

Guidelines on Effective Community Involvement and Consultation

RTPI Good Practice Note 1

About these Guidelines

Professionals in all manner of disciplines are having to come to terms with the intricacies of consultation and effective community involvement.

In the case of planners and those in allied activities, recent legislation adds new obligations to existing, long standing commitments to public participation, and accordingly planning authorities in England are working on Statements of Community Involvement (SCIs). In Wales a similar document is being prepared under the title Community Involvement Scheme (CISs) and in Scotland the issues are being considered in the White Paper, Modernising the Planning System. Specific advice and guidance on the preparation of these documents is available from a variety of sources.

These Guidelines serve a wider purpose. They are intended to provide RTPI members with a corps of *best practice* guidance on key aspects of community involvement, in an easy to absorb format and capable of being amended and updated in the light of experience.

By working alongside The Consultation Institute, the RTPI has sought to leverage its knowledge of *best practice* in those many disciplines where public and stakeholder consultation is well established. It must be remembered that planners are not alone in seeking wider community involvement in the decision-making process, and that stakeholders are right to demand improved co-ordination and consistency between the various public bodies and functions who wish to hear their views.

These 22 Guidelines contain detailed advice under three generic headings – Public Involvement Issues, Enablers and Consultation Standards.

Comments and suggested improvements will be welcome and should be addressed to policy@rtpi.org.uk.



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Introduction

One of the difficulties in coming to terms with the changes in culture and behaviour that is demanded of the planning profession is that some of the popular concepts of community involvement are still misunderstood by many people, both lay and professional.

In particular, it is important to be clear as to where ultimate responsibility lies for taking decisions on development plans and for processing planning applications. Whilst formal consultation will necessarily be required as part of effective processes in these contexts, there is scope for wider public participation in certain circumstances.

Both the Government, and the RTPI are keen to encourage this broader view of public engagement, but practitioners may need help to crystallise the concepts and make them meaningful in practice. For this reason, Guideline 1 on the use of terminology assumes a special significance.

It is also important to recognise the continuing and pivotal role of consultation in the new planning environment. Despite the growing popularity of interactions where decision-making and operational activities are shared between the parties, development plans and key planning decisions are ultimately taken by accountable bodies which bear the full responsibility for those decisions.

Effective consultation enables such decisions and plans to be approved in the knowledge that stakeholders and the public generally have had a full opportunity to express their views and make representations in a genuine and transparent dialogue. What has been absent in the past is a sufficiently robust framework of guidance so that planning authorities and others recognise if, and whether they are doing the job properly.

To help in this, in Category Three (Guidelines 16-22) we have followed the seven principles of, "The Consultation Charter". Since its original publication by The Consultation Institute in 2003, this has received widespread acceptance and forms a solid basis for measuring compliance with best practice in this area.

These Guidelines exist alongside other sources of guidance and assistance. The resources available on www.communityplanning.net include details of many organisations and contacts active in the subject of community involvement, and interested practitioners are urged to follow developments closely in what is a fascinating and rapidly evolving worldwide activity.

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¹ For a full explanation of The Consultation Charter, see www.consultationinstitute.org

No 1 Using Terminology with Precision

The Issue

Much of the terminology used in the recent legislation and associated guidance refers to various kinds of public participation, and it is sometimes difficult to discern the precise intention behind the use of different terms. Superficially, words such as engagement, participation, involvement and even consultation appear almost interchangeable.

In reality, they are different, and for those working at the practical implementation of these concepts, it is important to understand the precise meaning and usage of each term.

The use of standard definitions will, in time, help professionals to communicate with each other with fewer misunderstandings. More significantly, it should encourage greater consistency in communications with the general public and the stakeholder base.

The RTPI Recommends

■ Public (or Community) Involvement

Effective interactions between planners, decision-makers, individual and representative stakeholders to identify issues and exchange views on a continuous basis;

■ Participation

The extent and nature of activities undertaken by those who take part in public or community involvement;

■ Public (or Community) Engagement

Actions and processes taken or undertaken to establish effective relationships with individuals or groups so that more specific interactions can then take place;

■ Consultation

The dynamic process of dialogue between individuals or groups, based upon a genuine exchange of views, and normally with the objective of influencing decisions, policies or programmes of action.

No 2 Community Engagement and Building Relationships

The Issue

The phrase “community engagement” causes considerable confusion for it is often used as an umbrella term to cover the whole range of public involvement and consultation. In fact it has a more precise meaning, and refers to those actions and processes which take place to establish an effective relationship with individual and organisational stakeholders.

This phase is critical, as the future conduct of consultations and other forms of interaction depend upon the nature of the relationship, and the expectations set at the beginning. From time to time, it is necessary to re-engage with those who have ceased to participate, and on every occasion, the basis of trust between the parties is of paramount importance.

It is especially important to ensure engagement with hard-to-reach and other community groups which have traditionally been neglected.

The RTPI Recommends

- Setting clear objectives for community engagement, recognising which sections of society already have a satisfactory basis for public participation, and where greater efforts are needed to engage successfully with specific groups;
- Understanding the key drivers and motivations of groups targeted for community engagement, and devising engagement strategies that recognise the unique and diverse characteristics of such groups;
- Measuring success in community engagement by evaluating the quality and quantity of subsequent interactions, and by periodically reviewing the relationship to determine whether further actions are necessary to engage more fully with all strands of opinion within a defined group;
- Allocating clear responsibility for engaging with particular groups, leveraging historic or issue specific specialist know how, and avoiding disruption of existing long term relations with inherited trust.

No 3 Community Involvement and Consultation Objectives

The Issue

Many forms of public involvement and participation suffer from a confusion of objectives. Whilst some processes can accommodate such vagueness, it is important to have a clearer view of the more formal stages such as a public consultation. Successful consultations depend upon a clear, shared understanding of their objectives.

Because consultation objectives can vary widely, and the outputs used for a wide variety of purposes, it is often tempting to adopt too wide a set of objectives.

But as the consultation objectives should also largely influence the choice of methods, the style of the consultation and the post consultation actions, it is important to focus on key objectives.

Isolating key objectives from peripheral benefits of the consultation process will help those planning public engagement exercises and assist in creating the right expectations.

The RTPI Recommends

- That every consultation exercise possesses a clear mandate which explains the aims of the consultation;
- Identifying precisely *who* are the decision-makers or *which* is the organisation to be informed by the consultation, and the purpose for which they will use the information and opinions gathered in the process;
- Acting in accordance with an approved Statement of Community Involvement² (SCI) to ensure consistency of approach;
- Developing a standard format for such mandates and ensuring consistency with other consultations undertaken in other departments of the authority, so that stakeholders' understanding is assisted;
- If a consultation is restricted to a closed list of alternative options, this should be made clear;
- If a consultation welcomes new ideas and alternatives to the proposals published for consultation, then this should also be made clear.

² Statements of Community Involvement are a requirement under the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004; in Wales the equivalent document is called a Community Involvement Scheme (CIS)

No 4 Best Value and Consultation

The Issue

The concept of *Best Value* obliges public bodies to review at regular intervals, whether their methods of delivering services or undertaking essential tasks meet the criteria of economy, efficiency and effectiveness.

As public engagement activities in general, and consultation in particular are resource intensive and are likely to involve increasing amounts of public money, it is appropriate that local planning authorities (LPAs) adopt a *Best Value* approach to their policies and their options for implementing them.

This means finding ways to observe the standard tests of Challenge, Comparison, Consultation and Competition in determining the ways in which to undertake public engagement.

The RTPI Recommends

- That LPAs should incorporate the *Best Value* tests into their Statement of Community Involvement (SCIs) or Community Involvement Schemes (CISs);
- Setting challenging targets for operational aspects of public engagement (e.g. advance notice to key stakeholders on time between closing date for consultation submissions and publication of output feedback);
- Establishing relationships with comparable authorities to exchange information for benchmarking purposes;
- Conducting a formal dialogue with stakeholders at least once a year to discover their perceptions of the consultation and public participation processes;
- Periodically seeking information about the likely costs and benefits of using third party or partnership based suppliers of specialist consultation related services;
- Discussing with *Planning Aid*³ appropriate ways to undertake a *Best Value* review of community involvement.

³ Planning Aid provides free, independent and professional advice and support on planning issues to people and communities who cannot afford to hire a planning consultant. See www.planningaid.rtpi.org.uk

No 5 Consultation with Hard-to-Reach Groups

The Issue

The social inclusion agenda has identified the need to redress the balance of public involvement and to make greater efforts to hear the views of people and groups that have been traditionally under represented.

The planning system can be inaccessible to such interest groups, and local planning departments may have limited experience of the particular skills and techniques of engaging with them.

Many *hard-to-reach* groups have a limited capacity for involvement and are facing engagement initiatives from several quarters. Making progress in this area therefore requires high levels of co-ordination with other local authority departments and strong working relationships with equality and diversity (where these exist) units or their equivalents.

The RTPI Recommends

- Working from an authority wide database of groups and organisations. Avoid the temptation to compile yet another list of target organisations;
- Identifying and leveraging existing authority relationships whenever possible;
- Avoiding a tick-box approach to the *hard-to-reach*. Engage them in dialogues which are significant and especially when they have specific interests;
- Taking account of *best practice* for the provision of special facilities required by disabled and other disadvantaged groups at public meetings, events or via e-consultation⁴ etc;
- Identifying issues and policies that are likely to be of particular concern and interest to specific *hard-to-reach* groups, or those in particular areas; addressing these on a one-to-one basis wherever possible;
- Encourage private sector developers and commercial interests to consider the *hard-to-reach* when responding to plans or making applications.

⁴ See the emerging Disability Equality Duty which comes into force in December 2006; see the Disability Rights Commission for details: www.drc-gb.org

No 6 Avoiding Consultation Fatigue

The Issue

The same people are being consulted, and the volume is such that many organisations are now complaining of consultation fatigue. Voluntary and community bodies, many of whom have limited resources are particularly badly affected.

The general public, on the other hand, appears not to have reached this saturation point, and appears ready and willing to engage with public bodies provided the subject matter is sufficiently relevant, and the public is approached in a professional and honest way.

In both cases, groups and individuals have a limited capacity for involvement. Good use must be made of their time, and results must be demonstrable if they are to continue to be motivated to participate.

The RTPI Recommends

- Engaging with key stakeholder groups well ahead of any formal consultation. Use this to reach a consensus on the form and methods of consultation, and its timing;
- Developing a *consultation programme* covering at least a year ahead, and publishing a *consultation calendar* so that key stakeholder organisation can prioritise and plan their involvement with an authority;
- Integrating the spatial dimension into consultations organised by other departments and other public services; ensuring better co-ordination with other departments and other agencies (see Guideline 7);
- Inviting groups with limited resources to identify those aspects upon which they wish to focus, and help them channel their activity to fewer, more relevant actions;
- Finding easy ways for some groups to participate (e.g. *e-consultation* tools and wider use of e-mail and SMS text messaging);
- Developing thematic or geographic panels of people or representatives able to devote time and willing to offer views and opinions;
- Using up to date stakeholder data from a single stakeholder database. Avoid obsolete or inaccurate lists.

No 7 Setting Stakeholder Expectations

The Issue

Making a success of public participation depends upon setting the right expectations.

The process of determining between competing interests will inevitably disappoint some stakeholders, so it is in everyone's interest that individuals and organisations understand how various processes work, and what they can expect from their operation.

Great care is needed in balancing the need to motivate participants so as to secure their involvement, and the need for them to have realistic expectations.

The RTPI Recommends

- That planners take every opportunity to explain that public consultation findings and individual objections are only *part* of the evidence base upon which decisions are taken;
- Building long-term relationships with key stakeholder⁵ organisations and their members so that they become more familiar with public engagement processes and are realistic about them;
- Using local authorities emerging role of community leadership to involve stakeholders more systematically and help them understand how the planning process works;
- Using Statements of Community Involvement (SCIs or CISs) judiciously by drafting them to avoid speculative or unrealistic commitments, by publicising them appropriately and by ensuring they are supported by adequate budget and capacity;
- Training all front line planning staff in the need to communicate the limitations as well as the potential of planning processes and the need for *realism* at all points in discussions with stakeholders and the public;
- Restricting the use of jargon and observing *Plain English*⁶ standards in documents.

⁵ *Key stakeholders* are organisations selected on the basis of their interest in relevant outcomes, and their history of participation and engagement.

⁶ See the Plain English campaign and its Crystal Mark scheme - <http://www.plainenglish.co.uk/> A Welsh language equivalent is now available - Plain Welsh or Cymraeg Clir.

No 8 Joined-Up Consultations

The Issue

Stakeholders complain that many consultation and other public participation exercises duplicate each other or seek views about similar or overlapping issues, albeit in different contexts.

Given the multi-disciplinary nature of so much planning work, it is inevitable that there is a risk that community involvement will be seen on occasions to cover similar subjects to those covered by other consultations.

Many stakeholders, especially those with good, long standing relationships with an authority will understand the different roles played by different consultation exercises. They may also appreciate that public bodies have to satisfy different statutory requirements and have to proceed with parallel engagement activities. But they are less tolerant of avoidable proliferation of work from autonomous departments within the same authority, and increasingly look for a co-ordinated approach.

The RTPI Recommends

- Ensuring that planning consultations are fully integrated into an authorities' overall strategy for community involvement and/or consultation;
- Assisting other departments and agencies to include the spatial dimension in their consultations;
- Establishing a mechanism to approve all formal consultations undertaken in the name of the local authority, and acting as a clearing house to co-ordinate similar or overlapping exercises;
- Working with other public agencies through Local Strategic Partnerships (LSPs) or similar mechanisms to exchange information about planned consultations and to co-ordinate as much as possible;
- Inviting relevant public bodies seeking similar feedback from citizens or stakeholder groups, to participate or attend key public engagement events;
- Drafting appropriate data protection clauses for use in consultation exercises to enable relevant external organisations to share access to the outputs of specific consultations.

No 9 Selecting Appropriate Dialogue Methods

The Issue

There are over 40 documented methods of community involvement with ample scope for innovation and a steady supply of imaginative consultants offering ever more sophisticated techniques.⁷

The choice of methods has traditionally been largely a product of custom and practice, and the availability of skills and relevant experience. With the advent of SCIs and CISs, and with greater emphasis on front end involvement and consensus building, planning authorities will need to be more consistent in their methods.

In particular, they will need to consider the most appropriate ways to engage with specific stakeholder groups at various stages of the plan preparation process. In common with other departments undertaking consultation, planning staff will need to understand the stakeholder base better so that the methods they use achieve the goal of better and deeper engagement.

The RTPI Recommends

- Carefully selecting a range of methods and ensuring that trained staff (either within planning departments or available for use by planning departments) can implement these techniques to agreed standards;
- Exploiting new technology - *e-consultation*, particularly for groups with high online access (e.g. young people or businesses) and statutory consultees;
- Building and deploying skills and capability in mediation, consensus building and negotiation to complement skills in formal consultation processes;
- Using specialist techniques for public engagement and involvement in planning environments; making use of *Planning Aid* to supplement in house resources;
- Maintaining an appropriate balance between qualitative techniques (e.g. focus groups or stakeholder conferences) and quantitative methods (e.g. surveys). Look for methods which people find enjoyable!
- Reducing the reliance on documentary (i.e. written) consultation and place increasing emphasis on participative methods where literacy standards are less of a barrier to participation.

No 10 New Technology and e-consultation

The Issue

The Government's 2005 target required local authorities and other public bodies to e-enable all services and make them available online. This includes all aspects of planning and also public engagement and consultation.

Many authorities have already invested in such a facility and others are experimenting. Usage by the public is still slow, but initiatives such as the National Projects for Local e-democracy⁸ and PARSOL⁹ are developing new ways to increase take up. Whilst public reaction is still uncertain, commentators expect that cost and speed advantages will stimulate wider use of specific applications in the coming years.

Among applications of particular relevance to planners are online consultation directories, e-surveys, online commentaries, e-discussion forums and vip-chat sessions. In addition stakeholder portals will be developed to enable consultees to register for participation in particular consultations.

The RTPI Recommends

- Building awareness of available new technology applications, and working alongside internal and external information and communications technology (ICT) specialists to understand the channel better;
- Finding ways to work with other departments and to share the costs of buying, configuring, deploying and supporting specialist *e-consultation* tools;
- Training *e-discussion* forum *moderators* and publishing clear rules of engagement before deploying such applications;
- Ensuring that the use of *e-consultation* is never such as to exclude those without digital access from participating in specific consultations;
- Publicising the use of *e-consultation* methods so as to increase public and stakeholder awareness and maximise take up of the channel.

⁸ See a full list of the e-government National Projects in www.localgovnp.org

⁹ Planning and Regulatory Services Online see www.parsol.gov.uk

No 11 Stakeholder Capacity-Building for Public Participation

The Issue

Many of those whose views are most critical for local authorities and other public bodies to understand are relatively less capable of expressing themselves. This situation is not confined to hard-to-reach groups, but they are often among those most inexperienced in responding to consultations.

Whilst part of the solution is to use methods which are more appropriate to such groups, there will still be an increasing need to help them understand community involvement processes and to participate to optimum effect.

Capacity building takes time and costs money, but results in a more inclusive dialogue. By hearing a wider range of opinions, planning can take account of issues and perceptions which have hitherto been relatively neglected.

The RTPI Recommends

- Identifying groups or categories requiring special assistance. Note these are not always *hard-to-reach*!
- Investigating precise requirements on a systematic basis; even handed treatment of stakeholder groups (some of them with opposing views) is essential to avoid suggestions of bias;
- Developing effective training or mentoring both to explain public engagement processes and to motivate groups to wish to participate, but also to provide groups with skills, capability or organisation required to respond and become fully involved;
- Convincing target groups that capacity building is a two way process with advantages for all concerned (e.g. planners learn more about community needs and community groups learn more about planning);
- Budgeting to provide assistance for voluntary and community groups; to fund meetings, facilitate child care or transport and associated costs;
- Working with other departments within a local authority and externally with other relevant public bodies to ensure a consistent approach to capacity building.

No 12 Resources and Budgets

The Issue

The new emphasis on community involvement will require substantial investment in building and deploying the skills of public engagement and consultation.

Part of the rationale is the belief that a bigger effort made in the early stages of the planning cycle (e.g. the preparation of LDF documents) will result in savings later on. Whilst many experienced planners acknowledge this in principle, the lengthy time scales involved and the fear that wider participation may increase costs throughout the cycle, prompts a degree of caution with many planning departments anxious to avoid unrealistic expectations from the new regime.

This makes it even more critical for all concerned to take a fresh look at resource allocation and to make judgements about relative priorities. At all costs, planners must avoid commitments to public engagement that cannot or will not be funded.

The RTPI Recommends

- Statements of Community Involvement (SCIs and CISs) should be costed and an estimated budget calculated for at least three years ahead;
- Discussions with other departments (e.g. communications, marketing etc) using similar methods and committing to comparable projects to investigate cost sharing;
- Optimising the use of specialist public engagement and consultation skills by developing centralised services where appropriate;
- Making use of *Planning Aid* or specialist external consultants and other facilities when economic;
- Seeking opportunities to pass some of the relevant costs of consultation to private sector planning applicants where the exercises are directly related to specific major applications.

No 13 Effective Roles for Elected Members

The Issue

Elected members play an important part in taking decisions about community priorities and in approving or rejecting development applications. In practice however, many Councillors have questioned the value of lengthy consultation phases in the traditional development of local plans.

However, as the role of local authorities evolves towards that of community leadership, Councillors will probably play an even more active part in community involvement and in facilitating the transmission and interpretation of their constituents' views. There is an inherent tension between representative democracy and consultative democracy, and some local politicians will fear that wider consultation undermines their electoral mandates.

Developing an effective role for elected members therefore requires an understanding of these tensions and a search for complementary rather than competing activities.

The RTPI Recommends

- Involving Councillors fully in the preparation of Statements of Community Involvement (SCIs or CISs) and including within them, references to the role which members will play;
- Encouraging Councillors to play an active part in area committees and neighbourhood forums so as to help the local community to articulate its views;
- Discussing with Councillors the most appropriate methods for public involvement for their wards and for the authority as a whole;
- Provide awareness training for elected members on the most frequently used consultation techniques, and particularly how to interpret the results;
- Encouraging Members to attend selected consultation events (e.g. focus groups) as observers;
- Submitting the detailed outputs of key consultations to scrutiny committees.

No 14 Working with Representative Groups

The Issue

Civic society includes thousands of representative bodies and community associations of some kind of another.

Sometimes they exist as long-term, institutionalised bodies representing the interests of defined groups or professions. On other occasions they are transitory pressure groups springing up to campaign for or against specific proposals and mobilising grassroots opinion to participate in the many ways that a democracy allows.

Planners already deal with both types of stakeholders, but will now need to strengthen their capabilities in the context of community involvement. Building excellent relationships with representative groups is a high priority for all public bodies, but is particularly important if planners are to carry communities with them in the interests of sustainable development.

The RTPI Recommends

- Working alongside other departments and other agencies to build and maintain an accurate database of representative groups as part of a single stakeholder database;
- Gathering sufficient information about groups so as to identify which may need to be regarded as key stakeholders. Make a judgement as to how representative they are in reality!
- Exploring the links between various representative groups. Remember that many opinion leaders operate through several different bodies;
- Keeping detailed records of all interactions with representative groups. Consider an ICT solution (contact management for a simple application; CRM¹⁰ for a comprehensive one);
- Understanding how key representative groups determine their positions on key issues in a consultation dialogue;
- Identifying when representative groups need assistance to consider proposals or to participate fully in dialogue; offer capacity building initiatives where appropriate.

¹⁰ CRM means Customer Relationship Management and is the basis for most local authority investment in contact centres and one-stop-shop initiatives.

No 15 Training for Better Engagement and Consultation

The Issue

Although it has always been necessary to familiarise planning staff with the rudiments of consultation and associated processes, much of this learning has been on the job with few formal training opportunities.

In recent years, the body of expertise has grown in this area, and studies leading to the new planning legislation have assembled sufficient best practice to enable the development of training materials and courses on community involvement principles and techniques.

The recent creation of the Academy for Sustainable Communities¹¹ and initiatives by the RTPI and others will increase the availability of training, but the onus still remains on planning departments to identify and address their own specific training needs.

The RTPI Recommends

- Using the process of preparing and securing support for Statements of Community Involvement (SCIs or CISs) to analyse existing and emerging training needs;
- Collaborating with other departments and public bodies to identify parallel requirements and to share the cost of training provision. Help other service providers understand the spatial dimension of their work;
- Establishing internal self help learning and skills transfer networks so as to disseminate best practice faster;
- Placing a focus on skills required beyond formal consultation processes in particular:
 - stakeholder profiling and mapping
 - stakeholder relationship management
 - consensus building
 - mediation
 - conflict resolution
 - negotiation
- Looking for opportunities to undertake joint training alongside Elected Members and also alongside key stakeholders, as a confidence building measure.

No 16 Standards for Consultation - Integrity

The Issue

Greater emphasis on community involvement will prompt a requirement for a means to ascertain that consultation and other activities are being undertaken to an appropriate standard. The Consultation Charter provides for seven principles, adherence to which can act as an indicator of best practice.

The first Charter principle is **Integrity** and this means ensuring that the consultation has an honest intent. Whilst it is always open for local authorities to engage with stakeholders at any stage in the development of plans and policies, a formal consultation should not be undertaken if the decision has already been taken.

Great care is needed in scoping consultations properly and in providing the clearest possible indication of those matters where the consultor has discretion and is open to be influenced by the submissions and contributions made by those who respond.

The RTPI Recommends

- Authorities should emphasise their commitment to this principle in their Statements of Community Involvement (SCIs) or Community Involvement Schemes (CISs);
- Avoiding spurious consultation exercises where there is no scope to act upon consultee responses;
- Developing strong relationships with stakeholder organisations, based upon trust that their time and commitment will not be wasted on unnecessary consultations;
- Demonstrating how public and stakeholder views have been taken into account in previous engagement exercises;
- Using pre-consultation dialogues to discuss fully with potential consultees, how forthcoming involvement can be best used.

No 17 Standards for Consultation - Visibility

The Issue

Greater emphasis on community involvement will prompt a requirement for a means to ascertain that consultation and other activities are being undertaken to an appropriate standard. The Consultation Charter provides for seven principles, adherence to which can act as an indicator of best practice.

The second Charter principle is **Visibility** and this means that those most directly affected by plans and decisions have a reasonable awareness of such community involvement processes as will take place.

The onus is on consultors to ensure that this visibility is achieved, and that communications with identified stakeholders are such as to create a high level of awareness, particularly of formal consultations, highlighting the ways in which citizens and others can participate.

The RTPI Recommends

- Identifying the best methods of communicating with each stakeholder type;
- Ensuring maximum promotion for each individual consultation as well as the overall programme of community engagement and involvement;
- Engaging with key stakeholders and/or their representative groups in advance of specific consultations to provide them with adequate advance warning, and to seek their views on the most effective means of publicity;
- Publishing a comprehensive consultation calendar;
- Liaison with other local authority departments undertaking consultation and public involvement to reduce the likelihood of overlapping or duplicated exercises and thereby eliminate confusion.

No 18 Standards for Consultation - Accessibility

The Issue

Greater emphasis on community involvement will prompt a requirement for a means to ascertain that consultation and other activities are being undertaken to an appropriate standard. The Consultation Charter provides for seven principles, adherence to which can act as an indicator of best practice.

The third Charter principle is **Accessibility** and this refers to the ease with which potential participants can avail themselves of the opportunity. It means being aware of the greater propensity of some groups to respond to particular methods, and the barriers facing others.

Engaging with the disabled, racial, ethnic, linguistic or religious minorities all require special facilities, and ensuring equal access to the process for such groups is essential.

The RTPI Recommends

- Subjecting all consultation plans to the test of whether proposed methods will be accessible to the target audiences;
- Training all those involved with public engagement processes in *best practice* for meeting the needs of identified groups with difficulties;
- Ensuring that planning departments are involved in the production of Disability Equality Schemes;
- Discussing proposed involvement methods with key stakeholders at the pre-consultation stage to identify unforeseen difficulties;
- Using jargon free language when producing documents intended for non-professionals; observing Plain English and Plain Welsh standards (e.g. Crystal Mark scheme);
- Translating documents into other languages when this is necessary to fully engage specific linguistic communities, and following dialogue with their representative groups.

No 19 Standards for Consultation - Confidentiality and Transparency

The Issue

Greater emphasis on community involvement will prompt a requirement for a means to ascertain that consultation and other activities are being undertaken to an appropriate standard. The Consultation Charter provides for seven principles, adherence to which can act as an indicator of best practice.

The fourth Charter principle is **Confidentiality**, but the real issue is **Transparency**. There are occasions where stakeholder views are properly subject to confidentiality, but in the public sector, the Freedom of Information Act makes those circumstances few and far between.

Commercial undertakings and private individuals may be able to agree with planning authorities that aspects of their discussions may be confidential, but all parties need to be increasingly aware of the need to satisfy a public interest test.

The RTPI Recommends

- Encouraging a culture of maximum transparency, whilst observing the spirit and letter of data protection and freedom of information legislation;
- Advising participants in community involvement exercises on the presumption of transparency, and the duty on local authorities to make documents and information held by them available if requested under the Freedom of Information Act¹²;
- Providing a clear reference to the Act in surveys, questionnaires, documents and other materials used as dialogue methods to elicit the views of stakeholders;
- Drafting consultation documents and other materials used in community involvement processes with the citizen's right to know in mind; providing specific authority for statements and assumptions made with clear signposts for citizens to consult referenced sources;
- Providing a clear audit trail of analyses and recommendations so that the influence of consultations upon decisions can be followed.

No 20 Standards for Consultation - Full Disclosure

The Issue

Greater emphasis on community involvement will prompt a requirement for a means to ascertain that consultation and other activities are being undertaken to an appropriate standard. The Consultation Charter provides for seven principles, adherence to which can act as an indicator of best practice.

The fifth Charter principle is **Disclosure** and requires both consultors and consultees to be totally open with each other and not to conceal or withhold information which might be relevant to the dialogue.

Relevance is a difficult test to apply, but can be viewed as depending upon the view that one party to a discussion might reasonably take to the information's non-disclosure by the other party. If a stakeholder organisation feels that particular information being withheld by the consultor might have significantly affected the view it had of proposals or plans, then disclosure would appear to be necessary.

The RTPI Recommends

- Scoping a consultation to address those aspects which stakeholders have a reasonable expectation will be covered in the exercise;
- Using pre-consultation discussions with key stakeholders to establish their expectations of the nature and scope of information to be released in the course of a formal consultation exercise;
- Anticipating the most likely questions arising in a public involvement exercise, preparing and publishing comprehensive Q's and A's;
- Advising stakeholder organisations that they will be expected to disclose such aspects of their membership involvement, decision making and governance as would be relevant to an evaluation of their submissions to a consultation.

No 21 Standards for Consultation - Fair Interpretation

The Issue

Greater emphasis on community involvement will prompt a requirement for a means to ascertain that consultation and other activities are being undertaken to an appropriate standard. The Consultation Charter provides for seven principles, adherence to which can act as an indicator of best practice.

The sixth Charter principle is **Fair Interpretation** and this places a strict burden on consultors to analyse and interpret consultation output data objectively.

Clearly there are circumstances where the level of trust between consultor and consultees is high, and where good relations exist between all parties. On occasions, however, controversial proposals or a history of poor relationships can result in considerable scepticism and, in extreme cases, a clear lack of confidence in the impartiality of the consultor.

Public bodies need to be alive to these different scenarios and respond to this standard by taking steps to ensure not only that data is fairly interpreted, but that it is seen to be so interpreted.

The RTPI Recommends

- Publishing raw output data (e.g. public meeting minutes, focus group reports, survey results etc) whenever appropriate;
- Explaining how the data will be analysed, and clarifying the distinction between analysis and interpretation;
- Using established methods of analysis and statistically sound procedures;
- Considering the involvement of trusted third parties, either to advise on the analysis, to undertake the analysis, or to provide independent oversight of the interpretation;
- Discussing the need for independent verification with key stakeholders;
- Using accreditation schemes to demonstrate adherence to best practice standards.

No 22 Standards for Consultation - Publication

The Issue

Greater emphasis on community involvement will prompt a requirement for a means to ascertain that consultation and other activities are being undertaken to an appropriate standard. The Consultation Charter provides for seven principles, adherence to which can act as an indicator of best practice.

The final Charter principle is **Publication** and this refers both to the output of consultation as well as the eventual outcome. This is the practical application of the over riding requirement of transparency and is intended to ensure that everyone who takes part in community involvement activities can see what happened as a result of their participation.

It is not enough just to publish; the method chosen must be such that those with a significant interest can easily access the relevant information.

The RTPI Recommends

- Deciding upon a publication plan at the outset, and publicising this when the community involvement process begins;
- Selecting methods of publication which are appropriate for the participating consultees and also for others with an interest in the issue;
- Drawing a clear distinction between the publication of the *output* and the *outcome*. For *output*, it is helpful to indicate precisely how the data was gathered, and to use consultees' own submissions whenever possible;
- Avoiding crude summaries of complex arguments advanced by stakeholders; publish qualitative and quantitative analyses with explanations of the methods used;
- Showing how the *outcome* of consultation and public involvement has taken account of the contributions made by stakeholders and others;
- Making best use of new technology by posting relevant publications on the internet, whilst also providing a facility for non-digital organisations and individuals to obtain equivalent information.

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The principles contained in this Guidance Note are applicable to all planners.

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Written in partnership with The Consultation Institute.



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