



Whose stupid idea was that?

Questions for senior managers to consider before consultations

There has been much talk of late concerning the need for consultation relating to the provision of public services and also to local tax rates. Various coalition announcements have led us to believe that the government is keen to consult public sector employees on savings that can be made and are keen for local authorities to consult users and taxpayers on savings and closure plans. Add to this Mr Pickles stated view that he wishes to abolish capping and replace it with local referendums and it may be the right time for authorities to examine their corporate consultation strategies and see if they are fit for purpose.

For many authorities consultation has often had an outsourced element, notably in opinion polling and in citizens' surveys. Whilst some of this will no doubt continue, budgets are going to be squeezed, and many council staff will have to use their own resources. It is for this reason that corporate management teams need to get a firm grip on their consultation strategies, to ensure that staff have a clear idea of what is to be achieved.

Consulting citizens on service levels sits about halfway along the continuum of involvement strategies. Put crudely, at one end councils make their own decisions first, and then tell citizens what the decisions were, and inform them of the services on offer and the means by which they can be accessed. At the other extreme councils support citizens and users in the total design of services and in their deployment acting not as a provider, nor in some cases as even a commissioner, but more as an enabler.

The majority of consultation processes sit between these extremes and it is these exercises that I want to focus on. This note does not go into detail on any of the technical issues of methodology. Questions as to whether one uses quantitative or qualitative techniques, issues as to the varying merits of citizens juries and user panels, and decisions about whether one uses telephone surveys, web based questionnaires, focus groups or face-to-face interviews are all important. However, there is a rich literature about the pros and cons of all of these questions. Instead I want to focus on some of the overall questions that one should ask of any consultation exercise, particularly in the politically complex environment of a UK local authority.

Drawing on my experiences in local government, these are the questions I think a corporate management team should ask themselves to ensure that they have a strategy in place. Many of the points are pretty obvious, but it is sometimes useful to check one's own thinking.

INVOLVEMENT AND CONSULTATION

Ten things to consider (and one Golden Rule)

1. *Who am I consulting? Everyone or a targeted group?*

This is such an obvious question that it appears not worth asking, but it is fundamental. It is from the answer to this question that much of the discussion about consultation techniques and methodologies derive.

2. *What am I consulting them about? What discretion do I have to respond?*

One of the real dangers for local government consultation exercises is to ask questions which lead to an impasse. If certain answers would lead the local council to wish to take an action that the government will not allow them to take, or that legal or financial pressures make impossible, then to have a process that generates such an example is foolish. Ensure that any outcomes from a process deliver answers that the council can deliver.

3. *Why are we consulting? To raise awareness, to seek an answer, to inform another decision?*

Some simple consultations are there to generate an answer that can then be acted upon. Others raise awareness of an issue and are really part of an ongoing public debate. Quite commonly a consultation of one group of citizens is used to inform a decision that also has other consultations and advice informing it. If the respondent has not been clearly told the purpose of the exercise, they may assume that they are taking part in a binding referendum, and then will be very upset if their views are not followed to the letter. It is very rare that one exercise can be all three of the above, so upfront clarity is vital.

4. *When should it be done? At what stage in a management or political process should consultation take place?*

Within a local authority most decisions belong to democratically elected councillors, or to officers who have had powers delegated to them. If consultations are to be utilised in a process their timing is crucial. There is no point consulting widely if most of the decision is already decided. Such action merely leads to cynicism both in the community and in the council

5. *Timescale. How long will it take? Do consultees know this?*

It is very important to know how long the whole process will take. It is equally vital that everyone being consulted knows this.

6. *Who owns the consultation? Official or politician, an individual or group?*

This might seem blindingly obvious, but consultations occasionally come up with answers that people within the authority do not want to hear. If that happens it is vital that someone politicians and managers in the council feel ownership of the process and are

committed to it. This avoids the “whose stupid idea was this exercise” inquest that can follow a botched process.

7. *Who fronts the work? Who, in the respondent’s mind, is appropriate?*

This is slightly different to 6 above. Councils can be large and quite distant bodies. There may be advantages, in terms of getting honest and useful responses, to thinking about who is the most appropriate face of the council for any given exercise.

8. *What will you do with the answers? Are they of real use?*

Question design is very important, as is the overall structure of an exercise. Classically a citizens survey can lead you to a range of seemingly contradictory responses and some that you may simply not understand. At the end of a large amount of fieldwork you don’t want to be in a position where someone says: “This is all really interesting, but I am not sure what to do with the data”. That is a painful place to be, I know, I have been there!

9. *Are there any benchmarks? Check for reality.*

It is highly unlikely that a local authority will be asking a question where something similar has not been asked at a council elsewhere. Even very local issues, the siting of an incinerator say, will have arisen in other communities. It is worth checking around to see what kind of responses others have had to similar questions. There will always be variations, but if your answers are wildly different to another authority that perhaps shares many aspects of your communities’ profile, then it is worth checking if something basic has gone wrong.

10. *Is the issue properly communicated and fed back?*

Asking questions that can be understood is quite difficult for some parts of local authorities, but it is vital that everyone involved really understand the questions. It is equally vital, and only courteous, that everyone involved in the consultation is given a clear picture of: What was asked what answers came back; how the council responded as a result. If you do not tell people exactly what you did with their responses, they will not trust any future process.

All of the above represents a few things I have learned over several decades of working with, and for, local government. Over and above these, I think I have learned one golden rule, which I have found to be non-negotiable.

The Golden Rule

There are three distinct phases to a consultation process. Phase One is to prepare the exercise properly and perhaps address some of the questions above. Phase Two is the fieldwork phase, where citizens, customers and/or staff views are sought. Phase Three is feeding back the results to

a management process, and to all respondents what you learned from the exercise, and what has happened as a consequence. All three are vital.

For a process to work well the golden rule of thumb is 40% - 20% - 40%. Spend 40% of your time and effort on Phase One, 20% on Phase Two and 40% on Phase Three.

All too often Phase One is rushed and Phase Three is only lip service. Telling people what happened as a result of an exercise is a crucial way of ensuring that the authority is not devoting time to a process that merely generates suspicion and cynicism.

As Councils need to make huge cost reductions, communicating what needs to happen is a key skill. I hope this brief note adds something to this process.

David Clark

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1 July 2010

Acknowledgement

While I am more than happy for you to use this paper I would be grateful if you would acknowledge that it came from SOLACE.

I am in the debt of many colleagues for their contributions to this paper. I am particularly grateful to the staff and councillors of City Of York Council in the years 1995-2000 whose thinking formed the basis for much of the structure.