

How to write a Questionnaire



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Introduction

Once you know what the issues are, questionnaires are a good way of reaching everyone in the community. Good ones will capture a wide range of views and opinions, allowing you to collect in depth information about issues and the sorts of actions that can be taken to resolve them.

This guide is intended to help you design your questionnaire and to think about how you are going to use the results to develop actions or policies (depending on what sort of plan you are doing).

1. Before you start

What are the issues?

Don't start until you know what the issues are because a questionnaire is only as good as your grasp of the issues facing the community. Once you know what the issues are it can help you to look at what sort of plan is suitable as well as ideas for questions to help you understand the issues in more depth.

Now is a good time to make contact with the district and county councils (if you haven't already) to ask if there is anything coming up in the future that is likely to affect your area. Hopefully if you are doing a Neighbourhood Plan you will have already contacted the District Planners. Also, keep in touch with your district and county councillors who will support you and who may be able to provide some funding.

How can you find out?

There are various ways of doing this including:

- Hold a consultation event to bring people together (see Parish/Town Review leaflet)
- Visit regular meeting of groups in the village or town (see Consultation Methods document)
- Visit clubs, societies and organisations and talk to people about any issues or concerns
- take a clipboard or large board to popular places such as shops, events etc. and ask for people's views (you can also publicise the plan)
- encourage people to take photographs of what they like or dislike and display them at a drop in/public meeting and invite comments

All of these methods have their strengths and weaknesses so do a combination of them to get a good picture of the issues and you can then do the questionnaire to find out more about issues and possible solutions.

2. General ideas for good design

A good questionnaire encourages people to share information so it needs to be attractive and easy to complete.

- Make the questions easy for everyone to understand. People may have difficulty reading for all sorts of reasons including eyesight problems, lack of reading skills etc.
- Avoid jargon, keep it simple and direct
- Be relevant and specific about what you are asking
- Put the questions in a logical order by grouping questions about similar subjects together
- Make sure the questionnaire is written in a big enough font using something like 'Arial' because many people have sight problems
- Take time to make the questionnaire look attractive. On the printed copy, break the questions up into sections and perhaps put in a few pictures
- When using colours, be careful not to have busy or dark backgrounds behind the text, people may struggle to read it.

3. How do you decide which questions to ask?

Questions about the issues

You have found out about the issues in the community through your drop-ins, postcards or any other methods you have used.

The questionnaire needs the questions that will help you find out more about the issues so that you can start looking at possible solutions or ways forward.

Town/parish plan questionnaires usually cover a wide selection of questions including social aspects because they are holistic plans looking at everything in a community.

Neighbourhood Plans are about development and land use but the questionnaire may deal with other topics which can be included as an appendix or separate plan/action plan.

Whatever you ask, stick to one topic per question, so don't combine traffic issues with allotments and childcare for example. Each question needs to help you find out more about one topic.

There are lots of things you could ask however; do you need to ask the question at all? Is the data available already? (See contact page at the end for sources of data)

Ask yourself “so what?”

In order to decide which questions you want to keep in your questionnaire it may be useful to use the ‘so what?’ test – a question may be interesting but will you be able to use the information to inform any decisions or take any action?

Example - questions about drivers and numbers of cars in a household may be interesting to ask but what you can do with the information gleaned? Would it be better to save the space for something else?

- What will help you find out more about the issues?
- What will help to move things forward?
- Be realistic, some things are not possible or are simply not in your control
- “Wish lists” may raise expectation but may not be deliverable.

Analysis

Also think about how you are going to analyse the results so as not to give yourself an impossible task. Avoid having lots of open comments, because they are difficult to analyse.

Population profile questions

What would it be useful to know about who is completing the questionnaire?

You could have other questions depending on your questionnaire but the three below are essential for your analysis.

1. Male or female
2. What age group they fall into
3. The area they live in (using a map to define the areas is easiest)

By asking them you can analyse by:

- **Area** – is something an issue in one area or more parts
- **Age groups** – do different age groups have differing views or need different things
- **Gender** - do men and women have different views or is an issue affecting them differently
- You can also use all three together to help you drill down into the issues further

4. Types of question

Closed/multiple choice questions – where respondents are asked to select one or more options from a list you provide.

- When using this type of question, think about the order of the options you offer.
- You may also want to include an ‘other (please specify)’ option in case none of the options you have offered are applicable for the respondent which will result in comments.

Straight ‘yes’ or ‘no’ – where respondents are asked whether they have something or not, e.g. a service, or where they are asked to agree or disagree with a statement.

- You do need to follow this sort of question with another question or two to explore why they have answered “yes” or “no” and ask them about solutions, or it tends not to take you any further.

Open ended questions – where respondents are asked to provide a numerical or text response.

It is tempting to use open ended text questions to glean more detailed information from respondents. However, it is important to bear in mind that these types of responses take a lot longer to input and are more difficult to analyse due to the range of possible responses. Use them sparingly and give clear guidelines as to what subjects you want comments on.

Using Scales - Scales are useful to reveal how strongly people feel about the stance they have taken. It is important to use a balanced scale, for example:

- Very satisfied
- Satisfied
- Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied
- Dissatisfied
- Very dissatisfied

You can also use scales to ask people to list things in order of priority, for example where 1 = highest priority and 5 = lowest priority. Alternatively you can ask people to select a number from a scale, for example where 1 = very poor and 10 = very good.

When using scales it is important to be consistent throughout the questionnaire to avoid confusion for the person filling it in.

Example - if you are using numerical scales don't have **1 = very good**, for one question and **1 = very poor**, for another question.

5. Getting a good response

The following points will help you get a good response to your questionnaire:

- Think carefully about what questions you include, if a questionnaire is too long many people will be put off completing it. Ask no more than 50 questions at most, less if you can.
- Write a good introduction - Don't forget to explain who is sending the questionnaire out and why it is important that it is filled in. Explain how the responses will be used and how people can find out how the plan is progressing.
- The best response rate is achieved by hand delivering and collecting the questionnaires but if that's not possible organise some drop off points in the town/village or free post envelopes
- Provide a contact name or telephone number for anyone who may need some help filling in their questionnaire
- Assure people that their responses will be treated confidentially
- Some plan committees offer an incentive such as a prize draw to encourage people to fill in their questionnaire. If you decide to do this you will need to keep the names and addresses separate from the responses to ensure that the responses cannot be matched to an individual

6. Analysis

Once your completed questionnaires have been returned you will need to collate the answers and interpret what the figures are telling you. Most people will use specialist survey software as this has the advantage of enabling you to sort the information and do analysis of the results (i.e. cross reference the responses to two or more different questions). You could do a small one using "Word" and inputting the completed questionnaires into a spreadsheet however this is very time consuming.

- Inputting the questionnaire findings can be time consuming and it is important that it is done accurately
- Giving people the option of completing questionnaires online reduces the amount of manual inputting required

Please see the section on Software.

What kinds of questionnaires will you need?

You may want to think about the different groups of people in your local area and whether you will need different questionnaires to collect their views. For example, as well as a questionnaire that goes to all residents, it may be useful to have different questionnaires for young people and for businesses.

Below are some suggestions on how you could approach this.

1. Individual

The most versatile format is going to be one questionnaire where you ask each individual to respond to all of the questions. You can then cross reference and drill down all the information. It gives you the fullest picture of what the community think and the most information. You can put individual and household questions on the one questionnaire.

2. Household

If you are thinking of just doing a questionnaire that one person in a household answers for everyone, it really limits what you can ask and who can answer.

For example if you ask:

- **Where do you live?** - One person in the household can answer that.
- **What is your main form of transport?** – The responses from each individual in the household will vary, fine if there is one person in the household but not if there are 2 or more.

You can do separate Household and Individual questionnaires and combine them on the same printed copy however you will need to analyse them separately because the basis for each questionnaire is different.

3. Young People

Think about whether there are any organised children and youth activities already happening in your community, for instance scouts, after school club, Sunday school, youth club, youth sports teams etc in your area where groups of young people can be consulted collectively.

Some towns/parishes have a youth council or have worked with schools or youth clubs with young people have developing and analysing a questionnaire themselves as part of their curriculum or activities. The questionnaire is then asking questions about the things they are interested in and the issues they face.

When trying to get the views of young people consider the following:

- What age group(s) do you want to consult with?
- Are there any young people who can help with the planning and design of the consultation? Early engagement will help to secure their longer term involvement in any actions identified too
- Young people are younger members of the community with the same broad range of personality and interests as the adults. Young people will also be concerned about housing, jobs, access to services and the look of where they live just as the adults are.
- Feedback to them is very important and continuing engagement

4. Businesses

When trying to get the views of businesses:

- Is there a Business Association you can work with on writing a questionnaire and who can help with the distribution of it?
- Many businesses are run from people's homes – how will you reach them?

Although business owners may be interested in some of the same things as residents, there will be other things that the questionnaire could explore such as:

- Types of business
- Number of employees
- Suitability and availability of business premises
- Availability of skilled/unskilled employees
- Plans to expand & create jobs
- Improvements that could benefit local businesses

Keep any questionnaire short and to the point. If you can, go and visit businesses to talk to them and complete it with them. You will get a far better response rate and useful information.

Software and social media

Software

To develop your questionnaire and analyse the results it is easier and quicker to use dedicated software. Writing questionnaires from scratch can take a long time and even a small consultation exercise can generate a lot of information to analyse.

There are a number of options:

Community Action Suffolk has developed questionnaire software specifically designed to help with this part of the parish/Neighbourhood Planning process. The software includes:

- Access to approximately 400 questions that have already been tested and used in parish plans/Neighbourhood Plans
- Ability to add your own questions or amend questions on the database to suit your own needs
- Ability to offer questionnaire in printed form and online
- Powerful analysis tools
- Training and support available to use the software
- No time limit, the data remains available to you for as long as you need it

For further information and costs, please contact Danny Austin 01473 345324
danny.austin@communityactionsuffolk.org.uk

Survey Monkey is useful for short questionnaires and the basic package is free however:

- The basic package is very basic so you will probably end up paying at least £35 per month for the features you want so it could work out quite expensive
- It is not specific to Parish/Neighbourhood Plans so their templates are not helpful nor are the helpful suggestions for questions.
- If you only have a few questions and want to do a quick snap poll then it's really good

I've only given a couple of examples, take your time to look around and think about which features you would find helpful before selecting software.

Social Media

Many people use Facebook, Twitter, and other sites to share information with each other; this might be very useful in engaging with some people in your community because it is more interactive than questionnaires:

- You can invite comments
- People can post photos and videos of events/parts of the village or town that concern them and so on
- It is easy to keep information current
- People can interact with each other
- It can help people to stay in contact with the process and make it their own

However, do make sure it is safe; don't condone 'cyber bullying' and nasty comments. Unacceptable behaviour hurts people and will destroy community spirit very quickly.



More about Question writing

Common mistakes

The following examples highlight some of the common mistakes made when writing questionnaires:

Example 1 - a lack of balance

How satisfied are you with the service you received?

Extremely satisfied

Very satisfied

Satisfied

Not very satisfied

Not at all satisfied

Are the question and scale balanced? There are 3 options to show you are happy but only 2 if you are not. You are not invited to give the reasons why you are happy or not happy with the service.

Better to use:

Very satisfied

Satisfied

Neither satisfied or dissatisfied

Dissatisfied

Very dissatisfied

(Whichever scale you use just check it is balanced in this way)

Example 2 – not specific enough

Do you think it is important to for the offices to have more convenient opening hours?

1. Yes
2. No

Is the question specific enough? Could you have gathered more useful information by giving people some options about times they might find useful? You could then analyse the results to see which sections of the community would access the offices at various times and perhaps help to look at what services could be provided as well.

Better to use:

How important are the following when you come to our offices?

1. Opening times
2. Services offered
3. Disabled access
4. Waiting times
5. Friendly staff
6. Parking
7. Other (leave space for them to comment)

(Use rating question where they can put them in order of importance)

With a follow up question:

If the current opening times do not meet your needs which times would?

(Use a multiple choice question, giving people a choice of times).

Example 3 - asking 2 or more questions at once

The Town policy on sports is to refurbish facilities, develop pitches, and it fully supports the active clubs and exercise classes. Youth sports working with the school and facilities for visitors and residents should also be fully supported.

1. Yes
2. No

It's unclear what the respondent is being asked to agree to. There are several questions rolled into one so they will have trouble answering it and you won't be able to analyse it.

Better to use:

The Town Council looks after the sports facilities in the town and supports local clubs. To help us look at whether the current facilities meet current and future needs, how important are these facilities to you?

1. Football pitches
2. Trim trail
3. Cycle paths
4. Sports hall
5. Tennis courts
6. Other (allow comments)

(Use a rated question and encourage people to choose as many options as they want to comment on)

Example 4 – vague subjectivity and jargon

Is the Council doing a good job in implementing its infrastructure, viability and sustainability obligations?

1. Yes
2. No

What is a good job? It's vague and the idea of what is good will vary from person to person. Avoid jargon at all costs and use language people will understand. If people don't know what the question is about they won't answer it.

Better to use:

(Suitable questions about specific areas with plenty of options so you can find out if there are particular issues and possible solutions).

Example 5 – leading questions

The entrance points to the Town should be improved. Do you agree?

1. Yes
2. No

Is the wording of the question leading the response? Is there enough information to give an informed response? A yes or no answer doesn't tell you what people think would improve the entrances, so you will be no further forward.

Better to use:

Would any of the following improve the entrances to the Town?

1. Flower pots
2. Rustic gates
3. Welcome signs
4. Flower bed
5. Other (allow comments)

(Use a multiple choice question which allows people to select more than one response and you will have a better idea of what people are thinking).

Example 6 – more information needed

Is the Council doing a good job at providing services in the town?

Yes

No

What do you want to know in asking this question? If people answer it as it stands you will be no further forward.

Better to use:

How would you rate the following services?

(Include a list of your services and ask people to rate them taking care to balance your ratings system as in Example 1)

Example 7 – lack of focus

Please use the space below if you have any further comments.

In this case you may get a lot of comments about anything and everything which would be a nightmare to analyse. How many will be constructive?

Better to use:

Please use the spaces below to add any further comments on the following areas.

(Then give them a choice of perhaps, Roads, Community Services, Health, etc depending on what topics your questionnaire deals with).

Testing your questionnaire

Before distributing your questionnaire to the whole town or village it is strongly recommended that you test it out amongst a small group of people, preferably people who have not been involved in its development. This will help you identify whether there are any questions that are unclear or poorly worded. By doing some basic analysis of the replies it will also help you confirm whether the questions you have asked are going to generate information you can use.

The named contacts below would be happy to look at your draft questionnaire and provide feedback if required.

For help or further information please contact:

Communities Team: Communities@eastsoffolk.gov.uk