



# Connecting with users and citizens

*The Audit Commission is an independent body responsible for ensuring that public money is spent economically, efficiently and effectively, to achieve high-quality local and national services for the public. Our work covers local government, health and criminal justice services.*

*As an independent watchdog, we provide important information on the quality of public services. As a driving force for improvement in those services, we provide practical recommendations and spread best practice. As an independent auditor, we monitor spending to ensure public services are good value for money.*

## Introduction

- 1 People benefit most from public services that are based on a real understanding of their needs. The Audit Commission guidance *Connecting with users and citizens* aims to inform and encourage public sector service providers to develop new and effective ways of involving local people in improving the services that they use. Our own consultations with service providers show that they particularly value information about what works resulting from the experiences of others. Therefore, the guidance is centred on case studies that show a range of good practice examples.
- 2 This briefing summarises the main learning points arising from the case studies, and focuses on the key messages for managers about the organisational approach needed to achieve connections with service users and the general public.

## Commitment and culture

- 3 Having support at all levels is a key element in developing a successful approach to consultation. The will to achieve service user and public involvement should be an intrinsic **part of the organisation's or partnership's approach and culture**, arising from a genuine commitment to make connections with the community being served. This commitment needs to be evident at all levels and across all departments, including senior management and frontline staff. Consultation that arises from a statutory requirement or management directive alone will often fail to deliver the goods.

## Support and structure

- 4 Consultation and involvement is best supported by **cross-organisational structures**. Senior managers should establish support through:
  - **funding** – a specific budget for consultation should be considered;
  - **planning** – approaches should be co-ordinated across the whole organisation; and
  - **training** – staff at all levels should receive information and support.
- 5 Cross-organisational planning should take account of the need for **both long- and short-term consultation**. Long-term structures should provide an ongoing dialogue between organisations and the communities that they serve. Short-term or one-off research or consultations on specific issues and services are needed to answer particular questions about the experiences of service users and to give opportunities to broaden the spectrum of people involved in consultation.

## Diversity and representation

- 6 It is important that people taking part in consultations are **representative and inclusive**. As far as possible, they should reflect the make-up of the community or section of the community concerned. If the consultation is on a specific service, then it may be best to target current service users for their experiences and views. However, it is often important to speak to non-service users too, as they can provide information about why they do not access services. Service providers should consider:
- how to broaden the range of consultation participants;
  - how to meet the practical needs of people taking part in consultation;
  - reviewing membership of long-term groups to avoid it becoming static; and
  - how to make connections with 'hard-to-hear' groups.

## Handing over control

- 7 Consultation and involvement should be **led by service users** – simply asking for their views on questions determined by the service provider is not enough. Wherever possible, organisations should be prepared to hand over or share control with service users, who can then identify their own priorities and lead the way forward. Where the approach is originally structured by the service provider, allowing flexibility in the consultation design can ensure that participants are able to influence the direction of discussion and research, in order to reflect their own priorities and concerns.

## Learning from experience

- 8 Involvement processes should be able to **grow and develop** according to changing needs. They must not remain static. Lessons learnt from previous practice should be repeatedly incorporated into new approaches and shared with other departments and organisations. A thorough and regular process of **evaluation** is vital. It should look at whether the involvement process is meeting its objectives and what service developments are being achieved as a result.

## Real results

- 9 People who participate in consultations want to see the results of their contributions having **an influence on decisions, policy and service development**. Consultation needs to take place in time to have a genuine influence – last minute consultations may only be adding information after the real decisions have been made. The more tangible the outcomes are, the better, although it is also important to influence broader strategic decisions and priority setting. There may be other knock-on benefits too, such as improved communication and awareness between agencies, and an increase in good will and enthusiasm from service providers and users alike.
- 10 Agencies should plan for the **communication of results and outcomes**, both in terms of giving immediate feedback to participants and in communicating longer-term outcomes and developments. Updates on progress and evidence of real change are required in the long term. The wide scope of some consultations, with a number of services, departments and agencies involved, makes this a demanding process that needs advance planning and commitment.

## Conclusion

- 11 The case studies described in *Connecting with users and citizens* show that many organisations are achieving good quality, effective consultation and involvement. However, this is not to say that they have got everything right first time. They all show a willingness to get new approaches underway, dealing with uncertainty about outcomes and learning from experience about what works best and what can be improved. Once they have established connections with the people that they are consulting, new ideas and approaches develop on both sides and enthusiasm and interest grow and spread. Consulting and involving service users, and finding out what people want from their local services, is not an extra chore, but a means for service providers to carry out their work more efficiently and effectively.

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