

Guide to Participatory Methods & Techniques

By Anna Malina

The table below describes a range of different participation methods, suggestions of when to use them, and some advantages and problems.

METHOD	WHEN TO USE	ADVANTAGES	PROBLEMS
Consultation Documents	Traditional method of communicating detailed or complex information about options/issues for discussion.	<p>Can be widely distributed and can reach a wide group of people with different views</p> <p>Can act as a starting point to recruit peoples' on-going involvement</p> <p>Makes clear the views of the consulting organisation</p>	<p>May not be read or understood</p> <p>May not always be user friendly</p> <p>May be seen as a token gesture.</p> <p>Perceived as expensive</p> <p>Can be limits on how much participants can influence the outcome</p> <p>Can be time-consuming</p>
Written Comments	Publication of a consultation document may be sent out with a request for comments from named individuals, the public, interested groups and organisations.	<p>Indicates consulting body is open , transparent and inclusive – everyone is being given an opportunity to input opinion.</p> <p>Lets people know the consulting body is listening.</p> <p>Responses take into consideration information contained in the document so may be more informed</p> <p>May be qualitative or quantitative</p> <p>personalised letters more likely to gain a response</p>	<p>May get low response rates</p> <p>If information is not neutral, it may influence responses.</p> <p>Open-ended questions more difficult to analyse than closed tick boxes and so analysis may be more time-consuming, particularly if many responses received.</p> <p>Distribution lists may be out of date.</p> <p>Using same lists indiscriminately may lead to some groups experiencing consultation fatigue</p>
Events	Valuable for gaining information, sharing	High profile can get people interested	Even small events may need a lot of

Refer ' Guide to Events Planning '	and networking good practice or to build interest in community engagement work	Excellent tool for sharing information and knowledge	time consuming administration
Website Refer Guide to 'Have your Say'	To encourage wider participatory engagement	Quick	Access to Technology needed Not always interactive
Referendum	When public is to be fully involved	Involves all those on the electoral register. Can be legally binding.	Expensive Influence by selective provision of information.
Round Table Workshops Refer to ' Guide to Round Table Workshops '	Involves key players in generating a vision and strategy as part of a long term initiative to bring about change	Face to face meeting of different people Range of ideas can be discussed	Not appropriate for people who lack confidence in meetings A fairly formal process that may not appeal to all groups
Community Panel	A Citizen's Panel consists of a group of people living within the same area who have agreed to regularly provide information/feedback by participating in research. The Panel is useful as a reference point, as a small steering group and to feed information into decision-making	Good way to get views of relatively large group in the area Explores attitudes over time Participative. Allows results to be tracked over time, particularly with regard to key resident satisfaction and perceptions questions.	Panel must be updated regularly. Setting up and refreshing can be expensive Not suitable for consultation about a service used by a limited number of people
Focus Groups Refer ' Guide to Focus Groups '	Consists of a group of 8-10 people who discuss and deliberate on an issue over a 1-2 hour period with the help of a skilled facilitator	Can be very productive in gaining a large amount of data in a short time. Good for identifying in-depth perspectives on a particular theme or to explore or generate a new proposal Can be used to help identify questions	Due to small numbers can only make limited claims about representative-ness Must be conducted by experienced qualitative researcher. Generates large amounts of data that needs to be accurately interpreted (time consuming to write up, code and analyse)

		<p>for inclusion in a survey</p> <p>Can help develop understanding of why groups of people think or act in a certain way</p> <p>Can be designed to enable those not always included to have a voice</p> <p>Group discussion often generates ideas about different ways of doing things</p> <p>Works well when participants have something in common: age, gender, ethnicity or a shared experience of service-use etc.</p> <p>Issue can be explained in depth.</p> <p>Alternative possibilities can be identified.</p>	<p>One or two forceful participants can dominate a single group session –more than one session will allow comparison</p> <p>Ideally, they need to be carried out with different sections of community.</p> <p>Difficult to manage tensions if passionate issue.</p>
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<p>Surveys and Questionnaires</p> <p>They might involve face to face surveys in the street or at interviews in the home; or interviews over phone.</p> <p>Refer ‘Guide to Survey Questionnaires.’</p> <p>Surveys can be sampled.</p> <p>Refer ‘Guide to Sampling’; or open to all, self completed and returned by post or completed on-line (see below)</p>	<p>Designed to collect views. Careful planning and timetabling is necessary to ensure a successful survey.</p> <p>Investigates perspectives and illustrates trends</p> <p>Collects opinions from users and non-users</p>	<p>Can draw from a range of different techniques depending on purpose to: gather statistics; provide an overview of perceptions about a service or particular issue; measure performance; make comparisons with other surveys elsewhere or over time; test qualitative opinion.</p> <p>In random sample surveys identifying confidence levels and margins of error, allows for a prediction of accuracy of results.</p> <p>In quota sampling surveys you can aim to collect results that are representative of the community you are surveying Statistically valid.</p> <p>Easy to understand.</p>	<p>Does not support two-way dialogue</p> <p>Quota sampling can be complex</p> <p>Unless large, random samples do not provide an accurate picture of views of groups that make up a small proportion of the community/minority group.</p> <p>Low survey response rates mean that there has been a high level of self selection with articulate groups likely to be over represented.</p> <p>Questionnaire design and analysis often takes longer than anticipated</p> <p>Analysing and understanding survey results can raise as many questions as they answer.</p> <p>Can be high cost</p> <p>Structure can influence response.</p> <p>Not good at identifying attitudes.</p> <p>Difficult to include ‘hard to reach’ groups.</p>
<p>Face to Face Surveys</p>	<p>People often seem to appreciate face to face personal contact</p>	<p>Allows the interviewer to go into greater detail on complex questions</p>	<p>Requires skilled interviewer since non professionals may lead, resulting in biased results.</p>
<p>Telephone Surveys</p>	<p>To gather fairly simple answers to specific questions</p>	<p>Lower cost than face to face.</p> <p>Reduced</p>	<p>Not all target individuals have a phone</p>

		interviewer bias. Quick.	
On-line Surveys	Surveys on-line should not replace traditional surveys but rather complement them. Respondents can complete at a time and place suited to them.	Automatic results	There is a risk that people will respond more than once. Not everyone has access to a computer and online resources. Responses may be relatively low
Postal Questionnaire	When consultees are geographically dispersed	Cheap. Statistically valid Can include hard to reach	Tendency toward low response.
User Satisfaction Surveys Refer ' Guide to User Satisfaction Surveys '	To investigate user views	Easy to implement.	Often ignores needs/views of non-users. Not good at including hard to reach
Complaints/ Suggestions Schemes	Can be used to monitor and continually improve service delivery	Can help to make council aware of what's going wrong – offers a source of detailed information about how services are working or not Offers opportunity to deal efficiently with complaints Offers opportunity to reassure those complaining that you want to listen to them If dealt with well, it can help ensure that those complaining are more satisfied than before. Cheap. May be web-based	Need good systems in place to ensure complaints and comments are dealt with systematically so lessons can be shared and learned and lead to continuous improvement. Will not provide a larger picture relating to service performance or user's needs. A small number of complaints may not be wholly representative of the overall service
Mystery Shopping Refer ' Guide to Mystery Shopping '	Setting standards in tracking performance	Cheap. Quick. First hand account of service user.	Limited focus. Open to researcher bias (unless conducted by

			professional).
Advisory Committees and Groups	When regular consistent input is needed	Establishes good working relationship and familiarity with council report procedures	Perceived as led by consulting body and may alienate some people. Tend to be umbrella forums
Public Meetings Refer Guide to ‘ Public Meetings ’	When you want to take issues ‘into’ the community. When you need to explain and provide information When you want to stimulate meaningful exchange of information	Encourages focus on local issues. Can be held in familiar environment	Public meetings can be confrontational They are not always representative and can be dominated by those with strong interest or loudest voice. Some people put off from speaking in front of a large group
In-depth interviews See ‘ Guide to Interviewing ’	Lasting up to 3 hours, these may be semi-structured to allow some areas to be covered in detail. Most often carried out on a one-to-one basis but younger people may prefer to be with a friend	Good for generating detailed understanding, especially when an issue is difficult or sensitive Allows an individual to give their full views without group influence Can generate enough detailed material for a case study.	Requires a skilled interviewer. Must protect confidentiality to ensure there is no risk of individuals being identified. Time consuming and require a great deal of effort for a relatively small number of views.
Planning for Real Refer to the Neighbourgood Initiatives Foundation www.nif.co.uk/planningforreal/ for further information and permission to use this approach	Used to give local people a voice and professionals a clear idea of local people’s needs in order to bring about an improvement to a local area or community. Using a model or plans of a building or area, people are invited to identify problems and offer solutions.	Allows communication in a way that people feel comfortable, in particular younger people. Good use of local knowledge People can see results of different options and their input helps to develop new ideas Allows people to raise problems in a	People need to attend to become involved. Some people may be excluded, therefore, not wholly representative. Organisation can be very time consuming

		<p>non-confrontational way</p> <p>Works well for physical and environmental issues</p>	
<p>Leaflet/Newsletter</p> <p>See ‘Guide to producing a Newsletter’</p>	For facts and figures	Concise	<p>Responsive not immediate</p> <p>Expensive</p> <p>May not be read</p>
<p>Exhibition/ Information Stalls Road Shows Open Days</p>	Provides a good way of providing information to a significant amount of people using a particular street, public space or service. Possible also to gather views.	<p>Officer/Customer interface</p> <p>Attracts a broad range of people</p> <p>Can be high profile</p> <p>People may ask questions and become more interested in a project</p> <p>Encourages future debate</p>	People may see it as a sales pitch or may be unclear about its purpose.
Public Notices	To give information	<p>Concise</p> <p>Easy to produce on site</p>	<p>May not be read</p> <p>Response not immediate</p> <p>Difficult to monitor impact or number of people informed</p>
Visioning Exercises	Stakeholders are brought together over a period of time (sometimes days) to explore possible futures. The aim is to produce consensus about the way ahead.	<p>Can create a sense of cohesion, deal with conflicting interests and build consensus</p> <p>Uses knowledge and understanding of local people</p> <p>Good for community planning, partnership working and corporate or city-wide issues.</p>	<p>can be time consuming</p> <p>Can raise expectations</p> <p>Danger of being used as an ‘end in itself’ rather than a tool for dialogue.</p>
Citizen’s Juries	Group of 12-16 non-	Good when there is	Expensive and time

<p>See 'Guide to Citizen Juries'</p>	<p>expert citizens recruited to be broadly representative of the community. The group takes evidence and deliberates over 4-5 days before making final recommendations.</p>	<p>a clear question that demands an informed and considered response to a complex and highly significant issue</p> <p>Illustrates genuine commitment to involving people in decision-making</p> <p>May generate media interest and stimulate wider debate</p>	<p>consuming.</p> <p>needs significant officer support to collect evidence – even when external consultants are used.</p> <p>The will to accept the jury's recommendations is necessary or the whole exercise is in danger of losing credibility.</p>
<p>User Groups</p>	<p>Meetings with people who have a common interest</p>	<p>Group has knowledge and understanding</p> <p>Regular dialogue can aid discussion</p> <p>Useful sounding board for new ideas</p>	<p>Often only provides one perspective</p> <p>Can exclude those not part of existing networks</p> <p>User groups can grow too close to the council.</p>
<p>Participatory Appraisal</p> <p>Refer 'Guide to Participatory Appraisal'</p>	<p>PA is a powerful tool to engage communities and motivate participation throughout the process. It requires full involvement and may involve training Members and local people in PA skills</p>	<p>Highly flexible and can be used with small groups as well as whole communities</p> <p>Does not depend on people coming together for meetings</p> <p>Empowers people and provides them with transferable skills, eg in presenting views/ideas</p>	<p>People may struggle to understand what their involvement might bring about.</p>
<p>Creative Methods</p>	<p>Use of personal diaries, videos, drama or case studies to encourage people to express thoughts and feelings and stimulate discussion</p>	<p>Participatory – enjoyable and rewarding</p> <p>Can be good way of motivating people to become involved</p> <p>Participants enabled to learn new skills as part of consultation, for</p>	<p>Requires skilled facilitators</p> <p>Some people may feel self conscious and inhibited particularly if involved in drama</p> <p>May be difficult to analyse what was really meant</p>

		example in making a video or photography, using on-line opportunities such as social networking blogs, vlogs, wikis	accurately Difficult to summarise findings.
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