

# Consulting Disabled People



Use Guide **11** for guidance on consultation with disabled people; its benefits and uses; methods of consulting; how to plan and prepare for the process and carry it out in an accessible way

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The Portfolio is published as a result of collaboration with a working party, which includes specialist consultants, and aims to support the elimination of discrimination in service provision. The views expressed in these guides are not necessarily those of Resource.

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*Front cover:*

Consultation is increasingly seen as an integral part of what an organisation does. How does your organisation consult? © National Museums of Scotland

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# Introduction

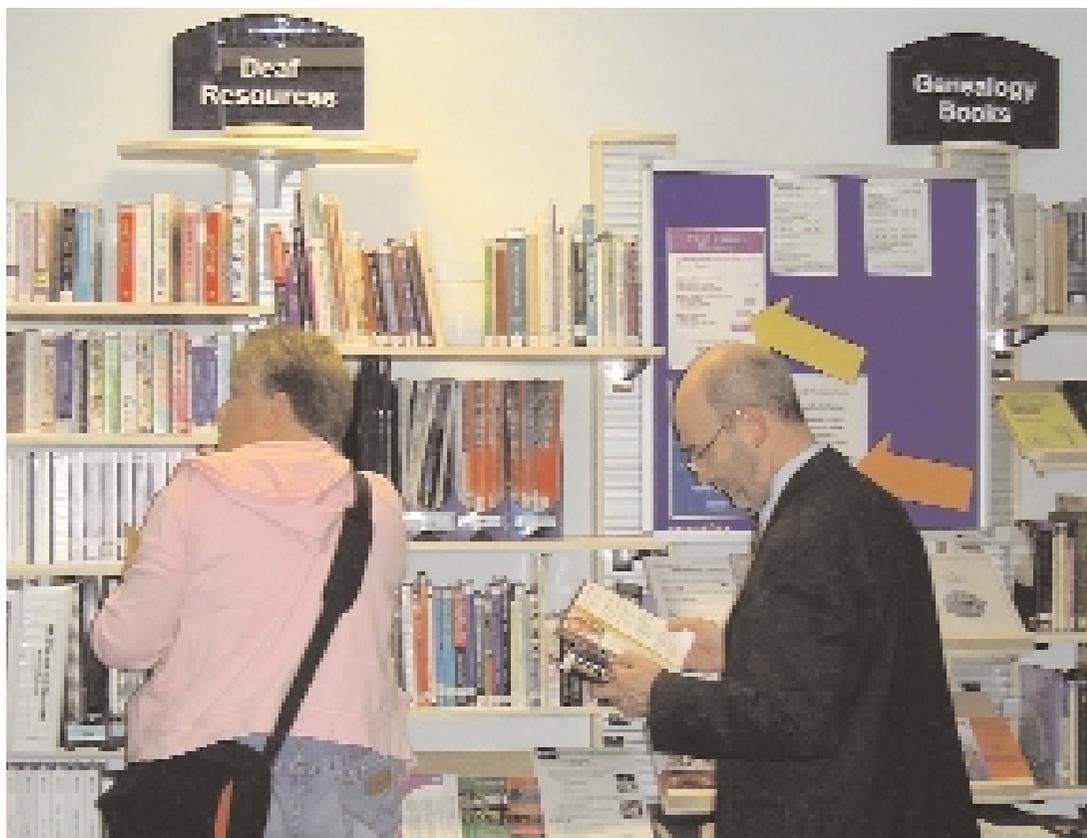
Consultation is a positive and rewarding process that can result in far-reaching improvements to access for disabled people. Alongside auditing (see Guide 4) and training for staff (see Guide 3) it is a vital element of your access strategy.

The *Survey of Provision for Disabled Users of Museums, Archives and Libraries*<sup>1</sup>, commissioned by Resource in 2001, found that 85 per cent of respondents used customer satisfaction surveys and 32 per cent consulted with users and non-users, both disabled and non-disabled.

Much consultation is reactive and informal, reaching mainly those who are already users of services. Service providers need to be proactive and to encourage, rather than expect, disabled people to participate in the consultation process.

A good proportion of managers who have successfully used consultation with disabled people are positive about the results, believing it to be 'the single most important thing' in service development and improvement.

This Guide is aimed at helping you to contact disabled users and potential users, to bring them into the consultation process; to ensure that your consultation planning and processes are effective; and to promote services to disabled people generally.



The Deaf Resources section at Gateshead Central Library is stocked with materials suggested by the local Deaf community.  
© Gateshead Council

# 1 Definition and key principles of consultation

## What is consultation?

Consultation is the seeking of information and advice from service users, potential users and stakeholders. It is an important tool for ensuring that an organisation's policies and services have been influenced directly by those for whom they are most relevant.

In the context of this Guide, consultation means seeking the views of disabled people and using this information to make changes, improvements and additions to services so that they are accessible. In many cases, consultation effectively complements an access audit (see Guide 4).

## Reasons to consult

Most organisations find that consultation has many positive benefits, including a better understanding of different views, and greater job satisfaction for staff because it results in a superior service that reaches more people.

Consultation with 'real' service users and potential users enables an organisation to target specific groups, for example the residents of a local hostel, the pupils of a local special school, those who attend a local day centre or members of a club.

Knowing who the non-users are and using consultation to discover what would encourage them to become users is part of the creative development of new and accessible services.

Increasingly consultation is a requirement for funding applications: “Proposals to improve physical access to buildings and sites should normally be based on an access audit and appropriate consultation.” Heritage Lottery Fund<sup>4</sup>

Consultation contributes to access audits by providing personal feedback and anecdotal evidence. Setting up a regular consultative forum, or several to cover a variety of impairment-specific issues, is a way of testing out improvements and changes to access policies and practices resulting from audits.

Consultation is increasingly seen as an integral part of what an organisation does in:

- Best Value and other reviews.
- Published statements of your commitment to users, for example in charters and mission statements.
- Funding bids.
- As evidence for potential partners and supporters of your dynamic and responsive approach.

Including disabled people in consultation about services in general helps to break down barriers and increase disability awareness in the community. Other local organisations can be influenced by your example.

## Case study: Dorset County Record Office

### Background

A Disability Audit of the goods and services of the Dorset Record Office was carried out by an independent consultant in June 2000. One of the key objectives identified was to develop a strategy whereby all new equipment is fully appraised to ensure it meets the needs of a broad spectrum of users and employees.

The audit report also advised consultation on a range of issues involving changes in the services and procedures at the Record Office. Our action plan to implement the recommendations of the report included the development of consultation with disabled people.

We also measured the impact of our service on disabled people as a pilot project to assess a Social Impact toolkit sponsored by the South West Museums, Libraries and Archives Council.

### Finding and establishing the group

The toolkit methodology was based on focus groups of users, non-users and employees. We recruited users through our search rooms and our Friends organisation newsletter. Reaching non-users was more difficult. We found more recruits through colleagues in the County Council, the Borough of Poole and Bournemouth Borough Council, particularly disability and diversity officers.

Our aim was to establish a group of people with whom we could consult on a range of issues such as proposed changes and developments to services, facilities and equipment at the Record Office. We wanted people in the group to represent a broad range

of impairment experiences, to include those who were deaf and hard of hearing; blind and partially sighted; with mobility difficulties, including wheelchair users; with manual dexterity and ambulatory problems; and people with learning difficulties. We offered reasonable travel expenses and refreshments.

### **The Access Consultation Group**

The group we established has met once as part of the Social Impact project assessing the service provided by the Dorset Archives Service to the community, particularly for disabled people. At a second meeting the group advised on some new developments in the office. Members of the group tried out a range of chairs for their suitability for people with different access needs, tested our newly installed induction loops and advised on our temporary signage. This information enabled us to make adjustments before the new equipment was purchased.

This group now meets occasionally, when there is something to discuss. We also consult staff and other users of the office via questionnaires and a newsletter but this group has a specific remit to look at issues from the point of view of disabled service users.

The aim is to expand the group's membership. This will enable it to continue its work and raise awareness, as well as publicise the increased accessibility of the Record Office to other disabled people who do not yet use the service because they expect to find barriers to doing so. Future projects include an access leaflet and assistance for those who may not be able to access the service independently.

*Jacqui Halewood*  
*Dorset County Council*

## Some key principles of inclusive consultation

Consultation is about developing a co-operative relationship with your service users and customers, which can then be maintained and developed.

Having an open consultation process will help to make it a democratic one, and result in much more useful information.

Be clear about the aim of the consultation. This will enable you to avoid raising expectations you cannot meet.

Be sure about your ability to meet what comes out of the process in terms of budgets, staffing and other resources as well as implementing changes to services, policy and procedures.

Consultation can be done in different ways and with different groups, with outcomes combined to produce an overall result for the organisation.

If you have gone some way already towards making your service accessible, you can publicise this by targeted events and activities to meet the needs of specific groups.

All consultation needs to be fully accessible, not just that relating to issues specific to disabled people.

Inclusive practices need to be part of all the structures and systems of your organisation as well as of consultation processes to ensure equality of access for disabled people (see Guides 1–4).

It is important not to underestimate the time, effort and cost of good consultation, but to accept that this is worthwhile to ensure that your service is better able to meet people's needs.

*"Disabled people are the experts in their own requirements and their advice is essential."* Annie Delin, Drawbridge group<sup>6</sup>

Be prepared to offer payment to disabled people taking part in consultation; this demonstrates the value you place on their contribution.

## 2 Planning: making consultation integral

You need to place the consultation process firmly into decision making processes so that its outcomes become part of your overall policy and strategy developments.

Careful planning with timescales is important. A good starting point is to ask the people you want to consult for advice on the best ways to do it.

### Questions to ask yourself before you start

*Why consult – what do you want to achieve?*

Consultation may be used for feedback on a specific proposal, to get new ideas from service users, to find out why people are not using your service or as part of a whole organisation change process.

It could be a regular occurrence, or a one-off and may relate to a specific issue or to an over-arching strategy.

*When do you need the results of the consultation?*

Time constraints such as completion by a certain date, or the need to meet a predicted number of times, or reach a target number or particular group of people will all affect your consultation strategy.

*Can the aims and objectives for the consultation and its outcomes be clearly communicated to those you consult?*

The most common complaint from people who have been involved in consultation is that they see no resulting change.

Another common complaint is that the people consulted give their time, but are often not given any feedback about the outcome of their advice.

Having and communicating clear aims and objectives with timescales for completion, identifying resources and keeping people informed of outcomes will help to avoid this pitfall.

*Will you include people to represent impairment – specific groups, or target them individually? Will you include people from different areas, and different ethnic and social backgrounds?*

This will depend on your aims and objectives. If you are carrying out a general consultation, remember that disabled people are as diverse in terms of ethnicity, gender, sexual preference, religion, culture and social circumstance as the rest of the community, and this diversity needs to be taken into account.

*How will you prepare for consultation meetings?*

People may be unfamiliar with the consultation process, and you may need to allow time to explain more about the services you provide, and about the consultation process. This needs to be done as clearly and concisely as possible.

*Is your timescale realistic?*

If you need feedback to a consultation document, you will need to give people ample time to receive, understand and respond to it.

If you use focus groups or similar methods of qualitative research, allow enough time to set these up effectively.

*Will you use in-house or external facilitators, and should they be disabled people?*

This will depend on your resources and timescales.

An in-house facilitator is likely to be clear about aims and objectives and you will have full ownership of the results, but they may not have time to focus fully on the work.

An external professional facilitator will have the advantage of being able to focus on the task and, if properly briefed, will meet the identified need of the consultation and produce reliable results. You will be able to choose someone with valuable experience and knowledge. If they are also disabled, this can add credibility, which may result in more detailed and honest responses from disabled people being consulted.

A good facilitator will avoid using someone who claims to be representative either of all disabled people or of an impairment specific group, and will seek a wide variety of viewpoints and present them without bias.

*How will you respond to issues beyond the scope of the consultation?*

If people have previously had little or no opportunity to have their voice heard, you may get comments and complaints about wider service delivery issues. If so, you will need to reiterate the aims and objectives of the exercise and make it clear if issues are raised that you cannot change (for example, government policy, benefit rates, and entitlement conditions). It is always helpful if you can direct the concern to where it can be addressed.

## Case study: AIRS (Access to Information and Reading Services), Gateshead Council library service

AIRS produces and delivers a free four-times weekly audio newspaper and magazine service to Gateshead residents, and offers a full braille, large print and audio transcription service and English to British Sign Language video translation service.

Consultation ensures that we continue to meet the expressed needs of our users.

We consult by maintaining close working links with local voluntary organisations and the council's Sensory Support team, as well as with user groups.

Consulting with visually impaired people is done in a number of ways:

- A braille user panel monitors the layout and quality of the braille produced by our transcription service.
- A group of computer users from the Gateshead Visually Impaired Forum is involved in continuous consultation in relation to the IT provision in Gateshead libraries.
- A 'Listening Hour' is held on Friday afternoons, when a member of our Talking Newspaper team is available on the telephone to discuss any requests or issues.

Consulting with Deaf people who use British Sign Language (BSL) has the twin aims of making the library more accessible for them and breaking down traditional barriers. As a result of this consultation, we now have:

- A Deaf Resources section at the Central Library, stocked with materials suggested by the local Deaf community.
- Internet training sessions in BSL on a one-to-one basis or in groups, as we found that only 5 per cent of the Deaf community has access to the internet at home.
- A series of family history sessions for Deaf people, delivered by a local Deaf person in BSL with our Local Studies Librarian, as part of Local History Month. These sessions will be extended through the North East Museums Libraries and Archives Council (NEMLAC) Access Network Small Grants programme.

## Making your consultation meetings fully inclusive

Key requirements are:

- Accessible and targeted information about the meeting.
- Assistance with transport to the meeting where needed.
- Accessible building with accessible lavatory facilities.
- Communication support; e.g. induction loop, interpreters.
- Accommodation for personal assistants.
- Supporting documentation in accessible formats.

and:

- Check access needs at the start.
- Set ground rules.
- Ask the right questions, i.e. about barriers faced rather than about impairments.
- Ensure people speak one at a time at a pace to suit other participants and interpreters.
- Allow additional time for communicating with people who have sensory or learning impairments.
- Use appropriate and respectful language.
- Allow enough time for breaks.

### 3 Making contact: who to consult and how to reach them

#### Approaching consultants

If your service has a register of users and you can identify that it represents the diversity of the community, including those who are disabled, you have a ready-made user group to consult.

Different approaches will be necessary if your service is used by the public in general and has visitors as opposed to borrowers.

There will always be people who can be easily identified and who will make their voices heard and this needs to be balanced by contributions from those who are less able to speak up for themselves. You also need to make it possible for people to give their views confidentially and anonymously if they wish to do so.

You could ask for third-party feedback from elected members or trustees, and suggest the direct involvement of disabled consultants. Ask them to let you have the information in writing or suggest they ask the disabled people whose views they are representing to become involved in one of your consultation groups. Some groups, such as Friends of the Library or Museum, local conservation or access groups are used to voicing their views. Although they may offer useful insights, they do not necessarily know everything that users want.

To target both users and potential users who are disabled, you may find it effective to approach any existing user groups you have as well as existing groups and networks of disabled people and other disability organisations.

If you are targeting organisations 'for', rather than 'of', disabled people, it's important to recognise that their views are not necessarily the same as those of disabled people themselves.

To reach some groups you will need to consider which media is the most effective communicator, for example, talking newspapers or email groups (see Guide 6).

Be proactive in reaching traditionally isolated groups such as those who have dual sensory loss, learning difficulties, or live in residential accommodation.

Using the knowledge of staff, especially those working at service delivery points, can be effective in identifying individual users who could make valuable contributions to consultation.

Consulting staff as well as users is valuable. This enables them to have input into any changes that may affect the way they work and to talk about any concerns they may have. It will also help you to identify related training needs.

## 4 Methodology: how to choose a consultation method to suit you

Different techniques are appropriate for different groups and processes.

These may include all or some of the following:

- Using existing information, e.g. from complaints procedures, suggestion boxes.
- Surveys.
- Questionnaires.
- Interviews.
- Focus groups.
- Permanent access groups (e.g. PORTAL – see page 22).
- Forums.
- Public meetings.
- Telephone surveys.
- Website coverage.
- Press, TV & radio coverage.
- Targeting specialist disability media and organisations.

You may need to use more than one method, depending on the complexity of the issues, the type of information you need and the access needs of any specifically targeted groups.

Highly interactive methods of consultation, for instance focus groups, are particularly suitable for difficult issues about which users or staff know little, but will need to be properly resourced.

Less interactive methods, for instance postal surveys or comment cards, sometimes contribute useful information, but the results can be unrepresentative, as often only those people with a particular interest in the issue will respond.

If you use postal surveys, they need to be clear and logical, printed in optimum size font (e.g. 14pt) with a timescale for responses, and ideally enclose a reply-paid envelope. ICT is accessible for many disabled people, so include an email address.

In order to consult with some people it may be most useful to make a home visit.

If you target disabled people specifically you could:

- Engage a local Access group on a voluntary or professional basis.
- Establish a professional and representative group of disabled people with relevant interests and experience (costs variable).
- Engage interested disabled service users for a general access focus group or impairment specific groups.
- Include disability consultants in an internal working party.
- Use established disability organisations, local or national, taking care that they are groups of, rather than for, disabled people to ensure representative views.

## PORTAL – Colchester Museums Disability Consultative Group

PORTAL's mission statement:

*"Our purpose is to advise and work with the Colchester Museums Service in order to provide equal access, in its broadest sense, for everyone regardless of ability, to the monuments and collections in their care. Our common aim is to promote greater use and enjoyment of the service, and to inspire a feeling of shared ownership in our heritage."*

In April 2000 Colchester Museums established an Access Advisory Group, now known as PORTAL. The purpose of the group is to ensure continuous improvement in terms of physical and intellectual access to the whole range of museum services. It also plays a critical role in making sure that resources, especially budgets, are used effectively.

*"Think about this: If you have a plumbing problem, you don't go to an electrician to fix it!"* Sophie Weaver, PORTAL member and Development Officer.

PORTAL was inspired and directly based on the Drawbridge Group, Nottingham City Museums' and Galleries' disability consultative group<sup>5</sup>. It has two fundamental principles:

- It is composed entirely of disabled people with museum staff attending through arrangement and invitation. This allows frank and open discussion within the group.

- All members are entitled to payment although they may choose not to take up this up because of benefit regulations. It is important, however, that it is offered, as it reflects the importance and value of their contribution.

*"In a society that tends to overlook disabled people and largely labels them 'non-contributors', it is very important for members' self-esteem that they are recognised for the work they do. Which is why I feel it is important that Access Group members are paid for their time."* Pam Glover, PORTAL member and Group Co-ordinator

## **Membership**

Currently PORTAL has nine members with a range of impairments. One member is Co-ordinator, recruiting members and organising the group and a second member is the Development Officer, acting as an external advocate. The group meets once a month. They may also be involved in project teams, for example, members with a visual impairment may be working on improving a tactile tour. The Co-ordinator and Development Officer attend quarterly meetings with Museum Managers to discuss upcoming projects and set regular PORTAL agendas.

## **Outcomes so far**

Colchester Museums now incorporates access into all new projects, large or small. PORTAL is consulted from the very beginning, and in so doing the whole process becomes much easier – it is always better to incorporate access rather than adapt later. Though there have been teething problems, and Colchester Museums still has a long way to go in improving its service provision, PORTAL has already begun to have a profound effect on the way people work and think.

It is clear that directly involving disabled people in the discussion and decision making process not only helps provide far more inclusive museum provision but is also a life changing experience for all involved.

*"A friend asked me if I would like to become a member of the Colchester museums access group. I asked what the job involved, she told me it was to help the museum to get the views of disabled people with different disabilities, to look at how the museum could be improved to give widest access to the biggest number of people. That sounded so good how could I possibly refuse, and the rest is history."* Richard Stock, PORTAL member

Annie Delin: *Drawbridge A Model for Consultation with Disabled People*, report for Resource, 2001.

### **Feedback: presenting and sharing the information from consultation**

If you have set up regular meetings and communication processes as part of the exercise, you will have the facility to present and share the information from consulting in an accessible way. You need to provide:

- Information in a range of formats on request, to meet physical, sensory and intellectual access needs.
- Communication support for meetings.
- Fully accessible venues for meetings.
- A flexible approach to meeting one-off access requests.

You can also provide feedback via press releases, leaflets and posters and on your website, remembering to be honest about why something requested is either not possible or will take some time to achieve.

It will help people to feel that their opinions are valued if you can demonstrate how their views have been taken into account and they will feel ready to contribute again in future.

# Conclusion

To achieve the best accessibility and inclusivity for disabled people, there is no doubt that time and effort on consultation is well spent.

For disabled people, whose history is being 'done to', it is no exaggeration to say that effective and accessible consultation with them has the potential for life changing outcomes.

If a traditionally marginalised group of disabled people is consulted, the consultation process itself can be empowering as well as informative.

Those facilitating the process will learn how to remove barriers to access; provide information accessibly; run inclusive meetings; and ensure everyone's views are taken into account.

Those contributing will be encouraged by being listened to and will learn effective ways to present their views, with consequent positive effects on their self esteem and their readiness to speak up for what they want.

The organisation that carries out regular and effective consultation and which incorporates the outcomes into its policies and strategies will be seen as dynamic, responsive and well worth supporting.

## Notes and further information

- 1 *Survey of Provision for Disabled Users of Museums, Archives and Libraries*: Resource 2001.  
[www.mla.gov.uk/action/learnacc/solon.asp](http://www.mla.gov.uk/action/learnacc/solon.asp)
- 2 *Disability Rights Commission code of practice*: DDA 1995.  
[www.drc-gb.org/law/codes.asp](http://www.drc-gb.org/law/codes.asp)
- 3 *2004 – What it means for you: a guide for service providers*: Disability Rights Commission 2003.  
[www.drc-gb.org/whatwedo/publications.asp](http://www.drc-gb.org/whatwedo/publications.asp)
- 4 *Historic Buildings and Sites*: Heritage Lottery Fund.  
[www.hlf.org.uk](http://www.hlf.org.uk)
- 5 *Annie Delin: Drawbridge A Model for Consultation with Disabled People*: Report for Resource, 2001.  
[www.resource.gov.uk/information/research/draw00.asp](http://www.resource.gov.uk/information/research/draw00.asp)
- 6 *Disability Directory for Museums and Galleries*: Resource 2001.  
[www.mla.gov.uk/documents/disdir.pdf](http://www.mla.gov.uk/documents/disdir.pdf)

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- 2 Meeting Disabled People
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The **Disability Portfolio** is a collection of 12 guides on how best to meet the needs of disabled people as users and staff in museums, archives and libraries. It gives invaluable advice, information and guidance to help overcome barriers and follow good practice.

The Portfolio is available in 12 point clear print or 15 point large print formats, braille, audio cassette and on the website. Please contact 020 7273 1458 or [info@resource.gov.uk](mailto:info@resource.gov.uk)

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