potential/current service providers. This is of particular relevance to an Equalities Impact Assessment - although there is no specific requirement to engage with people with protected characteristics, the Council does have to demonstrate that there is an adequate evidence-base for their decision-making and that they have given due regard to the Equality Duty.
- the effectiveness of what we undertake is evaluated and communicated to the public by demonstrating how the outcomes of consultation have been used to improve services

Key Principles

Whilst this guidance does not intend to prescribe how consultation should be carried out, there are a number of key principles which, if followed, will deliver a better, more reliable and valid consultation result.

1. Consultation lies at the heart of effective public policy development and service to the public. It should be a first thought and not an afterthought.
2. Consultation should never be used to communicate decisions already taken, and the outcome of consultation should never be pre-determined.
3. Consultation should be inclusive. Whenever possible, it should involve all parties/groups who can contribute to or are affected by the outcome of the consultation.
4. Effective consultation is about partnership. It implies shared responsibility and commitment; a clear recognition, understanding of the issues, objectives, purpose and expectations of all parties is essential. The agenda and process should be negotiable with any constraints being established at the outset.
5. To be effective, consultation must be inclusive and based on openness, trust, integrity, mutual respect for the legitimacy and point of view of all participants. It should be transparent of its purpose and process.
6. Participants in the consultation exercise should have clear mandates and influence but not control over the outcome.
7. All participants must have timely access to relevant and easily understandable information whilst committing themselves to sharing information.
8. Effective consultation requires follow through. Participants are entitled to know what use is made of their views and information they provide. They should also be made aware of the impact their ideas and involvement ultimately have on your decision making.
9. The main skills required for effective consultation are: listening, communicating, negotiating and consensus building. Participants should be trained in these skills.
10. Help people participate and use more than one method of investigation where you have the time and/or resources.

11. Some participants may not have the resources or expertise required to participate, so financial assistance or other support may be needed for their representation to be assured.
12. Participants should have a realistic idea of how much time a consultation is likely to take and for any results to become available. Plan for this during the designing process.
13. Effective consultation will not always lead to agreement. However, it should lead to a better understanding of each other's positions.
14. Investigate any similar work undertaken that can contribute to your project.

Choosing an appropriate Quantitative Methodology

There are two main areas of research methodology underpinning consultation. **Qualitative** research goes into detail about a small number of cases whilst **quantitative** (or survey) methodology looks for patterns across a large number of cases.

Quantitative methodology is based on two key ideas:

1. The best way of summarising any information about any large group of people such as customers, is to put it into statistical form. To do this, the information has to be obtained in a tidy and regular format, typically by using a set questionnaire.
2. There is no need to go to everyone in a population. A relatively small sample can provide a good picture of the group as a whole. Of course, a sample cannot give a perfect picture, and as a result, is often used in conjunction with qualitative methods. The 'sampling error' can be estimated, showing how close to the truth the sample is likely to be. The bigger the sample, the smaller the sampling error, and the more likely it is that the sample is giving a realistic picture. The real challenge however, lies in designing the questions. A common problem in survey design is to find that the resulting data doesn't answer the questions adequately or that it simply opens up new questions.

There are four main approaches to carrying out surveys. These are:

1. **Face to face interviews**: the classic survey method. The questionnaire can be much longer than with the methods that follow and can use a wider range of question techniques. But, per head, it is relatively expensive.

2. **Postal and self-completion surveys**: cheaper than face to face interview, this approach is commonly used. However, it has a number of disadvantages. These include:
   - a low response rate in many cases
   - less information is produced
   - great care needs to be given to questionnaire design if everyone is going to be able to understand it
   - problems where early questions need to be asked without the respondent knowing what the later questions will be
   - difficulty for respondents where the sequence of questions needs to be varied a lot to cope with different situations

3. **Telephone surveys**: a quick and cheap method. However there are a number of disadvantages, including the need to keep the interview short and simple, and difficulties getting people to participate. It is particularly difficult for this method to achieve complete cross-sections of a population such as employers or the general public.

4. **Online surveys**: while online surveys originated in market research, they are now widely used in social and academic research. Online surveys offer several advantages over paper-and-pencil or telephone surveys:
   - quick to set up and administer, and at a much lower cost;
   - flexibility – compared to a paper questionnaire, an online one can be set up to adapt to previous answers (e.g. only show this question to male respondents);
   - accuracy – minimises data entry errors

   However, there are also caveats to online surveys:
   - Verifying identity. Compared to face-to-face research, the researcher has less control over the identity of participants. It may also be difficult to ensure that respondents don't respond more than once.
   - Sensitivity. Some topics may be sensitive and respondents may be less likely to 'open up' to a computer-based survey than they would do in a face-to-face secure environment.
   - Follow-up. It may be more difficult to follow-up on participants if they have not left any identifying details in online surveys. This may be an issue for the research design, if you require the same person to respond several times.
   - Bias. Like all data collection methods, online collection can introduce bias – in this case the risk that people with better online access and more confidence will be more likely to complete the survey.

Sample Size and Confidence Intervals

In general, the larger the sample size, the more closely your sample data will match that from the overall population. However in practice, you need to work out how many responses will give you sufficient precision at an affordable cost.

There are two key elements to sample size:

1. Sample sizes are not dependent on the size of the population. If for example, you want to estimate the percentage of people in a small town of 25,000 adults with qualifications within 3 percentage points of the actual percentage, a completed sample of about 1,024 respondents is needed. If you want to estimate this characteristic for a city of 2 million adults with the same confidence, then around 1,067 respondents are needed. If you want to estimate this for the entire country, then again 1,067 are needed.

2. A relatively few completed questionnaires can provide surprising precision at a high level of confidence. If you can be satisfied with knowing whether an estimate from a sample survey is plus or minus (+ / -) 10% of the true population value, that could be accomplished by receiving completed questionnaires from a random sample of 100 individuals. What this means is that in a properly conducted national survey with a completed simple random sample of 100 households, in which 60% of the respondents say they own their own home, we could say with 95% confidence that between 50% and 70% of the population own their own home.

For further guidance on sampling and statistical reliability, click here.

Designing an effective questionnaire

Before you start writing your questionnaire it is important that you are clear about the main aims and objectives. These should then enable you to develop your questionnaire more easily and ensure that you are asking questions that will give you the information that you need.

The structure of your questionnaire doesn't have to follow the same order as the aims and objectives but should be logical from the respondent's point of view. Use the following additional hints and tips to help you design an effective questionnaire:

- In practice, there is no right or wrong question or answer. Your questions should be linked to the data you need to obtain. Bear in mind that different questions can get different answers.
- Whenever possible, a questionnaire should follow some form of natural flow, reflecting a train of thought, a logical conversation, or a sequence of events, depending on the subject matter.
- Include a simple introduction – this can help encourage participation. In this you should tell the respondent:
    - who you are
    - the purpose of your survey and why you want their input
    - a reason why they should take part
    - how long it will take them
    - terms of anonymity and confidentiality
    - how the results will be used
    - when and how they will receive feedback
    - who they can contact if they have for any queries
- The law has changed regarding how we collect and store personal data, as part of GDPR. This has implications for consultation – and we will generally be using consent as the lawful basis for collecting and processing survey data. You should give respondents the relevant information they need to give informed consent, and also give them the option to opt out of a survey. You can do this by asking a consent question before proceeding with any further survey questions. There also needs to be a link to the relevant Privacy Notice for your service. An example of a consent question is provided later in this section.
- It is always best to start with a simple question. Sensitive topics should be explored through appropriately sensitive or even indirect questions and are best to be placed towards the end of the survey.
- Group similar questions together – you may want to include section headings if appropriate.

- Questions should be relevant, concise, clear and efficient. Most people make the mistake of asking too many, and questions that they will not use. You want to get a good response so clear and concise questions will help to achieve this. Be really strict when thinking about your questions – ask yourself how will this question add insight or understanding?
- Only one question should be asked at a time - if you ask two questions in one sentence then you will be unclear about what the answer refers to.

Care should be taken to ensure that respondents are not led to answer in a particular way. For example, any facts to be communicated to the respondent should be set out in a neutral manner. Positive phrases such as “the proposal is a good idea” in a question without a balancing negative phrase may lead the respondent to a positive view.

- Think about the type of questions you are asking. Are you asking questions that can be answered:
    - Accurately (What is your age?)
    - Through memory (e.g. how many times in the past 12 months have you visited….?)
    - Through a best choice of options, none of which may correspond precisely to the respondent’s view/behaviour (e.g. Which of these three statements comes closest to describing your view…?)
    - Through estimation, guesswork or even speculation

- Appropriate answers should be available to reflect the reality of the range of responses. Available answers should be clear and understandable, with as little ambiguity as possible, and should be phrased to the respondent’s way of thinking/talking.
- Don’t know or No view should be available to the respondent as it is often a perfectly valid answer. You may also need to include a not applicable if necessary.
- Where it is difficult to predict the full range of answers, you should provide an ‘other or please specify’ category with a box to enter free text.
- Where appropriate, consider using questions from previous research as this gives comparability and can enhance the value of the data collected.
- Ensure that the design and the way that the questionnaire is written is appropriate for the audience. Offer to provide questionnaires in different formats if necessary.
- Ask yourself, will your respondents understand your questions and options, be willing to answer your questions and able to answer them.
- Always pilot your questionnaire either with colleagues or people from your target audience. The aim here is to detect any flaws in your questioning and correct these prior to the main survey. This may also help you to change some open questions to questions with options.
- As part of the design process you should consider how you expect to analyse and report the results.

Question types

The type of questions used in your questionnaire play a key role in producing unbiased or relevant responses and the quality of data you receive back. Question types range from open-ended (asking for comments) to closed (yes/no). These are described in more detail in this section.

Consent

A consent question should now be the first question you ask and should give the respondent the option to opt out of completing the survey. A simple consent question could read:

> Do you agree to take part in this survey being carried out on behalf of Sandwell Council? The data collected will be used to improve the services we offer to our customers. Special category or personal data may be collected as part of this research - completion of these questions is optional.
>
> Please refer to our privacy statement for further details.
>
> ☐ I am happy to take part in this survey on behalf of Sandwell Council
>
> ☐ I do not want to take part in this survey

Open-Ended

Open-ended questions allow people to answer a question in their own words, and can allow respondents to raise issues that you might not have considered. However, think carefully about your consultation and what you are trying to find out, as sometimes respondents might find it difficult to express their feelings, it can take longer for the respondent to complete and analysing comments can be time consuming.

Closed

Closed questions include pre-designed answers with a set of choices. When providing a set of choices it is important to try to cover all the possible answers that are expected. You may also want to include an ‘other’ category or comments box as it can be difficult to pre-determine all of the possible answers. There are different types of closed questions that you might want to use. These include:

i. Multiple Choice

   This type includes a set of pre-designed answers, for example yes/no/don’t know or once/twice/three times).

ii. Ranked questions

This type of question can be used when all the choices listed need to be ranked, for example you might ask people to rank how important services are from 1st to 5th choice. It is important to pilot these questions to ensure that they are clear and will be completed correctly.

iii. Rating questions

This type of question can be used when you want to measure people's ideas, opinions, knowledge or feelings, for example you might ask people to what extent they agree or disagree with something as demonstrated below:

Balanced vs. unbalanced rating scales

A five-point rating scale is usually sufficient and easily understood by people. However, there is no set limit on the number of categories to use. Using too few could give less useful information and too many could make it hard to answer. It is better to provide a balanced scale as it means that an equal number of positive and negative options are included which helps to avoid bias.

Example 1 – balanced

Excellent	Good	Average	Poor	Very Poor

This example includes two positives, two negatives and a neutral midpoint.

Example 2 – unbalanced

Excellent	Very good	Good	Average	Poor

There are some occasions in which an unbalanced scale is suitable. For example in a customer satisfaction survey, few customers may say that something is unimportant. In the example below 'important' will become the midpoint.

Extremely important	Very important	Important	Neither important nor unimportant	Not important

iv. Not applicable (N/A) / Don't know / No view

It is advisable to allow people to opt out if they don't know/have no view or if it does not apply to them as it will help increase the response rate and quality of data collected.

Increasing response rates

To help increase response rates, design a survey that is easy to follow with clear and direct questions. Provide instructions for your questionnaire at the beginning and throughout where necessary so it is easy to complete.

- Make your questionnaire interesting, of value, short, clearly thought through, and well presented
- Telling the respondent when and how they will get feedback or entry into a prize draw can help encourage participation
- Introductory letters, reply paid envelopes and follow-up telephone calls or emails can also help to raise the response rate. If possible, send reminders during the survey period for those that have not completed it
- Requesting participation in advance can encourage involvement
- Promote in the local press or on social media (particularly when the survey is online)
- Allow enough time to complete the survey and for people to get involved
- Ensure that you have communicated your survey to the right people

There are also things that can negatively impact on response rates:

- Excessively lengthy questionnaires – consider whether a question is required to meet the aims and objectives, or whether it is just “nice to know”. Avoid repetitive questioning
- Lack of honesty/transparency
- Excessive “about you” section – personal data should be relevant (think about what breakdowns of responses you may need – age, gender, ethnicity)
- Lack of opportunity for respondents to have their say – when asking closed questions you may also want to ask ‘why do you say that’ or ‘provide further comments below’. This encourages respondents to feel that you are interested and value their views. It may also provide alternative opinions and give a breadth of views.
- Boring questionnaires – whenever possible try to use different forms of questioning to break the routine

Survey Analysis & Reporting

With any research, care is needed to avoid over-interpretation of results. Think about who and how many people responded to your consultation, the method(s) you used and when you consulted (did any internal or external factors influence how people responded). It is fine to be selective in highlighting results, but be careful not to distort them. Consider what other information supports your consultation or should be included when reporting or presenting the results.

- Ensure that any conclusions you make are supported by data. Also make sure that any reports and presentations clearly distinguish between facts and interpretation.
- Ensure that you deal with answers in a way that respects respondents’ views. This will help retain the confidence of the general public, ensuring future co-operation.

Resources

There are further resources to help when considering consultation methodology and conduct. Information is available from the Market Research Society, as well as organisations such as the Consultation Institute or Ipsos MORI. Research Sandwell (based in Public Health) can also provide advice and assistance for any services considering research or consultation work. Assistance includes identifying appropriate methodologies, questionnaire design, setting up of online surveys (where appropriate), and data analysis and interpretation.

A starting point is also to look at the Consultation Database, which includes information about past, current and proposed consultation, engagement and participation projects. The main aim of the database is to ensure that consultation and participation activity is co-ordinated and duplication avoided - not only within the Council but also across all partner organisations in Sandwell.

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June 2018