Research and Consultation Guide

There are a number of research and consultation methods to choose from. Each has its own strengths and weaknesses and fitness for purpose.

You should select the most appropriate method to suit:

- the research/consultation topic
- the requirements of the brief
- your target groups/stakeholders
- the time you have available
- the resources and budget available

1. Secondary Research / Analysing Existing Data

Secondary research, or 'desk research', involves making use of and analysing data and information that is already available.

Its advantages of low cost and fast availability mean that is often the first step in researching a topic. Secondary research can be used to:

- Help clarify and define the research problem
- Give a better understanding of the issues and wider context
- Inform survey design (terminology, questions and response categories)
- Enrich the findings of survey results and set them into context

Your own research

Your own databases and records make a good start in any research project. They can identify who and who is not is using your service and can be used to clarify issues before undertaking further research.

Corporate Research Resources

The Corporate Research Team has access to key national data sets like the Census and Indices of Deprivation that provide information about Poole's population.

Facts and figures about Poole can be found on boroughofpoole.com/statistics, and reports on topics such as the economy, older people, equalities and young people can be found at boroughofpoole.com/research.

The Corporate Research Team also make use of anonymised administrative data held within the Council and partner agencies to inform targeted strategies and initiatives. For example, the Children and Young Peoples Plan is monitored via the combined use of local data sets.

Contact the Corporate Research Team to find out more about what data sources are already available.

The Research and Consultation Database on the Loop provides details of research and consultation projects carried out by Service Units, with information about the purpose of the project, results and contacts to find out more.

2. Quantitative Research

Quantitative research involves collecting data from a large sample in a structured and standardised way.

Poole's core quantitative techniques consist of:

a. Poole Opinion Panel

Background
The Poole Opinion Panel is the Council's main consultative group. POP is made up of 1,600 people aged 18 and over who reflect a cross-section of Poole in terms of age, gender, area and mosaic group.

The Panel is surveyed two to three times a year. This is administered via postal survey, although Panel members can opt to complete their surveys on-line. Surveys may also be interviewed over the telephone, if this is appropriate for the particular topic/s.

Formulating the questionnaire
Service Units can nominate questions or topics to be included in POP Surveys at no charge.

Requests are collated by the Consultation Manager and appropriate questions are developed to meet the research brief.

Partner agencies also have the opportunity to include questions in the Poole Opinion Panel. If questions relate to Partnerships with the Council and the Council will benefit from the results, no charge will be made. Where questions submitted by partner organisations are specific to their organisation and do not relate to partnerships or joint working with the Council, a charge will be applied.

The final survey is approved by a Policy Director and the Resources Portfolio Holder to ensure that the content is not sensitive or politically biased.

Results are cross tabulated as standard by age, gender, area, disability, gender and ethnicity (where the sample size allows). Significant differences are reported to see where views differ. Other cross tabulations can be requested where appropriate for specific questions. Results are published on the Loop and on the Council's website at boroughofpoole.com/opinions

To ensure the views of the panel reflect local opinion, the Poole Opinion Panel is refreshed every three years to prevent panel members from becoming 'conditioned'. The Panel is replenished to replace those who do not respond (mainly young people), or people who move away from the area etc. The Panel was first formed in 2001, and was last refreshed in spring 2007.

The Panel database can also be used for recruitment for qualitative research and consultations.

b. Best Value User Satisfaction Survey

The Best Value Performance Satisfaction Survey is the Council's main corporate survey.

The survey, conducted every three years, is a requirement of the Department for Communities and Local Government who prescribes guidelines and content.

The survey assesses the performance of the Council both generally and specifically through performance indicators. It includes questions about:

- What residents think about Council Services - environmental, transport, leisure, culture, libraries, communications, complaints
- What they think about living in Poole - Poole as a place, antisocial behaviour, involvement
- What needs improving

The last survey, conducted in 2006, was mailed to 3,000 households selected at random and achieved a response rate of 44%.

Results are cross tabulated by age, gender, area, ethnicity, disability, mosaic group to highlight were differences lie. They are also compared with previous surveys in Autumn 2003 and Autumn 2000, and results can be benchmarked with other Councils. Benchmarking information is available from the Audit Commission's website.

Poole's results can be found via the Research and Consultation Database. They are held on the Research and Consultation Portal on the Loop.

c. Ad hoc surveys

It is sometimes necessary to design or commission an ad hoc survey in order to collect views and experiences from particular target groups. Recent examples include the People and Places Survey undertaken for the New Builds Evaluation Project and the Childcare Sufficiency Survey.

When designing a survey, care must be taken to ensure that the correct methodology is used. Surveys may be administered by post, phone, face to face or electronically (via the web or email). Each methodology has different advantages and disadvantages, and suit different target groups. Refer to research and consultation techniques table appended to this document.

The questions themselves must be designed to answer the research brief. They should be interesting for respondents and should not be leading or biased in any way. The Market Research Society provides 'Questionnaire design guidelines' to ensure the quality of questionnaire design to fulfil your research aims.

Contact the Corporate Research for advice before undertaking a survey.

The Research Team also has Teleform Software and is able to manage survey design and survey data capture for Service Units.

They can also recommend Market Research organisations with the appropriate skills for your project if there is no internal capacity to assist you. Contact the Corporate Research Team to find out more.

3. Qualitative research techniques

Qualitative research reflects an unstructured and flexible approach to interviewing that explores people's views, behaviours, perceptions and motives in more depth.

The strengths of qualitative research lie in its ability to get below the surface, seeking to understand the underlying causes, the rationale behind issues and the relative importance of them.

a. Focus Groups

Focus groups are the most common way of exploring attitudes. They can be also used to consult on complex issues, provide a means of exploring a particular topic before conducting further consultation or to shed light on the results of quantitative consultation.

Focus groups are made up of 8-10 people who are led by a trained moderator/facilitator using a topic guide for 1-1.5 hours.   Attendees talk in detail and depth about their experiences, attitudes, opinions and feelings. Respondents can share experiences and bounce ideas off one another.

A minimum of 3 groups are held, to ensure that views are reflective. Participants may be of the same or different demographics/characteristics and are selected according to the needs of the research brief.

The Poole Opinion Panel database can be used to recruit attendees for discussion groups.

Guidance is available on the Loop to ensure that focus groups are conducted according to research standards, or contact the Consultation Manager to find out more.

b. Individual depth interviews

Individual depth interviews are conducted face-to-face by a qualitative researcher. Most interviews last around 60-90 minutes, depending on the nature of the topic and content covered. Mini-depths, covering fewer topics, last for a maximum of 30 minutes.
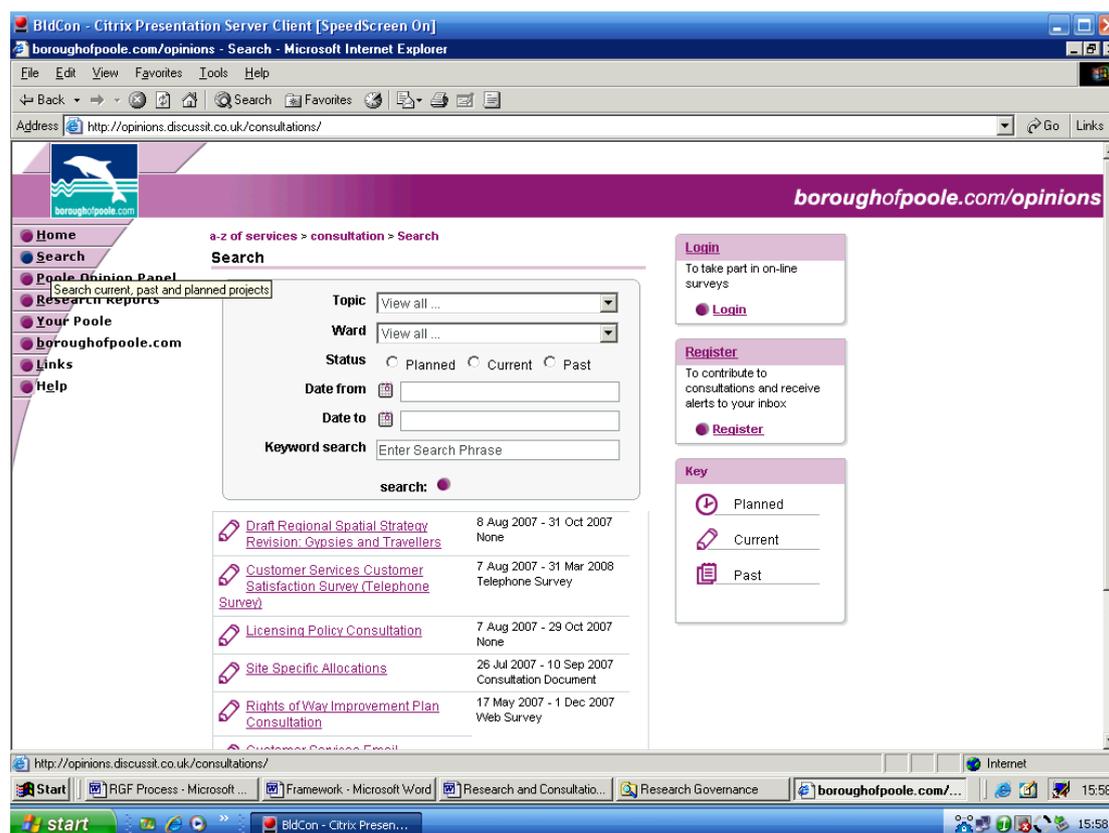
In individual in-depth interviews the respondent at the centre of attention and can be probed at length to explore remarks. As group pressure is eliminated, individuals can be open with their views and detailed understanding can be gained without views of the respondent being influenced by what other people say or may think.

4. Consultation techniques

a. e-consultation / boroughofpoole.com/opinions

The consultation area of boroughofpoole.com (boroughofpoole.com/opinions) can be used as an e-consultation technique.

All consultations can be added to the search database, so that the public can see what consultations are currently open and what is planned. They can also view the results of past consultations, seeing how the results have been used to make a difference.

Consultation documents (see below) can be posted on the site and downloaded by interested parties and feedback can be given directly on-line.

On-line surveys can also be hosted in the consultation area, offering an additional way to administer surveys. This is used for Poole Opinion Panel Surveys and can be used for other surveys, where appropriate.

Consultations may be left open, enabling anyone who wishes to comment to do so, or closed so that they are restricted to particular stakeholders or respondents.

Contact the Consultation Manager for advice on e-consultation or to add your consultation on the website.

b. Consultation Documents

Consultation documents are often used to gain feedback on proposals or draft strategies. These often form part of a wider consultation strategy including specific meetings, workshops, exhibitions/displays, discussion groups and area meetings.

Consideration should be given to the target audience when designing the document.

Where Consultation Documents are published, they should be presented clearly, use Plain English and respondents should be given plenty of time to feed in their response. Good practice is that both a summary and full documents should be made available – refer to the.

The feedback should be considered at the time of preparing the document, so that respondents can contribute their views.

The distribution of the document should be considered to ensure that it is relevant to participants to maximise response. It should not be seen as a mass mailing. Different groups will have different needs and may wish to respond in different ways.

Consultation documents can also be published on the Council's website **borough**of**poole**.com/opinions (see above).

The Cabinet Office has issued a 'Code of Practice on Consultation', which states that consultation periods should be at least 12 weeks long. Where this is not possible, consideration should be given to who is being targeted and whether they have a reasonable opportunity to give their views. The consultation should be planned so that all stakeholders have an opportunity to contribute.

The Corporate Communications Team can offer advice on the design of leaflets, and design protocols have been developed to ensure all Council literature follow consistent standards and look/feel. The Corporate Communications Design Guidelines are available on the Loop.

c.   Public engagement / face to face events

'Meet the public' events are organised at local venues to increase awareness of the Council.

The displays are designed to attract people to a stand – and to actively talk to members of the public. The Council's branding should be used so that residents can identify the display with the Council.

'Meet the Cabinet' events are held at the Dolphin Shopping Centre (in November for budget strategy formulation) and a further event at the Mayors Fair in May. These are an opportunity for residents to ask any questions of Portfolio Holders or the Leader.

Face to face events should be publicised at least 10 days in advance so that residents know when and where they will take place. Events should be added to the corporate calendar so that these do not clash with other events in the Council diary.

d.   Area Committee Meetings

The Council has 6 Area Committees:

- Hamworthy East and West and Poole Town
- Broadstone, Merley and Bearwood
- Canford Heath East and West, Creekmoor and Oakdale
- Newtown and Parkstone
- Alderney, Branksome East and West
- Canford Cliffs and Penn Hill

These provide a means for gauging the views of residents on issues relating specifically to their area. Residents are able to ask questions of their Councillors and can contribute agenda items.

Area Committees often form part of a consultation strategy and the feedback should be co-ordinated with other techniques.

Area meetings are publicised in the Advertiser (the local free newspaper) to make them more accessible and so that residents are aware of the issues relevant to their where they live.

5. Hard to Hear Groups

'Hard-to-hear groups' is a term to describe those groups or communities who are perceived as being difficult to access for any reason such as:

- Physical inaccessibility (e.g. disability, older people)
- Language
- Cultural perceptions and traditions
- Social expectations (such as whether to seek the views of young people)

Many of these communities are not actually that hard to hear and do not consider themselves as such. It is simply that we have not put enough effort into seeking their views.

'Hard-to-hear' groups could include:

- Children and Young People
- Faith communities
- Gay, lesbian and bisexual men and women, transsexual and transgender people
- Homeless people
- Minority ethnic communities
- Older people
- People with disabilities (physical disability, learning difficulties, mental health problems)
- People who travel or commute into the area
- Single Parents
- Businesses
- Travellers
- Tourists

Consideration needs to be given to the particular characteristics of the group and any sub-groups as it may be that particular groups are not as difficult to access as others, and some require specific attention. Groups should not be treated with a 'blanket approach' as different approaches and techniques will be required.

The service/issue of concern and its relevance to the particular group needs to be considered. For some services, hard to hear groups may not have any interest or any specific needs.

Consultees are identified through the Equality Impact Assessment Process. Consultation is being co-ordinated through the Research and Consultation Database on the Loop. Information and statistics about hard to hear groups can be found on this database.

Youth Forum

Youth Services carry out consultation with young people through the Youth Forum. Refer to the Young People's Participation Strategy for more information.

Consulting and Researching the Black and Minority Ethnic Community

Consultation with the black and minority ethnic community is being facilitated through the Equality Impact Assessment process and co-ordinated using the Research and Consultation Database on the Loop.

It is important that the techniques used to research hard to hear groups is appropriate to the subject of research/consultation and the particular group in question. The Corporate Research Team can offer advice on how to approach a research project.

A Guide to Research and Consultation Techniques

Desk Research	Advantages	Disadvantages	Sources
Using existing data sources/ information. Often supplemented with other research and consultation techniques. **When to use it** ▪ Essential starting point for research. ▪ To set issue/results into context ▪ Inform survey design (terminology, questions, response categories)	▪ Saves time and money - readily available and no cost. ▪ Wealth of information available (see sources). ▪ Useful starting point to clarify the problem and highlight issues or gaps for further research. ▪ Gives a better understanding of the wider context of issue. ▪ Enriches findings of survey results. ▪ Prevents duplication of research/consultation.	▪ May be out of date. ▪ Not specific to the project. ▪ Unknown biases may be held in the data if no metadata available. ▪ Data may not be available in required format and require 'cleaning' before it can be used.	▪ The Loop Research and Consultation database – a source of research and consultation undertaken by Service Units, Partners and national research. ▪ Corporate Research Team. ▪ boroughofpoole.com/research and boroughofpoole.com/statistics ▪ Internal administrative data. ▪ Internet sources.

Quantitative Techniques

Technique	Advantages	Disadvantages	Must dos
Self completion/ postal Survey Questionnaire posted to respondents for self-completion Typically a questionnaire is only one element of research project. **When to use it** To gather quantifiable information on uncomplicated issues. Can be used to gather views and opinions and to measure attitudes, satisfaction and performance.	Easily comparable data Can be statistically reliable if designed properly. Respondent can complete questions in own time. Can be anonymous. Cost effective in reaching a large number of people. Higher coverage than other forms of research. Relatively low cost in time and money Can reach people in geographically dispersed areas Can include open ended questions to explore issues in more depth Analysis is relatively straightforward for someone with the relevant skills Data can be updated and compared against local and national benchmarks is designed well	Statistical and research expertise are needed to design and administer the survey and analyse the data. Needs careful wording or responses may be biased. Cannot always control how different people interpret questions Information may be broad but not in-depth. Open-ended questions can be difficult to analyse Self-selection of respondents leads to biased results if the sample is not considered Often low response rates. (See tips for ways of increasing response rates). Consider whether you actually need to run a survey. Unsuitable for addressing complex issues as uses set questions with predetermined answers. Concepts cannot be explained. Sensitive or personal questions can affect response rates. Difficult to engage with 'hard-to-hear' groups. Needs to be produced in variety of formats (e.g. large print, languages)	**Ways to reduce respondent burden:** Use plain English Use a simple questionnaire design Pilot the survey to improve design/ comprehension Are all questions necessary / is the questionnaire too long? **Ways to increase response:** Include a covering letter explaining the purpose of the research Send two reminders to boost response rates (The first can be a reminder postcard, followed up by re-administering the questionnaire as a second/final reminder) **Other tips** Confidentiality measures should be highlighted as this often is a concern for respondents Give a contact number if the respondent has any concerns or questions about the survey

Quantitative Technique	Advantages	Disadvantages
Analysis of existing data Analysing existing datasets to extract information.	▪ Makes use of existing sources ▪ Reduces consultation fatigue ▪ Readily available – saves time and money	▪ May be out of date. ▪ Not specific to the project. ▪ Unknown biases may be held in the data if no metadata available. ▪ Data may not be available in required format and require 'cleaning' before it can be used.
Poole Opinion Panel The Poole Opinion Panel consists of around 1,600 residents who take part in 2-3 surveys a year and can be recruited for focus groups. POP is reflective of Poole by age, gender, area and mosaic group. **When to use it** ✓ To gather quantifiable information from demographically representative cross-section of the population. ✓ Can be used to gather views and opinions and to measure attitudes, satisfaction and performance, usually by postal or telephone survey	▪ Can select and invite demographically representative people to become panel members ▪ A readily available 'pool' of willing respondents to consult with on any issue of relevance ▪ Achieves high response rate (around 60%) ▪ Provides a snap-shot of local opinion	▪ Cannot be used to discuss complex issues ▪ Panel members are unlikely to represent the views of the general population, as they are self-selecting and want to be consulted. ▪ Members may become 'experts' and conditioned to providing the 'right' answers therefore the panel needs to be refreshed regularly (existing members replaced with new ones). Again this is a resource intensive process. ▪ Members are not anonymous so may not be a suitable means of consulting about sensitive issues.
Telephone Survey A telephone interview, using a structured or unstructured questionnaire] **When to use it** ✓ When have a sampling frame that you can use ✓ When you wish to gather quantifiable information on non-sensitive issues ✓ Can be used to gather views and opinions and to measure attitudes, satisfaction and performance. ✓ When have a trained interviewer to conduct the interviews (May also be a qualitative technique)	▪ Relatively low-cost way of achieving high response rates ▪ Faster responses than other survey methods ▪ Can be statistically reliable if the sample is designed properly ▪ Easily comparable ▪ Can contact respondents at more convenient times – out of office ▪ Easier to engage with hard-to-hear groups as overcomes problems with literacy, visual impairment and language barriers	▪ Needs statistical and research expertise to design the research and analyse the data ▪ Biases survey to respondents who are connected on the telephone, and whose numbers are available/willing to take part. ▪ Can be costly and time consuming. ▪ Need trained interviewer. May have to use external market research company. ▪ Negative association with cold calling. Can be perceived as intrusive as respondents may feel that their privacy has been compromised. ▪ Interview may be interrupted or respondent may hang-up. ▪ Limits the amount of questions that may be included to keep calls to a minimum. ▪ It is not possible to explain complicated topics using this methodology. The interviewer cannot respond to any questions from the respondent

Quantitative Technique	Advantages	Disadvantages
Face to face survey A structured or unstructured face to face interview carried out at the door or on the street **When to use it** ✓ When have a trained interviewer to conduct the interviews ✓ When want to quantify issues ✓ To understand fully someone's impressions or experiences, or to learn more about their answers to a questionnaire. ✓ Can be used as a follow-up to a survey to boost response in specific areas of low response.	▪ Can quantify issues. ▪ Can probe responses- get full range & depth of information. ▪ Rapport can be built between respondents and interviewer ▪ The interview can be more flexible. The interviewer can explain terminology/concepts and probe responses/follow-up ideas ▪ Can show information or allow for unprompted answers. ▪ Can ensure good response rate. ▪ More suitable for some hard to hear groups.	▪ Interviewer bias may occur- interviewer can bias participant's response. Good skills are needed – especially when more than one interviewer is used. ▪ Often difficult to analyse & compare ▪ Expensive research method ▪ Can be costly in time (for both researcher & participants) ▪ Personal safety of interviewers can be at risk when carrying out face-to-face interviews on doorsteps or in the street.

Qualitative Techniques
Qualitative techniques are used to explore concepts and issues and to grasp an understanding of the reasoning and attitudes behind quantitative results.

Qualitative Technique	When to use it	Advantages	Disadvantages
Focus groups In depth informal discussion with small groups (between 8-12 participants) on a topic led by a trained facilitator to explore issues in depth eg about reactions to an experience, suggestion or proposal; to better understand common complaints; useful in evaluation	✓ To provide background to research project ✓ To build on quantitative findings from a survey - to investigate attitudes and explore issues in more depth. ✓ To gather a wide range of information, insight and ideas ✓ To explore ideas prior to quantitative research ✓ To research complex issues ✓ To consult with specific groups, e.g businesses, hard to hear groups ✓ When have a trained facilitator to run the group	Can learn and understand what people have to say and why Provides in depth information - insight and ideas are generated from free flowing discussion Discussion can be flexible – facilitator responds to participants responses An efficient way to obtain much range & depth of information in a short time Can be used to explore complex issues Some feedback can be available fairly quickly Allows interaction and spontaneity between participants Can be designed to involve those who are perceived as 'hard-to-hear'	Requires expertise to facilitate discussion to keep to the objectives of the research Needs a competent facilitator, especially if topic is sensitive Can be costly and time-consuming (Respondents are often paid for their expenses and participation) Results cannot be quantified. Can be difficult to analyse the discussions. Need trained researcher. Can be difficult to get people together at a particular time. Consideration needs to be given to a suitable venue. Presence of Council representatives may inhibit respondents affect results

Qualitative Technique	When to use it	Advantages	Disadvantages
In-depth / Unstructured Interviews A one to one interview where the interviewer is able to explore a theme without being restricted to a series of questions	✓ To explore research personal topics or complex issues ✓ When a trained interviewer is available	Interviewer can pick up on particular issues and probe deeper Gathers a large amount of detailed information Very personal and can be used to explore sensitive issues	Specific skills are required to conduct the interview Interviews are time-consuming Likely to involve a small number of participants Can be difficult to generalise views Can be difficult to analyse
Observation	✓ To gather accurate information about how a service or project actually operates, particularly how processes are working	Operations of the project or service can be viewed as they are actually occurring. Accurate record of behaviour. The research can adapt to events as they happen.	Can be difficult to interpret observed behaviours and complex to categorise observations Observer's presence can bias/influence participants' behaviours. Raises ethical issues around consent. Can be costly
Mystery Shopper Uses the experiences of an undercover researcher to find out how a service operates (May be quantitative or qualitative)	✓ Gives first hand account of customers' experiences.	Provides accurate information on service delivery. Can monitor service performance according to pre-defined standards. Gives first hand account of customers' experiences.	Takes time to set up, so planning is essential Ethical considerations. Needs to be acceptable to staff. Open to researcher bias when questions are subjective

Consultation Techniques

Consultation Technique	When to use it	Advantages	Disadvantages
Consultation Events, Exhibitions, Road shows Information rather than consultation	✓ Used to provide information and to gather views on specific services	Effective in promoting services / projects Can explain issue to residents/stakeholders	Groups who are reached are dependant on location and timing of road show, exhibition etc Likely to obtain views of a small number of people who are not representative of the target population
Public meetings Open invitation to attend usually one-off meetings Structured meetings for members of the public and stakeholders, to consult about issues of local and town-wide importance. Used to provide information, seek views and develop / endorse local plans and strategies for the community or whole town.	✓ Used when you want to give everyone an opportunity to listen and give their opinion	Relatively inexpensive in terms of financial commitment. Can be tailored to large or small audiences. Addresses specific issues and allows residents/stakeholders to 'let off steam'. When well-managed can provide meaningful exchange of views. Provides local opportunity for people to comment on matters that affect them. Can be held at times and locations appropriate to target communities.	Unless the issue is of significant interest, turnout may be poor. Attendees are likely to be the 'usual suspects' and are therefore unlikely to represent the views of the whole community Can be dominated by those who speak the loudest and can be confrontational Agenda can be taken over by local, topical or personal concerns. Can be difficult to separate individual complaints from broader issues.
Consultation Documents To provide information about a consultation. Can also be used to invite feedback/comments.	✓ To provide information and can also be used to gather views by including a response slip / form ✓ Needs to be produced in variety of formats if it can be accessible by all (minority languages, large print etc)	Good for summarising the consultation. Makes the views of the organisation clear. Can be posted on the internet to widen audience and reduce printing costs.	Can be costly to produce and circulate Document may not be read by many Often sent to the 'usual suspects' without considering the audience.
e-Consultation Providing consultation documents, surveys on-line to enable feedback.	✓ Makes consultation available to wide audience. ✓ To supplement other consultation methods.	Supplements non-web based consultation in a cost-effective way. It makes the collection of comments/views easier through the use of a spreadsheet. Can reach a large number of people quickly and cost-effectively.	Excludes those people who do not have access to the internet or the skills to participate on-line. Needs to be used with other methods to be inclusive. Unrepresentative if responses are not monitored in any way.

Consultation Technique	When to use it	Advantages	Disadvantages
Citizens workshops 15-20 people drawn from a cross-section of the community discuss a specific topic for a whole day	✓ To explore a specific issue on a one-off basis ✓ Useful for development of concepts or service delivery	Informed views of typical members of the public	Resource intensive Used to explore options rather than draw conclusions The more information you give respondents, the less representative the results become
Deliberative polling 'Ask the audience' voting handsets	✓ Ask the audience ✓ Public meetings	Quick responses to questions and instant results Interactive and fun for the audience	Costs involved to hire handsets. Requires careful planning to get the right information and questions.
Citizens Juries Small sample of residents (usually 12), representative of the population act as Jurors and receive evidence from expert witnesses and can cross-examine and give a verdict.	✓ When the aim is to obtain informed and considered opinion or 'verdict' on a specific, often controversial issue ✓ For complex issues one-off issues of importance ✓ When there is a specific question to answer. ✓ When a trained facilitator is available to organise and run the event.	Can be used to tackle complex or controversial issues, especially when the public has pre-formed opinions or that decision-makers have struggled to resolve. Enables participants to make fully informed decisions. High profile, dynamic, interactive process. Results can reflect wider population.	Can be time-consuming and resource intensive for the Council and 'jurors' because of the time commitment of officers required. Small sample. Limited numbers directly involved may reduce wider ownership of the results. May be difficult to define a sharp enough question for the jury to address. Can be damaging if not done well because of the profile of the issue. Difficult to include all interest groups.