

Lessons learned from consultations

As a council, we regularly consult our citizens on statutory and non-statutory activities and have learned some useful lessons that will help you ensure your consultation is effective.

Before going forward, you need to ask yourself – **do you need to consult?** You should only consult when stakeholders can genuinely inform and influence decision making

Tips in brief

People are busy. There are lots of demands on their time and on their attention. To motivate people to respond, your consultation must:

- Be clear in what it's about and why it matters to people's lives;
- Be as short as possible;
- Be written in Plain English; and
- Be easy to do.

A key step in maintaining willingness to respond to council communications is:

- **Always** provide feedback on the difference people's views make to decisions.

Preparing your consultation

- Be specific on what you are consulting on and what you are trying to achieve. The public need to know the purpose of the consultation and the extent to which their views will influence decision making.
- Make sure the answers to this question are clear in your introductory information: why does this consultation matter to people's lives?
- Make sure you are clear of who your target audience is. The consultation will need to reach individuals who will be affected by it.
- Does your consultation target those who are harder to reach? Hard to reach groups are groups that have been historically under-represented and can include ethnic or language minorities, young people, elderly people, disabled people, people with learning difficulties and LGBTQI people).
- Think about the answers you need from your consultation. Can the questions be answered with a simple yes or no? Feedback shows that the public is more interested when there is a single question asked.
- Remember that closed questions (those that give set options to choose from) are less time-consuming to analyse than open questions (those that ask for general comments/ideas).
- Make the consultation as short as possible. Feedback shows that participants do not complete the exercise if it takes too much time or you do not give any indication of time.
- If you need to provide a lot of background information, break it down into clear sections, and consider using images to make it look more appealing.
- Is the language you are using a barrier? If your consultation is described/written in language/jargon that people as a rule do not use, they are likely to decide against doing it.
- Are the questions you are asking clear? If there is a risk of your questions being understood in a different way, then this would undermine the value of your findings.
- It is important to inform others of your planned consultation as early as possible. Make sure you inform the [Research and Engagement Officer](#) so it can be added to the centrally managed consultation tracker.

Contact our [corporate communications team](#) who can offer support with wording and make sure that your consultation is in [Plain English](#).

Methods of engagement

Standard methods of consultation are on-line plus printed copies on request.

There is a section on the council's website dedicated to consultations. You will find it on the homepage: www.argyll-bute.gov.uk/home

Remember for on-line consultations – it's important to make clear that people's information will be held securely and used only for the purpose of the consultation. There can be a focus on risks involved in providing information on-line; we have to address concerns around security to encourage people to participate.

Consultation events

If you decide to hold a consultation event to reach people, be clear on what you want to get from it. A meeting can be a better way of developing a conversation than an on-line /printed copy. *However*, bearing in mind that people are busy, asking people to attend a meeting is a big commitment.

Feedback shows that you should go to where people are rather than asking people to go to you e.g. find out if there's an event planned already that you could join to speak about your consultation, rather than ask people to go to a new event.

If you are organising an event venues should be easy-to-get-to, fully accessible for the public, and a time that suits your target audience.

Avoid formal consultation invitations and asking the public to register their attendance online – feedback shows that people prefer to turn up on the day. If you need to know numbers in advance, use the simplest method possible to register attendance.

Promoting your consultation

- If you are emailing links to your consultation, make sure that this complies with the [general data protection regulation](#).
- Make sure that your email distribution lists are up-to-date.
- Add it to the consultations tab to the homepage of the website.
- Contact the communications team for help in promoting it more widely - [corporate communications team](#).

Showing the value of consultations

You must always provide feedback on the results of the consultation and on how the views given have influenced decisions. Remember, if you don't feedback, the public will be less inclined to participate the next time round.

Check out the [consultation page on the website](#): you will find examples there of feedback given to previous consultations.

