

**GUIDANCE ON CONSULTATION
METHODS FOR MANAGERS
WITHIN THE HSSPS FAMILY**

May 2003

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SECTION 1 - INTRODUCTION

1.1 The Executive is committed to the principles and practice of open and accountable government, which can reflect and respond to the needs of our community. Effective consultation is a means of delivering these commitments, and is now a significant and integral activity within the areas of policy and service development. Consultation can promote improved decision making, by ensuring that decisions are based on evidence, that they take account of the views and experience of those affected by them, and that any new arrangements are workable and able to deliver the services expected. Consultation also provides for greater public involvement in and ownership of decisions and is a key tool of the HSSPS family of organisations in meeting their statutory duties under section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

Purpose

1.2 This Consultation Guide has been developed to provide a common framework for use across the HSSPS family of business. It has been designed to assist those with a responsibility to undertake consultation, to provide practical ways of delivering effective consultation, and to help business units¹ to meet their statutory obligations. The aim is to make consultation more meaningful and effective and to open up decision-making in the HSSPS to as wide a range of people and organisations as possible.

1.3 The Consultation Guide has been compiled with due regard to guidance provided by the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland, and the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister. It also takes

¹ The generic term ‘business unit’ refers to any operational unit within HSS Boards, Trusts, and Agencies (i.e. Quality Support Team). It also refers to any Directorate or Branch within DHSSPS.

cognisance of good practice and relevant experience from across the HSSPS and other organisations.

- 1.4 A common framework is set out in this document to aid planning and provide a structured approach to consultation. The framework is not definitive, but can provide a steer to effective consultation and should help inform the approach you adopt to fulfil your consultation needs or statutory duty obligations.
- 1.5 In addition, Annex 1 sets out the Equality Commission's Guiding Principles of Effective Consultation, which establishes the minimum standards and ensures that the legal requirements are met.
- 1.6 A synopsis of the key points as set out in the OFMDFM guidance is provided in Annex 2.
- 1.7 Annex 3 sets out examples of different forms of consultation, and highlights some of the merits and drawbacks associated with each. Points expressed are **based around real world examples**, and may help inform decisions on how business units conduct consultations.
- 1.8 Annex 4 provides details of people and organisations with experience and knowledge of different types of consultation. They can provide additional information to that provided in this guide.

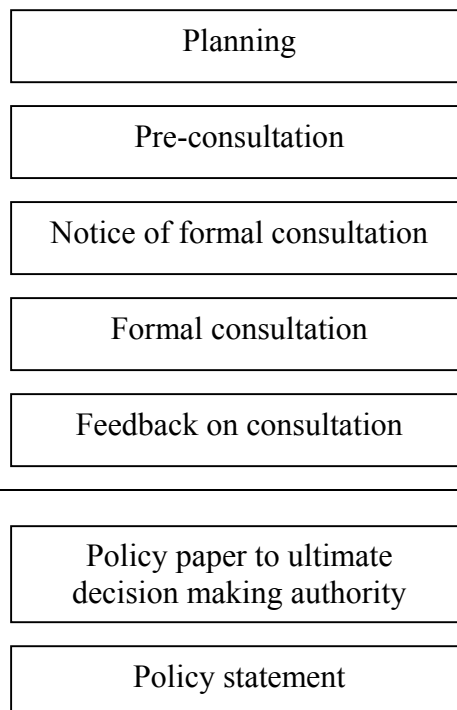
SECTION 2 - DEVELOPING EFFECTIVE CONSULTATION

2.1 Consultation is time consuming, expensive, and of limited value when consultees do not participate. Business units therefore need to plan the consultation process to ensure that appropriate steps are taken to engage with people, groups and organisations, and glean the information and views necessary to inform policy decisions.

Consultation - simple definition
‘consultation is a process of dialogue leading to a decision’
by: Audit Commission

2.2 Set out below is a simple diagramme showing the steps to be taken, which will help promote effective consultation. How, and to what extent each step is applied will vary in each instance. However, the inclusion of all these steps can be considered good practice in taking forward consultation.

Consultation Framework (Figure 1)



Each step in the framework will be discussed more fully in the following pages.

- 2.3 To obtain maximum benefit from this Consultation Guide, users should also read “Guide to the statutory duties” and “Practical Guidance on Equality Impact Assessment” published by the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland. These documents stipulate a set of ‘guiding principles’ for effective consultation.
- 2.4 Users should also acquaint themselves with “Guide to Consultation Methods for Northern Ireland Public Authorities” produced by OFMDFM². This document expands on and places further interpretation on the guidance provided by the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland.
- 2.5 In creating a consultation process appropriate to your business unit’s needs, it is important to consider the following three factors:
- (i) Planning for consultation
 - (ii) Identifying who should be consulted
 - (iii) Selecting the most appropriate consultation methods, taking account of the nature and complexity of the policy or service involved.
- 2.6 Considering these factors will help to: identify the different steps required to deliver a consultation exercise and the resource implications; ascertain who should be consulted at each stage of the consultation process; and help to determine what type of consultation activity is necessary for each stage of the consultation framework.
- 2.7 The following paragraphs discuss and set out guidance for each stage of the Consultation Framework (Fig.1).

² OFMDFM plan to publish the guide around Easter 2003.

CONSULTATION FRAMEWORK

- 2.8 This section of the guide is supplemented by Annex 3, which details some of the experiences encountered by those consulting in the HPSS.

Planning

- 2.9 The aim of any consultation process is to gain the best spread of views from those to be affected by, and those with the most to contribute to, the policy/service/legislation under development.

“... Consultation must be carried out with relevant interest groups as well as the Equality Commission, other public bodies, voluntary, community, trade union and other groups with a legitimate interest in the matter. ...”

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- 2.10 The consultation process should be built into the organisation’s business planning process and adequate time and resources secured. Even the most simple or basic consultation exercise will require an extensive period of time to complete if it is to be effectively carried out. In particular, time needs to be identified for pre-consultation or informal consultation, placing notice of formal consultation, formal consultation (8⁴ weeks minimum or as stipulated in the organisation’s Equality Scheme), and publication of outcomes.

Pre-consultation

- 2.11 In determining an approach to consultation specific to any business unit, it is helpful to seek the views of representative groups at an early stage to identify needs, potential barriers and opportunities and to glean necessary information.

³ Extract from Paragraph 4.1, Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998: Practical Guidance on Equality Impact Assessment. Equality Commission for Northern Ireland ISBN 1 903941 00 8

⁴ Within the DHSSPS (as for all Government Departments) the minimum recommended period is 12 weeks as recommended by the Cabinet Office.

2.12 Pre-consultation is a useful tool to policy makers. Early consultation is often the key to the success of any proposal and to securing co-operation in it. Undertaking pre-consultation on an informal basis with key stakeholders can assist policy makers in sounding out ideas, identifying and assessing potential issues, and obtaining expert views on key matters.

2.13 Drawing on the expertise of others can help inform initial development and place confidence in the policy or service being developed. It can also ensure that the proposed consultation process has been developed in the most effective and cost efficient manner.

2.14 In seeking information informally, it should be made clear that all contributors will be given the opportunity to comment formally as the policy is developed. Business units should know their key stakeholders, both local and regional. These are likely to include the HSSPS family of business, other statutory organisations with an interest in the policy area, voluntary and community organisations with an interest and other

Illustration of prioritising consultation

Pre-consultation in the form of informal discussion and meetings can be an extremely important tool in focussing EQIAs. For example, in the review of Ambulance Services there were over 70 recommendations. An EQIA, which specifically tests each of these recommendations against each of the nine categories, would have been:

- (i) bureaucratic – resulting in a lot of detail, much of it meaningless
- (ii) unfocussed – losing some of the key messages.

Instead, through pre-consultation with Ambulance Service staff and some equality groups the EQIA was focussed on four key areas, namely:

- response times;
- centralisation of controls;
- patient care services; and
- the medical priority despatch system.

By doing this it was possible to frame specific and meaningful questions in advance of the consultation, and quantitative analyses were carried out in advance of the consultation.

representative organisations and user groups. The organisation's Equality Officer can provide assistance in identifying relevant groups.

Notice of Formal Consultation

2.15 Consultation is a means of influencing policy in the local Administration, and central to the effective implementation of section 75 requirements. Consequently its use has increased significantly placing a burden on business units and in particular voluntary, community and trade union organisations. To help alleviate this pressure and enable organisations to plan their involvement in relevant consultation exercises, business units should make known, at an early stage, their intention to consult.

2.16 Advanced notice of formal consultation (ie. Prior to launch or commencement of consultation) should be provided through as many different **mediums as necessary** to ensure the target audience is made aware of forthcoming consultations. This can help to promote the engagement of smaller groups and organisations, particularly those with little or no administrative structures – that have a legitimate voice to be heard. The notice to consult might involve the use of regional, local and or specialised press, websites and other media such as advertisements, radio or television. (Generally, consultation should be publicised by press release or similar announcement).

2.17 Notices should also be provided in other languages and formats to promote the engagement of groups with differing needs, such as minority ethnic groups or people with a sensory impairment. In particular, care should be taken to use

Illustration on simple language

‘the feline beast is reposing on the material based floor covering.’

Or otherwise...

‘the cat lay on the mat.’

simple language, ensuring that those with literacy problems are not excluded, and facilitating interpretation. These steps may enable such groups to register an early interest and obtain consultation documents in a relevant format, to facilitate a response within given timeframes.

- 2.18 “Key” documents should be provided in other forms or languages **on request**⁵ - such as minority ethnic languages. The aim is to get the best spread of views, including the views of those most likely to be affected, and with most to contribute.

Formal Consultation

- 2.19 Formal consultation will usually involve the provision of written material supplemented with other forms of communication. In identifying an appropriate approach, consideration of the following factors will assist:

- Knowing the needs of those with whom you wish to consult;
- Appreciating the complexity of the issue to be consulted upon and determining how best to convey your proposals and information;
- Identifying the information needed to inform the policy process;
- Realising the resources restraints within which the business unit will operate – costs, personnel and time.

- 2.20 The outcomes of these considerations will help shape the consultation approach and make it as easy as possible for consultees to respond, to make contact or to complain. In addition, there are other basic standards to be achieved and these are detailed in the following paragraphs.

⁵ It is the Department’s policy to make “key” documents available in Irish, Chinese, Braille and audiotape, and other minority languages on request.

2.21 A business unit undertaking consultation should seek to engage and glean responses from those most likely to be directly affected by the policy or service. To help facilitate this, wide publicity of the consultation should be used to initiate the procedure, where possible in advance and then at the commencement of the formal consultation period. Again the use of different forms of media, language and format should be standard. OFMDFM have established a central consultation website. To use this facility business units should forward consultation plans through their Equality Officers to the DHSSPS Consultation Co-ordinator for registration.

“ The method by which the public authority chooses to conduct consultations at this stage must ensure a fair opportunity to present pertinent information...”

6

2.22 The consultation method must provide sufficient information to those being consulted to enable them to undertake informed consideration of the issues and provide a meaningful response. Smaller and more focused documents are, where possible, preferable. Respondents may have a great many documents to deal with and may suffer resources constraints. Everyone should be helped to identify quickly if they are affected, and if so to participate productively. Therefore formal consultation should set out data, information and reasoning behind proposals within a consultation document (or through other means such as meetings, focus groups and presentations) with clarity and using summaries.

2.23 The formal consultation process is likely to be delivered around a formal document. Business units should however target other consultation activities in a manner which complements the date of issue and period of

⁶ Extract from Paragraph 4.2, Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998: Practical Guidance on Equality Impact Assessment. Equality Commission for Northern Ireland ISBN 1 903941 00 8

consultation. For example, following the issue of a consultation document sufficient time should be allowed to pass before engaging in meetings, focus groups or other fora. This should enable consultees to read and draw together initial considerations that will in turn lead to a more meaningful follow-up meeting and promote better discussion and generation of meaningful responses. The scheduling of these consultation events should also be arranged to allow consultees time to produce a response within the consultation period.

- 2.24 Further consideration in setting up complementary consultation events should include identifying and addressing the different needs of those being consulted, such as their culture, practices and other potential barriers. Thought and provision should be made regarding the timing of events, language and format of information, the need for signing or crèche facilities. Unique or special provisions might have to be established to address very specific needs – perhaps when consulting with young children, older people, or people with disabilities.
- 2.25 When using forms of consultation other than written responses ensure that information is accurately recorded, and where possible let those persons, groups and organisations involved see what has been recorded and taken into account – that is the views, experience and opinions being included in the full consultation response to be analysed when the consultation period closes. The provision of feedback is fundamental to maintaining relationships and obtaining views in the future – people need to know their efforts and contributions are being recognised and considered.
- 2.26 The main consultation document being used should incorporate the following characteristics:

- (i) Use plain simple language, particularly in setting out complex issues.
- (ii) Ensure the document title is written in several languages (see paragraphs 2.17 and 2.18), and include details on how to obtain the document in other languages versions on the inner sleeve or contents.
- (iii) Include a concise summary of the main document highlighting difficult and contentious issues.
- (iv) Ensure documents are available in other formats, drawing on the RNIB guiding principles⁷ on formatting information, e.g. audiotape, and consideration of minority language versions.
- (v) Include a response pro-forma, with constructed questions to structure consultation responses and include a section for general comments. This will assist consultees and promote the likelihood of gleaning the information business units are seeking.
- (vi) Ensure that a complementary consultation strategy is in place to work with the formal consultation document, and include details as to how people, groups or organisations can avail of other forms of consultation.
- (vii) Ensure that a communication / publicity strategy is established, including advertisements in local/national newspapers, and specialist press relating to the groups concerned.
- (viii) Make the fullest possible use of IT including websites, and receiving comments by e-mail. Documents should always be available free of charge on a website from the moment of publication. In addition, paper copies of documents should always be available, and every effort should be made to avoid charging for paper copies.

⁷ See RNIB documents on formatting information – See It Right found on RNIB website – www.rnib.org.uk/seeitright/welcome

- (ix) Ensure that the consultation period provides consultees with adequate time to respond. In particular smaller organisations, which may be operating within limited resources.
- (x) Details should be given of a contact that can respond to consultees' questions.

2.27 In generating consultation materials and establishing other consultation activities there is a need to consider potential barriers to engaging those with whom you wish consult. In particular, considering any special needs in addition to those already highlighted. This might include developing means of consulting with children, people with learning disabilities and groups that consider themselves to be excluded from society in general. Innovative and sensitive methods may need to be developed, such as those developed by LEAD, the Northern Ireland Coalition of Organisations for Learning Disabilities. Your Equality Officer or the Evaluation and Equality Unit can provide initial guidance.

2.28 A popular and effective complementary method of consultation is to use focus groups. These groups involve setting up collective discussions guided by a facilitator. Focus groups are an effective means to providing information and explanation behind a consultation document, exploring issues around proposals and gleaning the views of those involved. This form of consultation is very flexible in that each focus group can be changed to suit the needs of its participants, for example adapting the content and level at which information is pitched to suit the audience.

2.29 Addressing the following can enhance the success of focus groups:

- (i) Ensure that facilitators are objective and well briefed, including making clear their role and responsibilities (A rule of thumb in

securing an objective facilitator is, the further removed the facilitator is from the business unit running the group, the better).

- (ii) Try to ensure that the focus group chosen is representative of the target group.
- (iii) Ensure that members of the focus group are informed of the event in advance and that briefing materials are provided in good time.
- (iv) Ensure the venue is accessible in terms of geography, timeliness and physical accessibility.
- (v) Ensure that interpreters and or signers are provided where necessary, and build in additional time to facilitate their work in running the event.
- (vi) Ensure that accurate records of the key points are maintained and the participants are informed of the process and or progress.
- (vii) Summarise at the end of the session.

2.30 In undertaking formal consultation **there is no prescribed method for all cases**. Each consultation will need to be planned and rolled out to meet specific circumstances. However, it is recommended that a business unit is seen to be proactive in undertaking consultation. Formal consultation will involve written consultation and should include a programme of complementary consultation activities to help address the many different needs of those being consulted.

2.31 Business units developing consultation programmes should consider forwarding their proposals to their Equality Officer, who can provide advice and guidance. In the case of undertaking an HSSPS region-wide EQIA, business units should use the Equality Steering Group (listed in Annex 4) drawing on its experience, knowledge and expertise to provide advice. A list of alternate and complementary consultation methods are detailed in Annex 3.

- 2.32 The consultation process should include a consultation period of at least 8⁸ weeks (or as set out in the organisation's Equality Scheme), provide sufficient data, information and reasoning behind proposals in simple terms to enable understanding and promote the likelihood of consultees providing sound responses to the process. When a period of consultation overlaps with or includes a recognised holiday period, such as Christmas, Easter or summer months, extra time should be included to take account of holiday closure or equivalent 'down-time'. (**"Inadequate time for response"** is the single greatest cause of complaints over consultation by Government)
- 2.33 Consultation should never have to be shortened below the Equality Commission's minimal level for reasons of organisational convenience. For example, because a business unit has fallen behind its own implementation schedule. If there is a need to consider shortening the period of consultation seek advice from your Equality Officer.

Feedback on Consultation

- 2.34 Obtaining the views and opinions of consultees, both informal and formal, is fundamental to the process. People, groups and organisations have used valuable resources to inform the consultation, and responses or involvement should be acknowledged where possible. It is important to record accurately the information gleaned throughout the consultation process to facilitate analysis; and where necessary, follow-up on information or views that may need to be further investigated; and ensure that everyone's view is fairly considered.

⁸ Within the DHSSPS (as for all Government Departments) the minimum recommended period is 12 weeks as recommended by the Cabinet Office.

- 2.35 To confirm the accuracy of the information gleaned, particularly at the informal consultation stage and when using other consultation methods to complement written formal consultation, details of the information should be fed back to contributors. This will enable inaccuracies to be identified and rectified, set out collective views and opinions, and explain how views are to be used or why they are not to be used. Feedback should be provided within a reasonable time period. This will vary depending on the different consultation stages and consultation mechanisms being used. Business unit should endeavour to provide feedback as early as possible in the process.
- 2.36 As part of the formal written consultation process it should be made clear in the consultation document that individual contributions will not be fed back and responded to individually. Instead it should be explicit that information will be commented upon within the final outcome document, setting out explanation to what information was used, how information was considered, the rationale behind decisions and highlight change. It is normal practice to list and acknowledge the contributions received from all consultees.
- 2.37 On publication of the final policy document some respondents may ask why individual proposals have been rejected. In these circumstances they should receive an explanation.
- 2.38 Whatever combination of methods are used, each business unit should monitor and evaluate the outcome and learn from its experience, seeking always to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of the consultation process.

Annex 1

**PRINCIPLES OF EFFECTIVE CONSULTATION- EQUALITY
COMMISSION GUIDING PRINCIPLES OF CONSULTATION**

Consultation enables the views of those who are affected by policy decisions or changes to services to be considered in the policy development process. It can help public authorities to become aware of issues and problems policies may pose for various groups, which the organisation might not otherwise discover. Consultation provides an important means of enabling those who may be adversely affected by public policy to participate in the process of policy making.

Key principles (ECNI Guide to the statutory duties Section 4 (2)(c)):

- Consultation with groups and individuals should begin as early as possible.
- Consideration must be given to which method of consultation is most appropriate in the circumstances. Consideration should be given as to whether face-to-face meetings, small-group meetings, focus groups, discussion papers with the opportunity to comment in writing, questionnaires, or Internet discussions are best.
- The accessibility of the language and the format of information must be considered to ensure that there are no barriers to the consultation process. Information should be available on request in accessible formats such as Braille, disc, and audiocassette and in minority languages to meet the needs of those who are not fluent in English. Public authorities must ensure that systems are in place to ensure that information is available in such accessible formats in a timely fashion. In addition, specific consideration should be given as to how to best communicate information to young people and those with learning disabilities.

- Specific training for those engaged in consultation exercises should be considered to ensure those facilitating consultations have the necessary skills to communicate effectively with those being consulted.
- Adequate time should be allowed for groups to consult amongst themselves as part of the process of forming a view. **The Commission recommends a period of at least eight weeks for consultation exercises.**
- Appropriate measures should be taken to ensure full participation in any meetings, which are held. Different groups have different needs and may have different customs. Public authorities will need to consider the time of day, the appropriateness of the venue, in particular whether it can be accessed by those with disabilities, how the meeting is to be run, the use of appropriate language, whether a signer is necessary, and the provision of childcare.
- Information should be made available to ensure meaningful consultation. This should include relevant quantitative and qualitative data and other documentation such as consultants' reports.

Annex 2

SECTION 3-CONSULTATION CRITERIA PROPOSED BY OFFICE OF THE FIRST MINISTER AND DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER

Reference should be made at the beginning of each consultation document that the consultation will be carried out in accordance with specific HSSPS guidance, which incorporates principle and practices espoused by OFMDFM and the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland. Furthermore full details of the consultation should be placed on both the Department's and OFMDFM's central consultation website, and this made known.

Listed below are salient points taken from OFMDFM consultation guidance⁹, emphasis by HSSPS is shown in bold:

1. Timing and resourcing of consultation should be built into the planning process for a policy (including legislation) or service from the start, so that it has the best prospect of improving the proposals concerned, and in order that sufficient time is allowed at each stage.
2. It should be clear who is being consulted, **for example what groups, and** about what issues/questions, in what timescale and for what purpose.
3. A consultation document should be as simple and concise as possible. **It should include a summary of the main issues/questions it seeks views on.** It should make it as easy as possible for readers to respond, make contact or complain.
4. Documents should be made widely available, with the fullest use of electronic means (though not to the exclusion of others), and effectively drawn to the attention of all interested groups and individuals. It should also state that the document is available on request in accessible formats and these should be listed.

⁹ Majority of points taken from Chapter 2 of OFMDFM guidance

5. Sufficient time should be allowed for considered responses from all groups with an interest. **Twelve weeks should be the standard period for a consultation with eight weeks being the minimum.** [However, there may be circumstances where a consultation period of less than eight weeks is necessary.] Among these may be timetables set out in statute; those unavoidably dictated by the EU or other international process; and those tied to the Budget and other annual financial cycles. The nature of the problem dealt with may also occasionally mean that urgency is in the public interest, though real urgency of this sort is rare. If the period is less than eight weeks, the document should state reasons for departing from the guide, and what special measures- for example advanced notice of at least the broad issues covered have been taken to ensure that consultation is nevertheless as effective as possible. In any event in all cases, where less than eight weeks has been allowed for consultation, the details must be referred to the Equality Commission as required by each Public Authority's Equality Scheme. (OFMDFM Guide to Consultation Methods for Northern Ireland Public Authorities; Chapter 7 Paragraph 2)

6. Responses should be carefully and open-mindedly analysed, and the results made widely available, with an account of the views expressed, and reasons for decisions finally taken.

7. Public Authorities should monitor and evaluate consultations. They should designate a consultation co-ordinator who will ensure that the central consultation website is up to date.

Annex 3

CONSULTATION METHODS

Consulting through the written word may remain the predominant method but it can no longer be the only way of seeking views, opinions and information; other methods of consultation should be used to bespoke each consultation to the specific needs of (i) a particular business unit and (ii) the interest groups targeted.

This annex sets out different methods of consultation, detailing potential merits and drawbacks, and it also includes several case studies for illustrative

purposes. In determining the consultation approach particular to your business needs, it is important that Public Authorities take (and seen to take) proactive steps to engage with all potential consultees, providing the opportunity for all to put forward their views.

Whatever combination of methods are used, each business unit should evaluate the

<p>Joint Equality Consultation Event</p> <p>A joint consultation even was organised by public authorities in the Southern Area – involving the HSS Board, Trusts, Ambulance Service, District Councils, NI Housing executive, Education and Library Board and DHSSPS.</p> <p>Its purpose was to provide a forum whereby groups and individuals could consult on a wide range of equality issues being taken forward by a range of public authorities at a single event.</p> <p>The event afforded consultees the opportunity to raise find out information or raise specific issues in relation to policies or policy areas.</p> <p>The event provided public authorities with valuable information on the issues in question, and helped to identify future issues.</p> <p style="text-align: right;"><i>Case study 1</i></p>
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outcome, learn from their experience, and seek to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of the consultation process. In particular questions to be addressed include:

- (i) which techniques/methods were effective in securing a wide range of useful responses, and which not;
- (ii) which represented value for money (taking into account staff time, as well as direct expenditure);

- (iii) how far policy and service provision changed as a result. If it did not, the reasons should be explored;
- (iv) respondent's feedback. This might emerge from response rates; analysis of complaints and other comments. It may also be worth surveying users after major consultations.

The following paragraphs provide some initial feedback on these questions on a range of methods.

Written consultation

This consultation method provides a formal means of obtaining views on a document.

The desired qualities of a consultation document are set out in the OFMDFM guide to consultation.

Advantages:

This type of consultation can be easier to organise than other methods. Consultees are provided with comprehensive information and data on the proposals in question, and respondents are asked to provide their contributions in writing.

Disadvantages:

There can be a low response rate from this form of consultation, and by its very nature can exclude some categories of people. The timescales involved can be

Pre-consultation on Oral Health Strategy/General Dental Services

The organisation Research and Evaluation Services (RES) was appointed to conduct a pre-consultation exercise in relation to this equality impact assessment. RES conducted 6 focus groups within each HSS Board area. Key learning points included:

- Contact lists and names must be kept up to date
- Consultees wanted information in writing in order to assess whether to take up an invitation to a focus group meeting
- Needed to provide for a variety of response methods to contribute to the consultation
- There was a good attendance at each of the focus groups. Choice of venues and providing refreshments/food was an incentive to attend
- The time of day which best suits consultees should be explored first when organising consultation meetings
- Those holding focus groups must be clear on the expected outcomes

Case study 2

lengthy as the recommended minimum consultation period should be at least 8 weeks. This method inhibits an interactive approach which can limit the opportunity to fully discuss and appreciate complex issues.

The HSSPS generally receives a good response rate to written consultation. On the New TSN Action Plan and Equality Scheme exercises the Department's response rate was the highest in comparison to consultation exercises by other Government Departments.

Open Public meetings

Open public meetings allow members of the public to find out about and express their views on a particular issue. It provides a two-way means of communication and facilitates interactive discussion.

Advantages:

This style of consultation provides local opportunities for collection of views, it provides a transparent process and allows for a two-way flow of information. Issues can be discussed in full and views are shared at each venue.

Disadvantages:

There can be concerns when using this format for consultation as to the representativeness of those attending the

meeting. This type of event can be more difficult to manage, in particular making sure all potential issues are covered. The format may also prevent certain groups of people attending/ inputting to the discussion. It is also difficult to establish the right time of day for these events – as they are likely to

Consultation on Protecting Personal Information Scheme

DHSSPS staff undertook two public meetings, amongst other steps, to consult on its draft scheme.

Advertisements were placed in the 3 major papers for the Belfast meeting and notices went into 3 local papers in Londonderry, for the meet held there.

The results were very disappointing – 13 people attended the Belfast venue, and nobody turned up at the Londonderry event.

This turned out to be an expensive exercise with little return.

Case study 3

restrict some persons or groups, such as carers, those with household responsibilities, persons at work, and others who may feel marginalized.

The experience of the HSSPS is that these meetings have not proved entirely successful. Some have been well attended, but at most, attendance has been poor, sometimes with more officials than public. This is in spite of considerable efforts such as press advertising and press releases in regional and local papers, letters and phone calls to groups. Times of day and location (hotels, leisure centres, libraries) do not appear to have made any difference to attendance.

Representative groups

Working with representative groups on a consultation, gleaning the views of specific groups at both the informal and formal stages of consultation. This might involve speaking directly with such groups or commissioning them to consult with users.

Advantages:

This is an effective way of consulting with excluded groups, it makes clear that such groups are being considered and provides

Consultation on the Investing For Health Strategy
Presentations were made to the Assembly committees for Health, Social Services and Public Safety, and Social Development, as well as the Civic Forum.

In addition to public open invitations to respond, a targeted distribution of information invited 1,800 community and voluntary sector groups to identify host organisations and local facilitators to host community meetings – 15 public meetings were hosted by local community organisations.

2 day-long training days were held in Belfast and Cookstown for 19 facilitators. A pack of support materials for five specific target groups. 5 mailings were done to a mailing list of 1,800, disseminating information and updating people on the consultation, and a regional newsletter was also produced.

Because of the Foot and Mouth emergency a special questionnaire was circulated to 11 rural community networks to facilitate their responses.

A number of focus groups were held targeting particularly marginalized groups, and a series of community arts projects were established to explore other groups' ideas about health and health improvement.

Overall there were 414 responses – 94 were from HSS bodies and professional groupings, and 263 came from the voluntary and community sector.

20% of respondents complimented the approach to the consultation.

Case study 4

opportunities to tap into expertise. Furthermore, marginalized groups can feel comfortable about putting forward their views and concerns.

Disadvantages:

Representative groups have to be chosen carefully as on many fronts they may not be representative of users, particularly those groups seen as ‘umbrella’ groups. The approach can be very resource intensive, particularly when trying to ensure that all user types are covered. Representative groups might also be prone to ‘gate keeping’ and therefore not provide the views of their representatives, and the expectations’ of groups may be raised too far.

Experience of working with representative groups has been very positive. In particular, seeking how best to consult with service users and gaining expert views on the issues which impact on users.

Face to face interviews

One to one discussions with an individual or representative of a single organisation.

Advantages:

Structured interviews are useful for complex or sensitive topics and they can provide detailed responses. They are useful in obtaining expert advice, particularly at the informal consultation stage of policy or service development.

Consulting people with learning disabilities
DHSSPS wished to effectively consult with people with learning disabilities. A series of face-to-face meetings with MENCAP and subsequently representatives from LEAD – NI coalition on learning disabilities.

The meetings enabled departmental staff to identify the best way forward on how to glean the views of persons with learning disabilities, and a series of specifically designed consultation meetings were facilitated by LEAD aimed specifically at people with learning disabilities.

This was an effective consultation approach, which has resulted in the development of a further consultation approach for people with learning disabilities.

Case study 5

Disadvantages:

Resource intensive approach to consultation - time consuming and costly.

Focus groups

Group discussions guided by a facilitator.

Advantages:

This is an effective means of consultation. It can promote a transparent and structured way to both providing information and gleaning views. It can provide broad/intense discussion of issues and provides instant feedback and sharing of information. Focus groups can be adapted to operate amongst mixed representation or narrowed down to representation of a single sector.

Disadvantages:

This style of consultation can be expensive, views elicited may be too consensual, and the lack of confidentiality in the process may inhibit some consultees.

This method of consultation has been effectively used within the HSSPS. In particular they have worked well with voluntary and community organisations, and throughout the HSSPS family of businesses.

Review of Stroke Care – (Acute)

As part of a review of effectiveness of current arrangement for delivering Stroke care Ulster Community and Hospital Trust put in place in a series of focus groups. In particular views were sought from the perspective of older people.

Focus groups were established comprising past and current service users, relatives and carers.

The focus groups were operated on a semi-structured basis giving a clear outline of the type of feedback sought while allowing attendees freedom to openly discuss and debate what they felt the key issues were.

Individuals not linked with the direct provision of care chaired the focus groups. Feedback from these groups was considered very successful in eliciting the necessary information and directing development of the service.

Case study 6

User panels

Small groups of users and service provider representatives meet regularly to discuss issues.

Advantages:

This method provides a useful sounding board to test proposals, and allows for rapid feedback. Useful in formulating ideas as the panel is highly user focused.

Disadvantages:

Care needs to be taken in establishing a user panel to ensure it provides broad representation. Through time effectiveness of a panel may deteriorate because of ‘conditioning’ and not examining issues from a fresh perspective. This approach has been used by the HSSPS and found to be effective. In particular, the HSSPS

Community Consultation Panel

The aim of the panel is to develop a consultation process that was not confined to the views of current service users, but was more representative of the views of the wider community.

The Down Lisburn Trust wrote to a random sample of people who appeared on the Electoral Register for the area, inviting them to join the panel and indicate the level of their involvement. 228 people agreed to join the panel and undertake activities ranging from completing questionnaires to participating in focus groups.

The panel has been used extensively over the last two years with most people having been consulted at least once on issues they had identified at the outset.

The range and depth of information received has been extensive and resulted in a significant amount of improvement activity among services.

Case study 7

worked with voluntary and community groups in establishing meetings between officials and representatives for elderly people, people with physical and mental disabilities, and young people, etc.

Citizen’s panels

Citizen’s panels comprise bigger numbers than user panels (>600) and aim to reflect the population characteristics.

Advantages:

This style of consultation can track the changing views of the consultees over time, it is representative, and can provide information quickly, once set up.

Disadvantages

Initiation time can be long, and problems can occur with the conditioning of panel members. This can be an expensive method of consultation.

Citizen's juries

Representative groups of citizens (usually 12 – 20) are convened to consider a question or course of action with a range of inputs, including witness contributions. The jury is a representative sample drawn from a specific population (broader representation the better) and the organisation commissioning the jury agrees in advance to abide by the jury's findings or conclusions.

Advantages:

The feedback received from this form of consultation is informed; the group dynamic can be useful if properly managed.

Disadvantages:

Citizens juries can be expensive to set up; raises expectation that the views of jurors will count, it is not suitable for all issues.

The HSSPS has had little experience of this form of consultation but they are considered costly and time consuming to set up.

Citizen's Juries

One local example was a jury organised by Democratic Dialogue, to consider views on the 11 Plus.

The jury was randomly selected from the population of 16-year-old pupils.

Jurors attended two information sessions in advance of the event. The jury was held over a weekend at Queens University and consisted of a mixture of open plenary, closed group, and public sessions, at which a range of witnesses (academic, business educational, political pro and anti 11 Plus Lobbyists) discussed their views.

The jurors produced a findings report based on the information and evidence presented to them.

Case study 8

Questionnaire surveys

Use of surveys to distribute to a sample of the population with a range of variables/ questions.

Advantages:

This type of consultation elicits statistical information and therefore it lends itself easily to analysis. The method can be low cost depending on the size of the project.

Disadvantages:

Questionnaire surveys can return low response rates and therefore it can be a costly method. The approach requires expertise in questionnaire design, and can exclude certain groups by its very nature. Questionnaire can be limiting in the type of information they can supply, and are less likely to be used in complex areas.

IT based consultation methods

Use of IT to elicit views using:

Specialised software- e.g. group systems

E-mail Internet polling

Internet chatrooms

Information kiosks

Advantages:

IT based methods of consultation can be relatively inexpensive, with rapid response rates, and broad geographical reach. IT approach can provide benefits similar to questionnaires.

Disadvantages:

This approach can be limited by available access to IT modes; and not all consultees are competent or comfortable with IT. IT based consultation documents need careful planning and will require similar levels of expertise to that required for questionnaire design.

The Departmental website has been used for consultation papers, including response pro-forma, which is seen as helpful, but to date there has been no requests for discussion via the internet. The Department e-mails documents to groups who prefer to receive consultation papers this way and receives comments by e-mail.

Other types of consultation

User complaints/ feedback

Feedback from suggestion schemes

Mystery shopping

Piloting changes

Deliberative polling

Open days/road shows/exhibitions

The HSSPS has little experience of these methods, but they may prove useful to some business unit when developing and undertaking an innovative way to consult with potential users.

Annex 4

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