

Section Seven - The Consultation Process Feedback and Evaluation

7.1 - Writing-up Results

Report Structure

Introduction

This part of the report should detail the background to the consultation exercise such as;

- Prior knowledge, experience and interest.
- Previous observations and literature.
- Research Hypothesis.
- Predictions.

Methods

This section should include the following;

- Project design and methods used
- Data analysis and techniques
- Time frame in which the work was undertaken.

Results

This section should include all figures and descriptions of relevant patterns obtained from the data.

Discussion

This section should include conclusions with implications, applications and ideas for new research. Also, evaluation of the entire experimental design and its conduct complete with suggestions for improvement - in other words a 'reflective critical review'.

Acknowledgements

If anybody helped you in any way with the project (no matter how small the task) identify what he or she did and then thank them for it.

Reference List

Complete documentation of all those sources cited in the text in an appropriate standardised manner such as the format below;

Williams, M & May, T. (1996) *Introduction to the Philosophy of Social Research*, University College London Press. London.

Tips for Writing up Reports

1. Always write up your research methodology - this ensures that the research can be replicated at a later date. Include
 - Sample design - number of interviews or questionnaires etc.. - quotas (if appropriate) - response rates
 - Methodology used
 - Weighting
 - Fieldwork dates
2. Write in the past tense
3. Use rounded percentages one place of decimal i.e. 0.2%
4. Make your report as easy as possible to read, consider your audience and use language that is appropriate to them.
5. Where possible make comparisons with similar research i.e., benchmarking the exercise.
6. When your purpose is to inform or educate -select content that advances your point of view and supports your case and you use a more formal level of language.
7. Your vocabulary can be more specialised when you're writing for a specific audience - one which presumably has prior knowledge of the subject area. However avoid the use of jargon.
8. Avoid the temptation to be dogmatic - a report is just that- you're giving an account of a situation so that others can make up their own minds. This means it is not an opportunity to project your opinions - just the facts.
9. Provide sufficient factual detail.

Writing up and Presenting Key Findings

Ensure that you communicate with all key audiences in order to let people know how you are responding to their comments. If you can't respond - let them know why. Communication can act as a motivational tool. You should include all these groups who have been involved in the consultation exercise or who may have an interest in the outcome. This could include;

- Residents
- Staff
- Members
- Partners
- Other Departments
- Other Authorities / Local Businesses

7.2 - Evaluation

Evaluating the effectiveness of consultation exercises can help authorities to:

- Know whether consultation is genuinely helping them to listen and respond to the public
- Plan how to improve future consultation exercises
- Use resources that are spent on consultation wisely

Evaluating consultation is not an easy task, but it will be increasingly important as the number and breadth of consultations undertaken grows. At the moment, few authorities attempt to evaluate the effectiveness of their consultation programmes and relatively few know even how much they cost.

Evaluating Individual Consultation Exercises

Evaluation is not something to think about only at the end of an exercise. Deciding on how you will assess effectiveness is a fundamental part of consultation design. Judging whether an individual exercise has been a success depends largely on its objectives. However, there are two main dimensions to consider:

- The quality of the exercise, including the extent to which target audiences were reached
- The cost

Keeping an eye on costs is important. Consultation can be expensive and money invested in it may be wasted if the exercise is not properly planned or well used. The amount spent on a consultation exercise should also be considered in light of the overall cost of the service to which it relates and the opportunities that exist for improving value for money by making the service fit users' needs better. The cost of different consultation techniques varies significantly and this should be taken into account when choosing a method. There are ways in which costs can be reduced or spread and these may be particularly valuable where the most appropriate tool for an exercise is one of the more expensive types.

- Eradicate duplication of consultation exercises
- Make the widest possible use of consultation results
- Consult jointly with other agencies
- Use members of the community to carry out consultation

The Local Government Improvement and Development Agency (IdeA) has produced a valuable, detailed checklist of questions to ask when planning evaluation.

The key questions are:

Process

- Did the exercise reach a representative sample of the population or, where this is appropriate, all the target groups?
- Was the response rate high enough to give reliable results?

- Were the results disseminated to:
 - consultees?
 - the wider public, if only a smaller group was consulted?
 - relevant staff in the organisation, including frontline staff?
 - relevant partner organisations?
- If the exercise did not meet its objectives, why was this, and what steps can be taken to prevent similar problems in future?
- What did the exercise cost both directly and indirectly
What proportion is this of the overall cost of the relevant service?

When evaluating consultation, in general we are trying to find:

- What did you do?
- Why did you do it?
- How did you do it? (how efficient and effective)
- What were the outcomes and impacts?
- Was it cost effective and worthwhile?

In hindsight, what would you do differently?

The following more detailed checklist is a general approach which should be tailored to specific circumstances.

Objectives

- Are they clear?
- Are they understood by all relevant stakeholders?
- Do they feed into the planning process?

Choice of Technique

- Is the choice appropriate for the objectives?
- Are they understood by all relevant stakeholders?
- Is the choice appropriate in terms of
 - Quantitative/qualitative
 - Sample Size
 - Sample Selection

Process

- Was a clear timescale set out and adhered to?
- Was sufficient time allowed for responses?
- Was information and explanation easily accessible?
- Plain English
- Translations
- Have appropriate efforts been made to get to 'hard to reach' groups?
- Was there feedback to those consulted?

Cost

- What was the cost of staff time?
- What was the cost of bought in goods and services?
- What other costs were there?

Benefits

- Has it led to some change of policy, service delivery, influencing other agencies or other action?
- What is the estimated impact over what time period?
- Number of people affected
- Value of the benefit
- Is any measurement of these factors possible?
- What has the impact been on satisfaction?

The Citizen's View

Has evaluation considered the viewpoint of those consulted and citizen's more widely?

Evaluating an Overall Programme

The principles that should underpin the overall evaluation of a consultation programme are similar to those that apply to individual exercises, but the issues that need to be taken into account differ. The key questions are:

- Has the programme been planned to cover both corporate and service area priorities?
- Has the programme been planned jointly with partner or neighbouring organisations?
- Is information held corporately about consultation exercises that are planned or underway across the organisation and where appropriate partner organisations?
- Is consultation being carried out to a consistently high standard across the organisation?
- Are organisation-wide standards for consultation in place and being met?
- Are the results of exercises made available to other services or organisations that might find them helpful?
- Has the programme resulted, over time, in an increase in the percentage of local people who say that the authority listens to their views? The following more detailed checklist is a general approach which should be tailored to specific circumstances. How does the cost compare with similar exercises in the authority or other similar authorities?
- Has the cost been shared by designing the exercise to be valuable to more than one service or organisation?

Outcome

- Has the exercise helped to improve the cost effectiveness of the service by making it match users' needs more closely?
- Did the consultation directly inform a decision, or shape policy or service delivery arrangements?
- Were the consultation results used to set local performance standards and targets?

What is Evaluation For?

Purpose	Accountability	Focus	Evaluation Paradigm	Key Questions
Accountability	Funders/ /Sponsors Steering Committee Senior Management	Achievement of targets goals v.f.m	Assessment	Has the programme achieved it's objective? Are resources used efficiently?
Management	Line Managers Project co- Ordinators	Delivery mechanisms Strategies Procedures	Implementation	How well is the programme managed? All delivery Strategies working?
Learning	Policy makers & those planning similar initiatives	Problems and constraints in context: Institutional Culture	Development	What is being learned about the 'object' of evaluation; constraints and strategies.

7.4 - Newsletters

Newsletters can be a very effective way of providing information and inviting feedback. They can range from the very simple two sides of A4 to a magazine style.

An attractively designed newsletter should entice people to read it! Too much information can sometimes make the reader 'switch off', so newsletters should generally use shorter articles and (where possible) also use eye-catching pictures. A picture can say a thousand words!

It should also be laid out so that people can 'dip' into it, rather than be forced to read all the way through one long, continuous document. It goes almost without saying, but the most valuable information in the world is no good unless people actually read it.

You will need to ensure that the newsletter states clearly by whom it has been produced together with an address.

If it is a service user newsletter to which anyone is invited to contribute, you may want to have an editorial policy which is clear about how you will select articles and why you might reject them, (eg, they are contrary to the Council's equal opportunities policy).

They can be used to keep a large number of people informed and invite them to provide their views or participate in other ways. It is particularly useful if the initiative is going to go on for a long time, e.g. Best Value Reviews.

Resources

Access to a PC for the simplest newsletter. For a more sophisticated newsletter you will need to have a desktop publishing programme and someone with the skills to use it. Photos, drawings and logos can be inserted into a newsletter using a scanner.

Cost depends on length, design, use of colour (but it is possible to achieve a satisfying result by using different shades of the same colour).

Once a page has been designed, it can be very time consuming to alter the layout. Any late requests for major amendments are also difficult to incorporate.

Cost of external design and printing and issues around corporate image.