

Notes: Community Engagement & Public Consultation

Wednesday 23rd March 2011

1. Opening Presentations

Sue Thiedeman, London Cultural Improvement Programme:

Consultation and Engagement were identified as an area that needed improvement in over 20 self-assessments undertaken through CSIT and Peer-challenge:

<http://www.londoncouncils.gov.uk/policylobbying/culturetourismand2012/lcip/csit.htm>

Rhion Jones, Consultation Institute

People at the top don't always know best; public consultation is useful.

Local authority staff are similar, they may not have the same job titles or work in the same department, but we are all concerned with public engagement. Every public body in the country carries out some form of public consultation because dialogues with people will always have.

Consultation is gathering information about what people think so that it can influence what we do. There is a lot of superfluous consultation around that does not actually influence decisions e.g. customer satisfaction at hotels.

The language of consultation is important. There are subtle differences & nuances of language and we must learn to use the correct terminology.

Politicians promote public consultation (vote for us and we'll listen to you). This has the effect of raising public expectation. In particular the localism bill raises public expectation. We need to get into the thinking behind the bill. We should try and think of how we can take people with us.

What is local? A term that is bandied about but it is a very subjective term. "Local" is at the heart of consultation but we need to recognise that we do not have a customer base but thousands of individual customers.

2. Best Practice Case Studies – Jon Bradley & Elizabeth Gammell

Consultation must be meaningful; there must be room for consultees to actually influence. False Consultation devalues the trust in the organisation conducting the consultation and harms its reputation.

How do you weigh the different views from consultation and find balance? How do you resolve conflicts?:

- Effective, transparent and objective consultation is needed
- Manage dialogues to get meaningful consultation and information

Techniques used by market research have been adopted by consultation bodies.

Section 128 public bodies must:

- Inform
- Consult
- Involve

Bridging Social Capital is vital – use arts, sports, culture to bring people together. We need to help people understand how cultural organisations are funded so they can make informed decisions & opinions in consultation.

We need to use the most appropriate dialogue methods for the right people/groups. There are over 50 dialogue methods; to get it right we need to be a jack of all trades, whilst also being an expert in a few.

Polls and surveys do not work when asking what people would like less of. We need to use more deliberative methods to get people involved and seek out opinions.

3. More with More: Local digital communities, neighbourhoods and public services – Hugh Flouch

Pending

4. Successful engagement with Children & Young People – David Jones

We need to recognise the importance of intermediary organisations that work with Children and Young people, partnership working and key messages when consulting and engaging.

Your reputation can be a help or a hindrance to consultation; what credibility do you have with Children and Young people? This will affect how they respond to you. Attitudes of staff to Children and Young people can be a problem and obstacle to meaningful consultation.

What you're asking needs to make sense to Children and Young people.

We need to change our view of "hard to reach" groups to those who are "seldom heard". Limited resources are the issue not the people and the language we use needs to reflect this.

Need to look at communication methods used to consult with young people. Scottish parliament used the following routes to consult with Children and Young people:

- Direct Contact
- Schools
- Festivals, events etc
- Online

In terms of facebook and other online social networking we need to be aware that they will come to us rather than us seeking them out.

Just because they don't vote it doesn't mean they don't deserve respect. Information is hugely important to young people.

Examples of Children and Young people consultation:

Children and Young people disability groups consulted on inclusion

- The adults who accompanied them could act as a barrier to effective consultation.
- The young people were commissioned to seek the views of their friends and brought back after 6 weeks to discuss their findings with their local Councillor.
- There were major issues with the venue in terms of accessibility, provision of rooms for changing, food requirements etc.

Children and Young people consulted on binge drinking

- Through the process of consultation it came to light that the subject was wrong and needed to be reframed as "Scotland's relationship with drink through the perspective of Children and Young people"

- The initial brief presumed that binge drinking was exclusively a Children and Young people problem/issue.
- Need to address negative viewing and stereotyping of Children and Young people

Children and Young people consulted on Common Wealth Games legacy

- Need to realise that consultation may throw up ideas that are financially out of reach but we must acknowledge that just because we can't afford it doesn't mean it isn't vital.

Children and Young people consulted on older people's services

Must not make the presumption that they do not need to be consulted because they are not old because:

- They may work in that field either now or in the future
- They will pay for the services through tax
- They have parents and grandparent
- One day they will be old

It is all too easy to use existing contact lists when conducting consultation but you need to consider the widest possible group of stakeholders because it will lead to:

- Better services
- Better solutions

For example: A cinema screened their last film with an ending time after the final bus back to town. Council staff suggested increasing the bus operating hours to ensure that there were buses after the end of the film. But following consultation with Children and Young people they discovered that the preferred option for this group was earlier film times because they didn't want to be out late and come home on a bus that may be filled with drunks!

5. Expert Panel – facilitated by Rhion Jones

Panel members: Hugh Flouch; David Jones; Jon Bradley; Davy Jones

Q: How are Neighbourhood websites funded and is there any editorial control?

A: Websites very low cost to set up, low running costs make them sustainable. Time is a bigger issue. Need a few people to dedicate time for updating and moderating. Most are independent of local authorities which is an important aspect.

Q: Tensions between Inform & Consult

A: Needs to be a balance between these in order to manage expectations. You should avoid leading questions.

Sometimes you will want to Inform on its own but you should be up front about this. Only say you are consulting if you mean it. Community liaison for example is not consultation. Inform in general is one way, consult implies a dialogue and there has to be a commitment to go back to people and say what happened as a result of the consultation.

Q: How to approach consultation on budgets - i.e. who to cut?

A: Finance is complicated but people do this in their daily lives successfully. Main point is that they don't have the information available to do this for the council.

One idea is to use Participating Budgeting through public meetings. Drawbacks are that people bring their own supporters which can skew public meetings. There is always a danger that a lack of response will mean the usual voices are the only ones heard.

Q: How to consult meaningfully on issues such as siting of drug treatment centres where many of the responses will be of the 'Not in my back yard' type.

A: People need information as to what the consequences will be. They need to be able to challenge. Stakeholder mapping will be crucial here. Make sure you are not just consulting with nearest neighbours. Look at your audiences and use tailored techniques. You need to make sure more than the vocal minority are consulted. Be pro-active.

Q: Communications budgets are reducing how can we recommend low cost methods and fund them?

A: New technology is key here - using new media and websites. Sharing costs with partnerships e.g. health boards, police, strategic partnership boards, joint assistance panels rather than relying on one organisation. Really use available staff. Frontline staff in particular can be ambassadors. Listening and interacting will make the consultation credible to local people. To be funded you need to demonstrate the return on investment the consultation delivers. Show that consultation can help deliver better services, and is not a waste of money. Need to list the deliverables. Social media is low cost, community website owners are often keen to engage with local authorities.

Q: Effectiveness of consultation with CYP. Stakeholder groups must feel they can trust you and that your consultation is credible. If this is damaged how can you repair the trust and integrity?

A: Deliver on promises, feedback regularly and be up front at all times e.g. tell people that the timetable has slipped if this occurs. Be very clear about what you are consulting on. It must be more than informing. When you plan the consultation, plan the feedback. Show how consultation has made a difference. Acknowledge past problems, make the process transparent and explain how things will work in the future. Reflect back on past consultation especially if it has been successful.