

# Consultation methods Compared



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## Introduction

To achieve a balanced consultation that engages with as many people as possible, and one that ends up in useful actions, you will need to use a variety of methods. Here is a selection of consultation methods that you may find useful when collecting issues and consulting your community, but it is not exhaustive so if something else works for you then do it.

### Things to consider:

- How big is your community? Some methods work better for smaller communities and some for bigger ones.
- You may know some of the issues, what's the best way of finding out if there are others?
- How much help is available to do the consulting and following actions?
- How will you include everyone in the community?
- What information will help you to improve the local area?
- Do different age groups need different sorts of consultation?
- Have you got you organisations and groups you can contact and visit?
- Have you got any meeting places, regular community coffee mornings or other events?
- Don't forget to include contact details in case people need further information

# 1. Finding the issues

## *Suggestion boxes*

Good points	Not so good
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Easy for people to use</li><li>• Informal way of collecting views on a single subject</li><li>• Confidential/anonymous</li><li>• People can do it in their own time</li><li>• Works in smaller communities</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• It's not targeted so you have no idea of how representative the sample is</li><li>• Not good if you want to explore a number of issues</li><li>• You will probably get all sorts of random comments some of which may be difficult to use</li></ul>

## *Postcards*

These are delivered to every household giving a bit of background information and asking for their ideas, views, needs, concerns etc on that particular subject. Provide questions, or areas you would like information about and provide spaces on the card for the information. Give them an address to return it to or ask them to bring it to a public meeting or drop in event.

Good points	Not so good
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Easy for people to use</li><li>• Informal way of collecting views on an issue or certain areas of interest</li><li>• Confidential or anonymous</li><li>• People can do it in their own time</li><li>• Limited space so people are kept to the point</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• People may forget to hand it in</li><li>• You have no idea of how representative the views are of the whole community</li><li>• Limited space so you can't ask much</li></ul>

## *Leaflets/flyers*

These can be slotted into parish magazines or local newspapers, and useful for very small surveys.

Good points	Not so good
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Inexpensive</li><li>• Everyone sees the same written information</li><li>• Gives everyone a chance to respond</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• As for postcards above this is only suitable for simple issues due to limited space</li></ul>

## *Contact Clubs and Organisations*

Write to or preferably visit (you might also be a member of a group) any clubs, societies or other organisations in your town/parish and see if you can collect issues, ideas, and perhaps some volunteers.

Good points	Not so good
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Covers a range of groups</li> <li>• Informally chatting to people may encourage those who wouldn't or are unable to come to a formal meeting to give their views</li> <li>• Groups often contain people from outside who may give you good feedback on what they like about the community</li> <li>• It can help reach some of the people who are termed "hard to reach"</li> <li>• Helps to get the views of people who are lacking in confidence or who would find completing a questionnaire difficult</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• If there are lots of groups this will be time consuming</li> <li>• Not everybody is in a club, society or organisation</li> <li>• Care is needed so groups don't feel the visit is an intrusion</li> </ul>

### ***Informal Chats/Surveys***

Go to places where people congregate for example the pub, shop, bus stop, teen shelter etc armed with a list of questions on a clipboard.

Good points	Not so good
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Questions may lead into fuller discussions on the topic</li> <li>• In some places you will have a captive audience</li> <li>• Asking the same questions gives you a comparison across all the groups</li> <li>• Possibility of meeting people who may not normally get involved</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Not necessarily inclusive</li> </ul>

### ***Community Walks***

Everyone is invited to come for a walk around the village/part of town with either the general aim of identifying current problems and possible solutions or looking at something more specific such as litter, historic buildings, problem road junctions etc.

Good points	Not so good
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• It generates discussion and ideas</li> <li>• May generate more volunteers for the project</li> <li>• It can be a relaxed opportunity to sound out ideas and identify issues</li> <li>• Useful if you have or would like a conservation area</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Weather dependent</li> <li>• Finding a suitable time when a good number of people can participate can be a challenge</li> <li>•</li> <li>•</li> </ul>

Depending on the issues identified you may want to organise a second walk having invited someone able to give professional advice on the issues e.g. someone from SCC Highways, a utilities company, a conservation officer, English Heritage etc.

## ***Drop in events***

There are lots of ways to make these events where people can share their local knowledge, give views, and bring up issues, volunteer, talk to people and so on. You can have them as a information event with maps and other information displayed, collect issues and ask for solutions.

Good points	Not so good
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Can be tailored to any sort of community and project</li> <li>• Opportunity to talk to people in depth about issues and conversely what is good</li> <li>• Can be motivational events with good buy in from the community for the project</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• May not be representative of the community as a whole (younger people especially are unlikely to come)</li> <li>• Time consuming to make them varied and interesting</li> <li>• They need really good publicity to try and draw in as many people as possible</li> </ul>

## ***Community events***

Depending on your community there are various events in the year both inside and out where you could have a stall/table/exhibition board to publicise, collect views, help people complete questionnaires, meet visitors to collect their views and so on. It can be a good way of getting the informal history of a place and getting volunteers.

Good points	Not so good
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Useful for publicising further consultation and where the project has got to</li> <li>•</li> <li>• Good informal way of meeting people and collecting issues</li> <li>• Can also be used in later consultations to encourage people to complete questionnaires etc.</li> <li>• You may collect local stories, history and things you wouldn't have thought of asking in a questionnaire</li> <li>• You can encourage people to volunteer to join the project</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• People may be more interested in the event than your consultation</li> <li>• Needs volunteers to man a stall in addition to all the other meetings you may be holding</li> </ul>

## ***Public Meetings***

Participants are invited to attend, by open invitation using local publicity. These can be useful especially to launch a project, gauge support and to have a first look at issues however there are lots of pitfalls with the traditional form of meeting where there is usually a top table of officials/committee etc. facing the audience who are arranged in rows.

Good points	Not so good
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cheap and quick</li> <li>• Familiar format for officials</li> <li>• Opportunity for people to hear something together and ask questions</li> <li>• It's hard to pitch a presentation to a varied audience</li> <li>• Can be confrontational especially if the topic is controversial</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Attendance is often low</li> <li>• Some people find public meetings intimidating</li> <li>• They can exclude certain sections of the community</li> </ul>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• It's a poor format for debate and decision making</li> <li>• The effects of one bad public meeting can last for years especially in small villages</li> </ul>	
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**Tips for public meetings that deliver more useful information:**

- Keep the proceedings informal. Seating people around separate tables for instance helps people feel more comfortable and as a result they are more likely to contribute.
- Have an introduction and points where things are feedback to everyone but break into discussion or action groups so people get a chance to discuss things in a smaller group and work on not just what the issues are but also what they think can be done. This avoids confrontation, gives everyone a chance to contribute and a tasks to focus on so much more information is collected.
- You could do a Parish/Town Review instead as below (also separate leaflet available with more details)

**Parish/Town Review**

This is a consultation that generally runs on one day (usually for a couple of hours) but might be in two sessions or run over 2 days if that suits your community. It can identify peoples' issues & concerns but also their aspirations & community assets. It is facilitated by SCDC and WDC and a full report of the event is written up afterwards for the Parish/Town Council.

**It usually consists of:**

- An informal audit to give basic statistics about those attending, which helps with any follow up you may wish to undertake
- everyone who comes can note their needs & concerns but also good points about their community that can be built on
- Refreshments and time to talk to each other
- Opportunity to write action plans and actions they feel could be taken

Good points	Not so good
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Can be tailored to any sort of community and any particular issues</li> <li>• A report and action plan is produced</li> <li>• It draws together members of the community to look at issues together</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• May not be representative of the community as a whole (e.g. younger people are less likely to come)</li> <li>• They need really good publicity to try and draw in as many people as possible</li> </ul>

**2. Consultation on the issues**  
**Questionnaires**

These are useful after issues have been identified to find out more about the issues and look at possible solutions. With that in mind careful thought needs to go into the construction of a questionnaire so that you do collect the information that will help to look at issues and get useful possible actions. (There is a separate guide to producing questionnaires: **Community Consultation Questionnaires**)

Good points	Not so good
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A printed copy can be delivered to every household in the town/village so everyone has the opportunity to participate</li> <li>• They are a cost effective way of reaching everyone</li> <li>• They are versatile and can cover all the issues you have identified or just one particular one</li> <li>• The statistics you collect can help with evidence of need for funding bids, a variety of services, as well as information for plans</li> <li>• They are anonymous so people give their views freely</li> <li>• Depending on what you ask you can analyse by age, area, gender</li> <li>• You can do separate questionnaires for different groups (households, businesses, young people etc.)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• It is a lot of work to produce a good questionnaire and does need a lot of careful thought about what you want to ask and whether the information will be useful</li> <li>• It can be a lengthy process to produce one</li> <li>• Analysing the results needs to be done carefully and does take a lot of time</li> <li>• If they are too long people won't complete them</li> <li>• Distribution may be an issue in bigger parishes and towns</li> </ul>

Note: They are a tool to find out more about issues and what actions people think need to be taken so are followed by analysis and an action plan to work on getting issues resolved (or feed into a bigger plan such as a Neighbourhood Plan).

### **Website**

Setting up a website (or a dedicated set of pages if you have one already) is a good way of getting the message out about your project/consultation/events and so on. Depending on what you want to use it for it can be interactive to connect to surveys, invite volunteers, people to post info, photos and so on or more about information. Just make sure it “pings up” on Google for people to find it easily. Put the web address on everything to publicise it widely and make sure that all the buttons and links work.

Good points	Not so good
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• People can access it at anytime and from wherever they are</li> <li>• It has far more reach than leaflets, posters or notices</li> <li>• People from other organisations can also access it for info and updates</li> <li>• You don't need lots of copies of documents, people can read them online or print them off should they need to</li> <li>• You can run small surveys</li> <li>• Keep people in touch with a newsletter</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• It needs to be fully working and up to date, it's disappointing to look at a website and the latest news is over a year ago</li> <li>• Not everyone is online</li> </ul>

## Social Media

Lots of people use Facebook, Twitter and a whole host of other social media sites to share information with their friends so this is an area which might reach a number of people in a way that is more interactive.

Good points	Not so good
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Interactive people can post their views, photos etc</li> <li>• Easy for people to access and share with others</li> <li>• Can reach people who may be harder to reach by other methods</li> <li>• Many people do not use these sites</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Needs to be kept up to date to be effective because it is conversational</li> <li>• Posts need to be moderated to avoid offensive remarks that destroy community spirit</li> <li>• There are lots of social sites – which do you pick?</li> </ul>

## Business Breakfast

Invite members of all the local businesses to a breakfast event with informal consultation time. However, ask businesses what times would suit them; it might be that an evening or lunchtime meeting is better attended.

Good points	Not so good
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Good opportunity for businesses to talk to each other and share good practice and issues</li> <li>• Consultation can be interactive with discussion of a wide range of issues</li> <li>• Issues may come out that wouldn't have been covered in a questionnaire</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• You may not get much of a response from businesses</li> <li>• Is unlikely to involve homeworkers unless there is Business Association and they belong to it or you do some publicity</li> <li>• This may not work with larger businesses however instead you can visit them individually</li> </ul>

## Informal Action Plan

People are often asked for their views but not always for their ideas on how to take issues forward or resolve them so at a drop in event why not use the event as an opportunity to get not only the issues but possible solutions. Give people an empty template with a subject (in this case "Traffic") and see what suggestions they come up with.

Anyplace Consultation (year) Action plan			
What is the issue?	Action that could be taken	Who can help with this	Resources Needed
Traffic			

Good points	Not so good
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Moves people on from the issues and the present, to what can be achieved in the next few months or years</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• People may be happy to put down actions but not so keen to help</li> <li>• Some of the solutions suggested may not be possible at the present time due to the amount of funding needed so there is the</li> </ul>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• It encourages people to think constructively and put down their ideas for changing their area on paper</li> <li>• Can help with setting up action groups to implement improvements</li> </ul>	<p>danger people may have expectations that can't be met</p>
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If you have a school (or more than one) it is always worth making contact to build closer links with the community and sometimes they will help with getting the views of the students or encourage students to produce their own questionnaire as part of the curriculum.

Good points	Not so good
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• By working in partnership more young people are likely to take part</li> <li>• It may be easier to start projects in which the young people see their suggestions taken forward</li> <li>• You can publicise the consultation through things like "parent mail"</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Young people may feel unable to say what they want because they are at school</li> <li>• Timetables are set a long while in advance so they do need to be asked well in advance</li> </ul>

### ***Street/open space montage***

Take photographs of all the buildings in a street or streets and mount the photographs on a board/s. Ask people what they like or they don't like and how it could be improved. This could be useful if you are doing a Neighbourhood Plan and want to know what sort of housing people would like to see built. It could also help when thinking about improvements to an area.

Good points	Not so good
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Visual. Helps people to look at an area and see what they do or don't like and why</li> <li>• It starts discussion and helps people think about improvements or how new developments could look</li> <li>• Can be a catalyst to community action to improve a local open space for instance</li> <li>• Useful as part of a drop in session</li> <li>• This approach can also be used to identify, good buildings and areas and eyesores, run down buildings and areas</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• More volunteer time; you need someone to prepare it</li> </ul>

**This is a brief look at the sorts of consultation methods you may wish to use so for further information and to discuss your needs and ideas please contact [communities@eastsoffolk.gov.uk](mailto:communities@eastsoffolk.gov.uk)**