

Introduction to Volunteering Consultation and Participation

This InfoSheet is based on Bradford Council's Community Consultation and Participation Guide which uses the 'ladder of participation' as a framework to use when planning a process of consultation (or community participation). The main purpose of the guide is to provide a model for groups wishing to consult with local communities, although it can apply in other consultation exercises, i.e. consulting paid staff about volunteer involvement.

It is a good idea to involve and consult paid staff, service users and other stakeholders when planning volunteer involvement within your organisation. If consultation and involvement does not take place, paid staff may feel threatened by volunteers (i.e. because of worries about job substitution) or be unsure about how to work with them. Service users too may be unsure about how volunteers 'fit in', why they have been recruited and what value they add to the service.

Before any consultation exercise you will need to provide those being consulted with adequate and balanced information about volunteering. You could do this by planning and delivering an awareness raising session (Bradford's Volunteering Unit has a sample session that you could use as a framework for this – see Useful Contacts List (Appendix V) for details).

Using the Ladder of Participation

The Ladder of Participation is based on the work of David Wilcox 'Guidelines to Effective Participation' (1996). The ladder is a starting point when planning any process of community (or staff) involvement. It is a useful tool to clarify what level of consultation and involvement you are offering and what is most appropriate for your organisation. ***Although the term 'ladder' is used, do not assume that higher means better – it is more a case of choosing the level of consultation that is right for you.***

Level 1 – Information

Information giving underpins all levels of participation and may be appropriate on its own in some circumstances. However, you are likely to hit problems if all you offer is information and people are expecting much more involvement. You will probably need to go beyond this level when planning volunteer involvement.

Level 2 – Consultation

In this stance you may ask for the views of others and their perception of potential problems, offer some options, allow comment, take account and then proceed, perhaps after negotiation and compromise. Consultation is appropriate when you can offer some choices on what you are going to do, but not the opportunity for others to develop their own ideas or participate in putting plans into action. This level may be appropriate for planning volunteer involvement, but you can also consider higher levels if they seem appropriate (see below).

Level 3 – Deciding Together

Deciding together means accepting other people's ideas and then choosing from the options you have developed together. The basics of consultation apply, plus the need to generate options together, choose between them, and agree ways forward. Deciding

together can be a difficult stance because it can mean giving people the power to choose without fully sharing responsibility for carrying decisions through. You will need longer timescales for your consultation exercise if you decide to consult with your staff, service users and stakeholders at this level.

Level 4 – Acting Together

Acting together may involve short-term collaboration or forming more permanent partnerships with other interests. Acting together in partnership involves both deciding together and acting together. This means achieving a shared vision of what you want, and finding the means to carry it out. To act together, the partners need to trust each other as well as agree on what they want to do. Each partner needs to feel that they have an appropriate stake in the partnership and a fair say in what happens. Acting together is not likely to be appropriate when one party holds all the power and resources and uses this to impose its own solutions. If you use Level 4 for planning volunteer involvement, you will be acting with your staff, service users and other stakeholders in getting your programme off the ground – everyone will have an agreed part to play in planning volunteer involvement within your organisation. This is probably the most difficult stance of all to take as you'll be relying on the equal input and actions of everyone involved.

Level 5 – Supporting Local Initiatives

This means helping others develop and carry out their own plans. It applies to resource holders who are assisting local communities in doing things for themselves. It does not seem very relevant to planning volunteer involvement, but may be appropriate when you hold the resources but want to help others to develop volunteering within small community-based groups. Level 5 is beyond the scope of this InfoSheet; contact Bradford's Volunteering Unit if you require more information (see Useful Contacts List at Appendix V for details).

Planning your consultation

Once you have decided which level of consultation is appropriate for you, you will need to think about the following issues *before* you begin to consult:

Background	Why are you doing it?
Objectives	What do you want to achieve?
Who to consult	Whom do you want to consult with?
Timescales	Are your timescales realistic?
Resources	Money, time and other resources required
Choosing a method	How will you consult?
Feedback	How will you make the results known to those who took part and to others?
Evaluation	How will you know it has been successful?

Background

It is important to understand why you are consulting. With volunteer involvement, you will be aiming to secure the trust, commitment and efforts of your staff and others in getting volunteering off the ground.

Objectives

If you understand why the consultation is necessary, you should then be able to set clear objectives for it. Clarify what you want to achieve from your consultation (bearing in mind level of consultation you have chosen) and be clear about how the results of your

consultation will be linked to the decision making process. For planning volunteer involvement your objectives might be a) to gain staff and service user support for volunteer involvement, b) to make decisions about processes (e.g. recruitment methods, support and management of volunteers, etc.), to identify resources (e.g. volunteer expenses budget) and roles and c) to clarify who will take responsibility for carrying the agreed actions through and to set proper timescales. Your objectives should always reflect the level of consultation you have chosen.

Who to consult

Service Users	To ensure that service users want volunteers and agree to their involvement.
Staff	To ensure that there is staff support and commitment to involving volunteers (without this volunteer involvement is unlikely to be successful).
Others	Consider who else you will need to consult, e.g. resource holders and management committees and local people affected by your activities.

Timescales

You will need to ensure you have allowed enough time for consultation. The higher levels of consultation generally need longer timescales.

Resources

You will need to consider what resources you need and have available for your consultation exercise. This is linked to the method of consultation you choose (see below) and might involve things like printed materials, postage costs, hiring a venue, etc.

Choosing a method

Methods you could use for consultation about volunteer involvement are:

Focus groups with staff, service users and other stakeholders (following information giving about volunteering issues and perhaps an awareness raising session), Workshops (where staff plan volunteer involvement together), and face-to-face interviews (with service users, staff and other stakeholders). The method will depend on the level of participation you have chosen (e.g. it wouldn't be appropriate to run planning workshops if you are consulting at level 2 and offering a list of options rather than the opportunity to generate ideas and options together).

Results and Feedback

Consultation is not something that should be done for the sake of it. You need to make sure there is a clear mechanism for feeding the results of your consultation into the decision making process. You need to think about what you will do if there is disagreement and how you will negotiate and compromise if necessary, for example, if there is staff disagreement about the roles you have planned for your volunteers. You also need to think about how you will let those who participated in your consultation know the results, for example, if you held focus groups with staff, service users and others, you will need to let them know what you decided as a result of their input and give them a chance to say whether they think your decisions reflect their views fairly.

Evaluation

Evaluation of your consultation is important but does not have to be complex. Effective evaluation should tell you what worked and what didn't work and why. Problems often become clear with

hindsight, and you should ask yourself 'What didn't work and why?', 'What did work and why?' and 'What could we have done differently?' You will need to assess whether your objectives were clear, whether you consulted with the right people and whether your timescales were realistic. You will also need to assess whether you chose the right methods for initial information giving as well as the right methods consultation exercise itself. The final and key question is what you decided as a result of the consultation and whether you have made full use of the views of those you consulted with.

For more information contact Jackie Golding at the Volunteering Unit (part of Bradford Council's Department of Community Development and Lifelong Learning) – see Useful Contacts List at Appendix V.