Consultation Practices within Scottish Local Authorities and Community Planning Partnerships
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Foreword from the Improvement Service

The Improvement Service has undertaken this joint project with The Consultation Institute to help enhance knowledge and understanding of consultation policies and practices within Scottish local authorities and Community Planning Partnerships (CPPs).

The report which follows makes a number of observations about how consultation is currently undertaken by local authorities and CPPs and includes a number of recommendations for how consultation can be further developed across local government and within CPPs.

The report suggests that the practice of consultation is improving across local authorities, which is encouraging and that local authorities have a genuine desire to engage citizens in decision making.

Whilst the report focuses specifically on consultation, the rationale for undertaking this work was recognition that a wide range of national policies and initiatives have highlighted the need for better consultation which engages citizens and empowers communities. These include:

- The increasing importance of community engagement and participation across public services, as highlighted in the Christie Commission (2011) findings, resulting in impending legislation in the form of the Community Empowerment Bill.
- The emphasis placed within the Scottish Government and COSLA ‘Review of Community Planning and SOA Statement of Ambition’ on CPPs unlocking the potential of communities to help to shape and co-produce better outcomes by providing genuine opportunities to consult, engage and involve them.
- The work currently being undertaken by the COSLA Commission on Strengthening Local Democracy, which aims to “Identify a route map to deliver the full benefits of a shift in power towards local democracy for people in Scotland”. The Commission has stated that local accountability and engaging with communities are at the heart of this discussion and will seek to strike a balance between citizen, community and government, and how we, as a society, manage local diversity, choice and variation.

It is therefore important to see consultation as part of a wider approach to public service reform, as well as a method of engagement in its own right. The recommendations of the joint Improvement Service and Consultation Institute report have far greater significance if they are understood within the context of reform.

So why does consultation matter? Consultation matters because it allows individuals and communities to engage in a wide range of discussions on issues which are important to local people. When carried out well, consultation is an essential mechanism to help public services deliver efficient, customer focused services and to support the achievement of improved outcomes for local people.

This has been broadly recognised by successive Scottish Ministers, who have firmly embedded consultation within the statutory duty for Community Planning as outlined in the Local Government in Scotland Act 2003. The act calls for a commitment to
effective partnership working between public bodies but also between local authorities and their customers and requires local authorities to consult and cooperate with community bodies.

Whilst it is difficult to derive the exact benefits of a consultation process for local authorities and CPPs, broadly speaking effective consultation can achieve:

- Greater public involvement and interest in local democracy.
- Increased support from individuals and communities for activities undertaken by the Council and CPP.
- Better-informed decision-making.
- Continuous improvement – consultation can highlight issues at an early stage, allowing local authorities and Community Planning partners to learn from those that use their services and live in their communities and to make improvements where necessary.

Consultation also matters because legislation places a duty on the Scottish Government to consult with local authorities and a duty on local authorities to consult with the public on a range of issues such as school closures, planning and licensing.

In addition to these “statutory” consultations, local authorities conduct a whole range of consultations on issues such as a change in library opening hours, new traffic-calming speed humps, revised school transport arrangements, the rationalisation of care homes, the council’s budget, school session dates etc. Whilst many of these consultations are conducted at service level and may appear to focus on issues of lesser importance, they involve changes to public services which can have a direct impact on the local authority’s service users and local communities. Consultation in effect bridges the gap between service users and providers and can be a source of invaluable information.

This joint report is also timely as the demand for public services continues to grow whilst total spend across the public sector is falling and is projected to continue to fall. All areas of the public sector will be expected to do more with less and to make hard decisions about where savings will be made and what services and facilities will be affected. In order to do this every aspect of government will need to improve the way they consult with local people on decisions which affect their communities of interest, and of place, to prioritise services which are important to them and to help improve outcomes.

The work of the Christie Commission and the current deliberations of the COSLA Commission highlight that there is a growing democratic deficit in Scotland and that local authorities need to do more to engage with local people on issues which matter to them. This is supported by the growing body of evidence which suggests a persistent decline in the number of people who are actively involved in politics and democracy.

For example, in its 2012 Audit of Political Engagement, the Hansard Society found that as a society we are becoming increasingly apathetic to politics and political engagement. The Society suggests that the public is more disgruntled, disillusioned with and disengaged from politics than at any time in the past decade. The report notes that constituents and local community groups are often targeted on a continual basis by a wide range of public services seeking their opinions on a variety of different issues.
When faced with too much consultation, particularly if it lacks focus or relevance to them, the report found that people can switch off from participating.

All of this evidence and opinion suggests that consultation needs to be carried out in a strategic and coherent manner, targeting relevant stakeholders. It also suggests that we need to rethink how we engage, debate and make decisions as a society.

The real value of consultation is arguably its role within the wider community engagement agenda. Consultation is an essential element of community engagement and is required to build relationships with local people, establish trust and develop a better understanding of local priorities and concerns.

The drive towards community engagement has been further strengthened by the Scottish Government’s impending legislation- the Community Empowerment Bill. The current draft Bill cites the Scottish Government’s commitment to supporting communities to do things for themselves – community empowerment – and to people having their voices heard in the planning and delivery of services – community engagement and participation.

The benefits of such reform are as yet hard to assess, however the Scottish Government cites the following benefits of legislation in its efforts to devolve power to communities and local people:

- Increased local democratic participation
- Increased confidence and skills among local people
- Higher numbers of people volunteering in their communities
- Improved community engagement and participation leading to the delivery of more responsive services and better outcomes for communities.

The current COSLA Commission has also recognised that there is unmet demand in many communities to have a greater say, and to run services and assets for the community by parts of the community.

“The task of local and national government should be to promote citizenship, to facilitate and enable participation, and to make decisions which are influenced and informed by it. …Government must facilitate and help the strong and growing movement around participative forms of consultation and engagement. Strong local democracy needs to be informed by local preferences and choices, there will need to be many more opportunities for deliberation and dialogue and this means ensuring that communities are not just listened to, but they are heard, and that there is a clear line of sight to the actions that follow.”

(Interim Report, COSLA Commission. April 2014)
Foreword from the Consultation Institute

Introduction

The Institute is delighted to have had the opportunity to work with the Improvement Service to facilitate a joint project to enhance our understanding of this subject. It appreciates the efforts made to engage with almost all Scottish councils and is encouraged by the breadth and depth of insight that has been obtained from the exercise.

This commentary aims to add wider context to the findings, offers some suggestions on issues to be considered and possible actions to enable and equip councils to use consultation and engagement to achieve better outcomes for communities. In developing this commentary we acknowledge the current work to progress the recommendations of the Christie Commission, the proposals within the Community Empowerment Bill and other reviews such as that of Community Planning Partnerships and the Scottish Government Short Life working group on Community Councils.

Knowing more about council consultations

The report tells us a lot about how Scottish local authorities consult their public. In many ways it portrays an encouraging picture. Councils indicated they are committed to consulting and engaging and can demonstrate considerable activity, including more use of Citizens panels and residents surveys than is commonly found south of the border.

Against this however, the study highlights a number of shortcomings. Much consultation is rooted in traditional methods, and new technologies and platforms seem to be struggling to gain traction as legitimate consultation and engagement techniques. Very few Councils seem to know the true cost of consultation and engagement and the importance of meaningful and respectful feedback does not seem to be recognised in many places. In summary, there may be a lot of activity, but can we be sure that it achieves as much as it should? Does it really help to improve outcomes?

It may be of comfort for Scottish local authorities to know that similar studies in England and Wales in recent years have led to similar conclusions, with a large range between the best and worst performing Councils in the matter of public engagement.

In addition, councils in Scotland, as elsewhere have to recognise a massive change in the characteristics of the audiences for public dialogue. Appendix One provides an insight into the factors that have to be considered, and their implications.

The rationale of consultation and engagement

In the context of a proposed route for “a shift in power towards local democracy”, the Institute strongly believes that how a council consults and engages is a factor in how its integrity is viewed by its partners, stakeholders and citizens. These practices and processes help to build social capital and create environments for informed decision making. They can also help to develop and deliver services in new ways through, for
example, co-design and co-production.

There is often a stronger causal connection between listening to stakeholders’ views and responsive decision-making at local than at regional or national levels. In taking forward the debate around strengthening local democracy in Scotland we believe that a key consideration should be the ability of public bodies to engage successfully with local communities.

This proposition has within it three advantages, and two disadvantages:

**In favour** of the argument are the following:

- Because local election turnouts are low, elected members and officers have often accepted the need to supplement their democratic mandate with additional sources of legitimacy for their decisions.
- A wide range of local decisions do not necessarily follow party political divisions.
- The best councils have excellent information on community stakeholders, long standing relationships and trusted communications – the essential ingredients for effective dialogue.

**Against** the argument however are two significant issues

- For many people, consultation and engagement is ‘old news’; there is also a public perception that some of it is no more than tokenism. Sadly there are examples where this is true and the reputation of a council can suffer if, as the report indicates, feedback is inadequate and consultees cannot have confidence that their views have seriously contributed to decisions.
- There is an instinctive desire for something new, more interesting and, hopefully better able to leverage stakeholder views, experience and expertise in a more collaborative way. Hence the growing popularity of co-production. It seems for many to be more progressive to generate enthusiasm for such ideas, provided they work.

Our conclusion in the Consultation Institute is that public engagement continues to be a potent model for any public body, but unless it is undertaken well, it runs the risk of causing more problems than it solves. It must be embedded in terms of structures that are fit for purpose and a culture which genuinely sees citizens as partners in informed decision-making processes.

**Integrated public services**

There are additional factors that have a major bearing upon future thinking in this area. Throughout the UK, the public realm is bedevilled by the profusion of organisations, whose responsibilities cut across each other as a result of piecemeal changes in their remits over decades. The jigsaw of overlapping duties and service delivery models confuse insiders; how much more confusing it must be for ordinary citizens.

In all UK countries, there have been attempts to address this issue, including Local Strategic Partnerships in England and Local Service Boards in Wales. Neither has worked particularly well.
In Scotland, Community Planning Partnerships have published Single Outcome Agreements, and these were meant (per the December 2012 SOA Guidance) to have been demonstrably influenced by comprehensive consultation and engagement. It may be a matter of timing, and being too early a stage in the learning curve, but despite concerns about the lack of public consultation and engagement on the first round of Single Outcome Agreements some years ago, the report concluded that “there is very little evidence to suggest that local authorities are collaborating with their CPP’s on consultation activity”.

Politically, we see little chance that the Scottish Parliament will consider devolving more authority to local public bodies unless councils and CPPs can demonstrate that the existing framework established in the 2003 Act is really working as expected. In March 2013, Audit Scotland’s overview report “Improving Community Planning in Scotland” pinpointed a number of weaknesses that have prevented CPPs from fulfilling their potential.

They included:

- Inadequate accountability
- Ineffective prioritisation
- Little influence over local public expenditure

In a telling phrase, the Report describes Single Outcome Agreements as “summaries of existing planned actions” rather than the added value of joint planning and delivery. In its words “Too often everything has seemed to be a priority, meaning that nothing has been a priority”.

In reaching this conclusion, Audit Scotland has encountered a similar problem to that which also afflicted the equivalent English and Welsh partnerships. In short, collaborations of this kind are fine for maintaining progress on already-determined programmes, but are very reluctant to take actions involving bad news. One reason is that service reductions, rationalisations or other forms of unwelcome change involve awkward choices affecting public bodies’ statutory obligations and funding streams. On occasions, there can be a genuine question over who exactly is legally able to take such decisions.

A further factor in taking tough decisions is public opinion. Change may not be popular, but if officers and elected members make genuine attempts to engage with stakeholders, at least the public is better informed of the likely consequences before a decision is made. Moreover there is the opportunity to explore the widest range of options and the chance to explore solutions that will leverage the knowledge and resources within both CPPs and communities themselves.

**Engaging better: consulting better – better outcomes**

Although public participation enthusiasts have long argued that greater public involvement is always sure to bring about better decisions, and by extension better performance, this is not always true. Better dialogue should, in theory help councils and other public bodies avoid some of the more obvious mistakes, but politics can easily
offset gains in credibility that improved engagement brings.

So the question is whether public bodies are capable of improving public engagement to an extent that it makes a significant difference to the outcomes for both organisations and citizens. Are there steps that can be taken quickly and cost-effectively?

The Institute believes there are.... but only if councils and other service providers actually want it to happen. Without a clear sense of commitment to public engagement, with honourable exceptions, there will continue to be only occasional examples that make a difference, and continuing indifference by a public who see little point in expressing their views.

This report includes a number of practical suggestions as to how councils can make their engagement and consultation more meaningful. Alongside these, the Consultation Institute also recommends:

• Urgent research be carried out into the evidence of the impact of co-production in achieving outcomes for both CPPs and councils. It is recognised that co-production is in its early stages and that much of the focus in Scotland has been on Health and Social Care through the Joint Improvement Team and our colleagues Governance International. An independent study to establish where and how success is being achieved would inform future skills training so that this approach can be rolled out more systematically.

The Institute recognises the need for very specialist research specifically on such matters and has recently collaborated with Huddersfield University to establish a Centre for Communications and Consultation Research. A project of the kind suggested above could be undertaken at this or at a Scottish University with comparable interest in the subject.

• Serious consideration be given to the implications of any changes to representational structures in Scotland. For example, the work of the Scottish Government to take forward its recommendations for strengthening community councils, could result in a significant shift in terms of their role and credibility; they might well become the recognised or acknowledged voice of local neighbourhoods. Were this to be achieved, it would affect other tiers of representation and the expectations of citizens for engagement and consultation.

This Commentary builds on the sensible recommendations which are included in this joint IS/tCI Report. If implemented, there would be a significant improvement in engagement and consultation leading to better solutions and outcomes. It would also increase the credibility and legitimacy of Single Outcome Agreements and any contentious prioritisation contained therein. Demonstrating public support for difficult decisions could be important evidence in any resource-related dialogue with national Government.

For these reasons, The Institute argues that investment in engagement/consultation will produce a significant return especially on outcomes. It will place local government in a better position to argue for more powers and resources.
Conclusions

The Christie Commission has made the case for radical change in the design and delivery of public services in Scotland. It correctly made the connection between public bodies’ ability to engage with stakeholders and the likelihood of developing new delivery methods that are effective and acceptable.

It is early days, but we believe that the thinking behind Christie in terms of culture shift is not yet being given enough serious consideration. Whilst there may be honourable exceptions, it would be a mistake to allow an emphasis and focus on structural change with the view that changes to best practice will come over the longer term. The state of public finances means that no tier of Government now has the luxury of waiting!

The Institute believes that one of the best contributions towards strengthening local democracy is by investing to create environments and cultures where, through effective engagement and consultation, public bodies can maximise their unique relationship with citizens at a local, even neighbourhood level and their ability to engage/consult cost effectively.

This joint report is an excellent initial diagnostic, and identifies some of the issues that the Improvement Service, local authorities and the Institute itself needs to address. More needs to be done.

We are happy to assist further development of best practice for councils and CPPs. The Institute is also willing to expand on these themes discussed in this paper if any organisation wishes to discuss this further.

Rhion H Jones LL.B, Programme Director

David Jones, Lead Associate in Scotland

Quintin Oliver, Chair
Executive Summary

Working in partnership with The Consultation Institute, the Improvement Service has undertaken a joint research project to help enhance knowledge and understanding of consultation in Scottish Local Authorities and Community Planning Partnerships (CPPs).

This work reflects the principles outlined by the COSLA and Scottish Government Review of Community Planning and Single Outcome Agreements (SOAs) Statement of Ambition, where a key priority is to “strengthen community engagement and participation in delivering better outcomes”. This message is re-enforced in the SOA Guidance to CPPs, December 2012, which makes clear that “CPPs need to have a strong understanding of communities and to provide genuine opportunities to consult, engage and involve them.” Legislation in the form of the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Bill is also expected before the Scottish Parliament later in 2014. The Bill is designed to develop the skills and capacity of communities and voluntary organisations, such as Community Councils and Local Development Trusts, and to strengthen community participation and engagement.

Aims and objectives

The key purpose of this project was to evaluate current consultation practices in Scottish local authorities and CPPs to help to better understand how, and why, local authorities and CPPs choose to consult. It should be noted that consultations relating to planning matters were deliberately excluded from this report on the grounds that planning consultations are closely supported and monitored by the 34 Planning Authorities in Scotland. However it should be noted that consultations on planning account for a significant proportion of all consultations carried out by local authorities.

This report contains the findings from our research and proposes a range of recommendations for consideration by local authorities and CPPs to support the development of more effective consultation practices which enable the delivery of services which better meet the needs and aspirations of local people.

The key elements of this project were to:

1. Research current consultation policies, practices and processes across Scotland’s local authorities;
2. Research the extent to which consultation activity is planned, resourced and integrated within CPPs;
3. Identify examples of where consultation is working well; and
4. Identify a range of measures to support local authorities and CPPs to build capacity to undertake effective consultation with local communities and stakeholders.

Methodology

Given the three different requirements of this research (to review current consultation practices, identify good practice and assess the development needs of local authorities
and CPPs) a multi-methodological approach was used:

- A desk based review of a sample of local authority websites was undertaken, to look at the number of active consultations on websites, the range of response methods and the availability of supporting documentation and external links which the public can access to give them additional background information on the issues being consulted on.
- Analysis of active Consultation / Engagement Strategies which have been developed and implemented by a number of local authorities.
- A survey was issued to all 32 local authorities, to consider a range of issues around consultation. The survey was broken down thematically into four key areas: internal procedures, consultation methods, evaluation and feedback and the role of consultation within the CPP.
- Qualitative interviews were undertaken with a range of local authority employees who have responsibility within their remit for consultation and engagement.

Key findings

1. Consultation is an important element of wider community engagement and is an essential component in community capacity building. It is essential that local authorities and CPPs recognise the critical role that consultation can play in helping to progress the key recommendations in the Report on the Future Delivery of Public Services (Christie Commission) to strengthen community decision making and participation.

2. Consultation is often complex and fulfils a variety of roles and functions. This spectrum ranges from communicating or informing the public through to shaping ideas and decision making.

3. Local authorities and CPPs remain committed to improving engagement with stakeholders and local communities and continuing to think innovatively about how they can maximise the effectiveness of consultation.

4. There is a relatively high level of co-ordination of consultation activity within local authorities, including corporate strategies for consultation, centrally maintained databases of consultation activity and clear guidance to staff on how best to communicate information relating to a consultation. However current working models and practices differ across local authorities and CPPs.

5. There is very little evidence to suggest that local authorities are collaborating with Community Planning Partners on consultation activity. Currently most CPPs do not coordinate consultation across the partnership or document consultation activity being carried out by individual partners.

6. The majority of CPPs do not currently consult on issues as a collective partnership. Individual Community Planning Partners continue to consult independently of other partnership members. Useful mechanisms such as Citizens’ Panels, Residents’ Surveys and online consultation hubs offer real opportunities for CPPs to combine resources and to consult with communities collectively, avoiding duplication of work and maximising the potential of public services to engage with the communities they serve.
7. Local authorities are heavily reliant on traditional consultation techniques such as public meetings, mail drops, focus groups and paper surveys, which are resource intensive and potentially unsustainable in the current financial climate.

8. The functionality and usability of local authority websites, including online consultation portals, have greatly improved over the last year, however further work is needed to ensure online information on consultations is consistent, provides reliable and relevant information and is kept up-to-date.

9. Promoting consultation especially via social media remains a challenging area of development for local authorities, many of whom are currently exploring how best to integrate social media into their working practices. There is limited evidence to suggest that social media is an effective consultation tool. However, social media can be a useful method of communication to help local authorities engage with a wider spectrum of the community.

10. Citizens’ Panels and Residents’ Surveys are currently used extensively by local authorities across Scotland. However significant variation exists across local authorities in the way Citizens’ Panels are supported, the frequency with which Citizens’ Panel questionnaires and Residents’ Surveys are issued and how results from panels and surveys are used to inform and improve service design and delivery.

11. Significant investment, including staff time, continues to be made in procuring, implementing, operating and developing Citizen’s Panels and Residents’ Surveys and the use of external contractors to assist in the delivery of panels and surveys remains widespread.

12. The majority of local authorities do not believe there is a need to evaluate their consultation practices.

13. The quality of feedback to stakeholders on the results of consultation and the impact of results on the decision making process within local authorities and at CPP level, remains limited.

14. Evidence suggests that consultations do not consistently influence service design, delivery or improved outcomes across local authorities

Key recommendations

This report makes a number of recommendations to improve the quality, efficiency and effectiveness of consultation being carried out by local authorities and CPPs.

It is proposed that the following recommendations are considered by a range of stakeholders including COSLA, SOLACE and CPPs.

The key recommendations of this report are as follows:

1. Local authorities should only carry out consultation activity on areas where the views of stakeholders can genuinely inform, and influence the decision making process. Unless there is scope to influence the issue/ decision, Local Authorities should not consult. Where there is a statutory requirement to consult but little or no scope for influence, then resources should be limited to the extent required to be compliant.

2. Consultation should not be a substitute for improving communication. Local authorities need to assess the need for real consultation before committing to
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the process. This could be better managed by creating a clear sign off process, or clearing house function, to approve all consultations before they are issued. Such a system is likely to improve the standard and quality of consultations across services and departments and should ideally be led corporately, or where appropriate at CPP level.

3. All local authorities should review their Consultation/Engagement Strategies to ensure that they reflect the priorities of the Public Service Reform agenda and Single Outcome Agreements.

4. Elected members should be supported and encouraged to take ownership of these strategies and have a clear understanding of what consultation is being carried out by the local authority on their behalf.

5. Consultation needs to support political accountability. Local Authorities need to develop mechanisms to ensure elected members can provide political oversight to consultations and are given an opportunity to scrutinise the results of a consultation.

6. Local authorities need to think more strategically about how they reduce consultation activity being duplicated by different services and departments. One potential solution is for a local authority to create a single accurate stakeholder database, to ensure that only relevant stakeholders are targeted for consultations.

7. Local authorities need to be more creative in their approach to engaging with stakeholders. Improvements in the use of social media for engagement/consultation purposes, linking with specialist partner organisations has the potential to widen access and participation in consultation.

8. Consideration should be given to developing national guidelines on consultation for CPPs, Local Authorities and other public services to highlight good practice in consultation and to help to improve consistency in approach across public services.

9. CPPs need to think more strategically about the opportunities to share findings from consultations and create opportunities to share good practice with other CPPs, provide peer support and harness existing expertise of staff in research and analysis. CPPs should be encouraged to adopt a CPP-wide 12-month rolling programme of engagement/consultation activity and relate it to the key outcomes that the Partnership wants to achieve. This programme should then be promoted heavily to staff working across the partnership.

10. Local authorities and/or CPPs should explore opportunities for a shared service for the collective procurement of Citizens’ Panels and Residents’ Surveys. A shared service across all local authorities, which is centrally procured, could potentially reduce costs and improve the overall standard and consistency of Citizens’ Panels and Residents’ Surveys throughout Scotland.

11. Local authorities and CPPs should be encouraged to continue to invest in training and staff development on the wide range of skills required to carry out effective consultation. A particular focus on better evaluation techniques and providing feedback would enhance the value of consultation and help embed the findings of consultation in decision making, service design and delivery.

12. All staff engaged in consultation activities should be required to provide feedback to stakeholders.
1. Aims and Objectives

The key elements of this project were to:

• Research current consultation policies, practices and processes across Scotland’s local authorities;
• Research the extent to which consultation activity is planned, resourced and integrated within CPPs;
• Identify examples of where consultation is working well; and
• Identify a range of measures to support local authorities and CPPs to build capacity to undertake effective consultation with local communities and stakeholders.
2. Research Methodologies

In order to best meet the stated aims of the project, a multi-methodological approach was adopted. This included:

- A desk based review of a sample of local authority websites
- A desk based review of consultation/engagement strategies currently being used by a number of local authorities
- An online survey issued to key staff in all 32 local authorities
- Qualitative interviews with a range of local authority employees who have responsibility within their remit for consultation and engagement

2.1 Desk-based review of local authority websites

Local authorities have become increasingly reliant on websites as a first point of access for a wide range of services and information on consultations and public engagement, including:

- Decision making structures and political accountability: All committee minutes and reports are available online and council policies and strategies are easily accessible to the public. Information is also available on elected members and senior officers. Good background information and documentation is essential to ensure consultations are supported by good evidence.
- Consultations, public awareness campaigns and customer satisfaction surveys. These functions are commonly collectively referred to as “Have your say” tools on websites.

A sample of local authority websites were selected using existing data on participation and democracy published within the Society of IT Managers (SOCITIM) Annual Report 2012. The report benchmarks the quality of local authority websites against a wide range of criteria including design, functionality, ease of use and number of layers or sub-pages within any given section of a website. Local authorities are awarded a star rating from 1* (poor) – 4 * (Excellent). In the 2012 report, one of the key functionality tests was finding information on consultation and whether information was available on current and previous consultations.

“Democratic engagement is a complex area. This is one of the few topics where engaging the citizen online over a period of time, or for an extended session, might be desirable. On the other hand, there will also be times where, just as with other services, the user simply wants to get online, find out something specific, and leave again.” (SOCITM, 2012)

SOCITIM’s primary focus is the physical attributes and functionality of web services, not the quality or the content. Therefore an analysis of a small sample of local authority websites was undertaken to explore content rather than functionality.

A total of twelve websites were examined, three from each star rating
4* Argyll and Bute, Edinburgh, Moray  
3* Clackmannanshire, Fife, Scottish Borders  
2* East Lothian, Glasgow, Stirling  
1* Falkirk, Highland, Shetland Islands

The analysis focused on whether the content of the webpages was as useful and informative as the functionality of the webpages. Pages were explored to look for the following information:

- Synopsis of the issues being consulted on and a clear description of why the Local Authority deemed it important to engage with stakeholders.
- Links to supporting documentation and background information including committee reports, council polices/strategies and national legislation.
- Key dates including closing date for responses, when responses would be analysed and when stakeholders could expect to receive feedback.

2.2 Desk based review of consultation/engagement Strategies

Local authorities were asked to provide copies of their consultation/engagement strategies. In total 6 local authorities provided their strategies for review:

- Aberdeenshire: Code of Practice
- Argyll & Bute: Improving community engagement in Argyll and Bute
- Dumfries and Galloway: Corporate Guidance on Community Engagement
- East Lothian: Consultation and Engagement Strategy
- Orkney: Community Consultation and Engagement Guide
- Renfrewshire: Consultation Strategy

2.3 Online survey

Chief Executives in all 32 local authorities were contacted to advise them of the project and they were asked to identify an officer with responsibility for consultation. Lead officers, predominately at senior management level, were then asked to complete an online survey on behalf of their local authority, to gather additional background information on consultation. The survey response rate was 96%. No submission was received from Comhairle nan Eilean Siar.

The survey consisted of 63 questions covering three sections:

a) Councils and consultation: Local authorities were asked a range of questions around corporate consultation practices, including strategic planning, the coordination of consultation and the tools and mechanisms used to monitor and assess consultation practices.

b) Methods of consultation: This included a variety of questions around
methodologies used to undertake consultation and mechanisms for feeding back findings.

c) **CPPs:** This section asked local authorities, who have a statutory responsibility to initiate, facilitate and maintain Community Planning, a number of questions on the extent to which the CPP undertakes consultation and whether Community Planning partners jointly plan and resource consultation.

d) **Evaluation and feedback:** Consultation is often let down by poor feedback to consultees and a lack of analysis and evaluation following a consultation process. Local authorities were asked a range of questions about their evaluation process and feedback procedures.

### 2.4 Follow-up interviews

Analysis of the survey findings indicated that a series of face-to-face interviews with key officers, in a variety of local authorities, would be beneficial to explore further a range of themes and issues emerging from the survey. Interviewees were asked to discuss core themes identified from their local authority’s response to the online survey. It should also be noted that the purpose of the interviews was to provide us with more detailed insight into the operational practice of consultation within local authorities.

Information gathered during these discussions also informed the selection of good practice case studies contained within sections 4 to 8 of this report.

Interviews took place in the following local authorities:

- Aberdeenshire
- Aberdeen City
- Angus
- Dundee City
- East Lothian
- Edinburgh
- Falkirk
- Fife
- Glasgow
- Moray
- West Dunbartonshire
3. Councils and Consultation

Consultation is essential to the work of all local authorities. In its most basic form, consultation is a mechanism for creating dialogue with a range of stakeholders including customers and citizens and allows councils to engage people in decision making and the democratic process in a constructive manner. Consultation also creates a basis on which public authorities can look to establish trust, build relationships and develop more deliberative and interactive forms of engagement. It is therefore important to reflect that consultation is not just about public bodies fulfilling their statutory duties, but covers a wider spectrum of engagement - at one end the need to inform the public, at the opposite end consultation can be complicated and is often focused on issues which are regarded as highly sensitive to the public. For example, a consultation on rationalising secondary schools or the closure of local libraries can be highly contentious. It is therefore important to understand what mechanism local authorities have in place to manage a consultation process and ensure a high standard of practice across staff and services.

The survey asked local authorities questions on their internal procedure around four main themes:

- Corporate Consultation Strategies: Does the local authority have a strategy and is it effective?
- Supporting Consultation: Who undertakes consultation within the local authority?
- Training and Capacity Building: How does the local authority train staff and ensure that there is a detailed understanding of consultation across all services?
- Effective Communication: How does the local authority engage with staff and communities and encourage them to participate in consultations?

3.1 Corporate strategies

This section will focus on the effectiveness of local authorities’ consultation strategies and the need for them to continue to develop mechanisms which ensure consultation is carried out as efficiently and effectively as possible.

Consultation and public engagement is essential to the development and delivery of services and achieving improved outcomes. By consulting with citizens, customers, communities, employees and stakeholders, local authorities can use the information received to ensure that policies, strategic planning and service design reflect the priorities and needs of service users and the wider public.

Understandably, consultation can therefore be challenging and highly complex and employees carrying out a consultation have to consider a wide range of factors including timing, who to consult with, what questions to ask, what methods of engagement to use and what the resource implications are and to plan accordingly.

A Consultation/Community Engagement Strategy is designed to promote greater clarity and standardisation across the entire local authority in the process of consultation, which is essential for the following reasons:
• It demonstrates a clear commitment by local authorities to consult and engage with citizens, customers and communities.
• It promotes greater consistency in consultation by providing clarity to staff on the appropriate procedures and process to follow when conducting a consultation.
• It raises awareness of the importance of consultation in planning, designing and improving the delivery of services.

Figure 1: The percentage of local authorities who have developed a corporate policy/guidelines on consultation

![Pie chart showing 19% No and 81% Yes]

Source: IS Survey April 2013

Figure 1 shows that 25 local authorities currently have corporate guidelines or policies in place to support consultation. Local authorities who do not currently have a strategy in place should consider reviewing their current practices and developing a strategy to ensure that their practices are consistent and that consultation is properly resourced and supported across the organisation.

From our review of consultation and community engagement strategies we would recommend that the following key points be incorporated into a corporate consultation/engagement strategy:

• An understanding of the importance of consultation and how it affects the delivery of key services and supports the local authority in meeting its aims and aspirations as outlined in its strategic plan and the SOA.
• Recognition of the importance of consultation within the wider Community Planning framework and the importance of developing an approach to involving citizens, customers and communities in decision making.
• A clear understanding of the different kinds of stakeholders and communities who need to be consulted with, including compliance with equalities legislation.
• A focus on continuously developing consultation methods which target a wide range of stakeholders including older people and ‘hard to reach’ individuals/communities.
• Clear guidelines on publishing and promoting consultations to ensure employees
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across services understand who is consulting and when. This avoids services duplicating questions and reduces the burden on communities to provide the same information on multiple occasions.

- A definition of the role and responsibilities of elected members within the consultation process.

It should also be stressed that a Consultation/Engagement Strategy alone does not ensure a local authority is carrying out consultation to a consistently high standard. Strategies need to be widely promoted and embedded into the work practices and culture of the organisation.

3.2 Approaches to supporting consultation

One indication of the variation which exists in supporting consultation is the split between local authorities who support consultation corporately with a dedicated consultation officer and those who devolve consultations entirely to officers in service departments.

Supporting consultation with key corporate officers allows local authorities to effectively co-ordinate activity across the entire local authority, managing the timings and number of consultations and creating a more complete picture of the work being carried out in services. There is also potential for greater consistency in the quality and format of consultation being undertaken because the officers have the skills and responsibility to monitor and support services and departments carrying out consultations.

However, 16 local authorities indicated that only one officer has responsibility for supporting consultation across the local authority and often this is only part of their job. As such, officers report that there is insufficient capacity corporately to support all consultations and they can only act in an advisory capacity, relying heavily on services to take the lead in the delivery of consultation relating to their service.

The level of support provided by consultation officers is often determined by the strength of relationship between the officer and the service carrying out the consultation. Currently no local authorities enforce a consultation process whereby services are required to sign off a consultation with a consultation officer or team.

One potential solution is for local authorities to develop a clearing house mechanism, whereby all consultations must be signed off by either an officer with appropriate skills and training to verify that a proposed consultation is of a satisfactory standard, or by a senior manager. This proposal also has the potential to be embedded within a CPP and thus support a more co-ordinated consultation process and strategy.

The department in which the consultation team/officer sits also varies across local authorities, however Figure 2 shows that in the majority of Local Authorities the officer works either in the Chief Executive’s Department or Corporate Services. In two local authorities, consultation activity is co-ordinated by the CPP officer and three local authorities devolve responsibility for consultation entirely to services and six local authorities currently have no co-ordination in place.

Consultation officers stressed in interviews that in order for them to be effective there
needs to be buy-in from all services within the local authority to co-operate in and support consultation work. Services also need to be aware of the support available to assist them in undertaking consultation.

All local authorities carrying out consultation require services to play some role in running consultations. Even within local authorities with a dedicated Corporate Consultation officer, there is not sufficient capacity for that officer to carry out all the work of organising and running every consultation in the council. However, devolving responsibility for consultation entirely to services, without any central support is an entirely different approach to consultation.

Local authorities who have adopted an entirely service led approach advocate this approach as it allows employees within service areas to develop an expert knowledge of the requirements of the people and communities they wish to consult, for example, Education Services consulting with young people. This devolved approach ensures that the methods of engagement used are appropriate for the target audience. A more general benefit is that this approach makes consultation and public engagement a fundamental part of the work of a large number of employees, thereby embedding consultation into the work culture of services across the local authority. One of the challenges for local authorities who devolve consultation to services is that it is difficult to get an overview of what consultation work is being undertaken across the organisation. This approach requires good communication between services, in order to prevent consultations being duplicated across services and policy areas.

This report therefore concludes that Local Authorities who provide staff with a central support service for consultation are better placed to ensure consistency in the standard
CASE STUDY: A corporate culture of consultation (Aberdeenshire)

Aberdeenshire Council has a fairly unique approach to consultation and engagement. Like many local authorities, it has a Consultation and Engagement Officer who is responsible for supporting consultation across the local authority. Unusually however, the officer sits within the Corporate Communications Team and is responsible for monitoring all consultation activities and ensuring they meet the required standard outlined in the authority’s Consultation Code of Practice. The code places explicit responsibility for driving forward the principles of good consultation and engagement on the Chief Executive and Directors, thus ensuring that consultation is carried out to a high standard at every level of the local authority.

Aberdeenshire Council’s commitment to consulting and engaging with communities across the local authority area is further demonstrated by its annual series of community engagement evenings. The Council Leader, Chief Executive, Directors and local councillors attend a question and answer session in a range of locations throughout the year. Local residents from across Aberdeenshire can put forward points and ask questions of councillors and senior officials. Directors are given personal responsibility for following up on questions and adapting services to satisfy communities as and when appropriate.

of consultation and are able to take an overview of consultation activity across services. Local Authorities who do not currently have corporate support structure for consultation are encouraged to consider investing in more centralised support.

3.3 Training and capacity building

The successful implementation of any consultation strategy relies on employees possessing the necessary skills and knowledge base and all good consultation strategies should include a commitment to provide staff undertaking consultations with relevant training and professional development opportunities.

Figure 3: Percentage of local authorities who provide training on consultation and engagement to employees

Source: IS Survey April 2013
Figure 3 shows that more than half of all local authorities already train employees across a range of services to deliver effective consultations. Understanding how to engage with communities and stakeholders requires a range of skills which may be new or challenging for employees to adopt. Indeed, some of these skills such as writing questionnaires, analysing results and data and providing feedback may require specialist training.

**Figure 4: Providers of consultation training**

![Figure 4](source: IS Survey April 2013)

Figure 4 shows a clear preference for training to be delivered internally by local authority employees. However, currently eight local authorities employ external specialists from organisations like The Consultation Institute to support the development of key skills in consultation.

**Figure 5: Number of local authorities providing training on different aspects of consultation**

![Figure 5](source: IS Survey April 2013)
Figure 5 indicates that training is fairly comprehensive with a significant number of local authorities providing training on:

- Designing consultations
- Identifying the right questions
- Methods of engagement
- Analysing results
- Preparing a findings report
- Providing consultees with feedback

Training on analysing results and providing feedback proved least popular with local authorities. During interviews, officers highlighted that this was because feedback on consultations is not always provided and analysis of results is carried out by external contractors or by specialist employees (see section 7 for more information).

Currently, only Midlothian Council coordinates its training on consultation and engagement through its CPP. Training is organised through the CPP Liaison Group and offered to a range of employees from across individual Community Planning partners. In the City of Edinburgh Council, training is co-ordinated by the local authority but offered to employees in all Community Planning partners.

**CASE STUDY: Employee training on consultation practices (City of Edinburgh Council)**

The City of Edinburgh Council delivers much of its community engagement work through 12 neighbourhood partnerships (NPs) across the city. NPs work with other local organisations to develop priorities and improve the quality of life in their local areas. Each partnership is made up of a variety of people - representatives from the local community (usually from Community Councils), the City of Edinburgh Council (local Councillors), Police Scotland, the NHS and the voluntary sector.

In order to do this effectively, the authority recognised that it was important for employees in all services and in Community Planning Partners to receive training in consultation and community engagement. The Consultation Institute was approached in 2011 to deliver a range of courses on all aspects of consultation, upon completion of which employees would receive a Certificate of Professional Development.

To date, more than 150 employees have completed the training and the Council is currently working to establish a Centre for Consultation Excellence. The Centre will help support the continuing development of employees and will help facilitate and support consultations being carried out across the authority. Employees who have already completed their training in consultation practices can also be called upon to provide advice and support to other employees carrying out consultation across the council and its Community Planning Partners.

### 3.4 Effective communication

Effective lines of communication between services and employees are vital to the
success of any consultation strategy. All local authorities who responded to the survey stated that they currently have a mechanism in place for communicating information both internally and externally about consultations they are undertaking. They also stated that their website was the primary source of information on consultation for the general public and for employees, with information available on live or planned consultations.

It is now common practice for local authority websites to contain information on consultations and they all have an engagement or “Have your say” section which links users to all live consultations. These pages are displayed prominently on the home page and on some websites, new consultations are displayed across the news feed at the top of the screen.

Local authorities have spent considerable time and money developing or procuring consultation modules or units which are embedded within their websites. Modules are designed to make uploading, updating and editing information as efficient and easy as possible.

How frequently these modules are used and the quality of the content varies considerably across authorities, and indeed internally at service level. From our desk based review of local authority websites it is clear that local authorities with an identified officer who is responsible for uploading information to the website tend to provide more up-to-date and relevant information.

The case study below is an example of a local authority making good use of a consultation module.

**CASE STUDY: Consultation and Engagement Hub (East Lothian Council)**

A key commitment of the East Lothian Consultation and Engagement Strategy (2012-2015) was for the council to develop an online Consultation Hub. The aim was to create a facility to enable people to respond online and to access information on closed consultations and engagement exercises.

Procurement highlighted that buying an existing system from a software provider was more cost effective than developing the software internally (Annual costs including personalisation of the software for the council and maintenance is around £7k.)

The Hub was launched in November 2012 and the catalogue of previous consultations was back dated to January 2012 to archive information on previous consultations for future reference.

All consultations, engagement exercises and customer satisfaction surveys are input onto the system.

The site is well used by all services in the council and a number of services who engage the public regularly such as Education, Children’s Services and Planning all have staff trained to upload information directly onto the site. Services that use the system less frequently rely on the Council’s Consultation Officer to upload the relevant information.

Currently the hub includes 51 archived consultations and includes a link to what happened after the consultation closed. The site does not display individual submissions to ensure data protection.
In North Ayrshire and North Lanarkshire Councils, information on consultation being undertaken is communicated to staff through CPP corporate working group meetings and to the wider public through the CPP website. Shetland Islands and Midlothian Councils have taken this approach even further and co-ordinate all their activity, including responsibility for ensuring good consultation practices are adhered too, through the CPP and its support officers. However this practice is not widespread and should be encouraged as it helps to embed consultation and public engagement firmly within the work of the CPP.

**Figure 6: Information captured by local authorities for inclusion in their consultation calendars/databases**

Good practice suggests that all local authorities maintain a database or consultation calendar which outlines all the consultations being undertaken by the local authority. Figure 6 indicates that the majority of local authorities have a calendar/database of current activity and activity which is planned. Slightly fewer of the local authorities’ consultation calendars/databases contain historical information on consultations which have been completed and only half of all local authorities in Scotland include information on the results and findings of a consultation.

Officers managing consultation calendars or databases highlight that it is important to include as much information as possible, such as:

- Consultations planned.
- Consultations in progress.
- Completed consultations.
- The results - what happened after the consultation and where were the findings discussed? Did the findings influence decision making? This section may include links to relevant papers, for example, committee or Council meeting reports and minutes.
• The name of the lead officer for the consultation and how to contact them.
• Background information to the consultation and links to further evidence and supporting documents such as committee reports and external analysis.

Figure 7: Service and/or officer responsible for maintaining the local authority’s consultation calendar/ database

Figure 7 shows that the majority of consultation calendars or databases are maintained by an officer working within a Corporate Policy team. Four local authorities use Covalent (Covalent is a performance management tool which allows individual services to upload information relating to consultation, such as surveys, contact details, details on future consultations).

Whichever method is used, it is essential that all local authorities ensure that information is up-to-date. Interviews with officers highlighted that consultation calendars/ databases are only effective if employees across services update them on a regular basis, or in the case of Local Authorities with a corporate consultation officer, services make the officer aware of all consultations they are undertaking and provide them with the necessary information. This small challenge re-enforces the need for a robust consultation strategy which clearly states the process employees need to follow when carrying out a consultation.

From the evidence available, some local authorities need to do more to ensure that consultation calendars/ databases and information held within them is current and includes information from across all services. Better engagement and dialogue with communities can only be established when local authorities provide the public with all of the necessary information and methods of participation.
4. Consulting as Community Planning Partnerships

CPPs are playing an increasingly important role in supporting individuals and communities to achieve better outcomes and reforming services to ensure they better meet the needs of local people.

As part of this research local authorities were asked a range of questions on consultation undertaken by their CPPs, covering issues such as collaboration between partners, resource sharing and general availability of information to the public.

Figure 8: Response to statements regarding working practices between local authorities and CPPs

Figure 8 clearly demonstrates that the majority of CPPs do not have an overall strategy for consultation. These findings are also consistent with the results that only 10% of CPPs maintain a central database or register of consultation undertaken by individual Community Planning Partners. The databases/registers in these CPPs include information on consultations in progress, consultations which have been completed, contact details for the lead officer leading the consultation and information on groups and key stakeholders who were consulted.

In discussion with officers there was broad consensus that CPPs have not sufficiently developed working models for widespread collaboration across partnerships. Consultation strategies across CPPs would help to establish clearer guidance on sharing information about consultations across agencies.

Consulting as a collective CPP has the following advantages:

- Demonstrates that the partnership takes its duty to consult and engage, as outlined...
in the guidance for SOAs, seriously and is developing a sustainable approach to developing stronger links with communities.

• Reduces the chances of work being duplicated across the partnership.
• Resources such as employee expertise and funding can be provided from a range of partners.
• The number of consultations conducted by individual partners is potentially reduced.
• The burden on the public to respond to consultations is reduced.

Another solution for local authorities and CPPs trying to maximise the effectiveness and value of their consultation work is to promote and develop a strong working relationship with local community groups and voluntary organisations across the partnership.

Currently there are a number of different kinds of well-established community based groups including:

• Community Councils
• Local Development Trusts
• Residents and Tenants Associations
• Parish Forums
• School Boards
• Business Associations

Furthermore, some voluntary organisations such as Community Councils (CCs), established by the Local Government (Scotland) Act 1973, were enacted to ascertain, co-ordinate and express the views of their communities and take expedient and practicable action (Scottish Government, 2005). CCs also have a statutory right to be consulted on applications for planning by the Local Government etc. (Scotland) Act 1994 (Scottish Government, 2011a).

However CCs are not compulsory and as of 2011, of the 1514 possible CCs across Scotland, only 1215 were active. Furthermore from that total number, less than 10% of CC seats were contested. This raises serious concerns about the representativeness of such organisations to represent the views of communities.

The now-defunct Association of Scottish Community Councils (ASCC) suggested that the lack of interest in standing for such elections, and hence presumed lack of interest in CCs, prevalent across Scotland was a direct result of CCs lacking teeth and purpose. Or as a report by the Jimmy Reid Foundation entitled ‘The Silent Crisis: Failure and revival in local democracy in Scotland’ (2012) states, the average CC annual budget is £400 “matching [CCs’] near zero powers and near zero number of contested elections”.

Currently the Scottish Government is considering the role of CCs within the Community Empowerment Bill and exploring a range of recommendations to develop and strengthen CCs to improve their purpose and legitimacy within communities.
This targeted approach of consulting communities through established community bodies is most prevalent and successful in rural local authorities including Aberdeenshire, Moray and Shetland.

**CASE STUDY: Targeted engagement (Moray Council)**

The Moray Council needs to cut £30 million (11%) from its budget over the next four years. To do this the council will have to reduce spending significantly, which will impact on many of the services it provides. To identify the services and facilities that are most important to residents, the council held a variety of road-shows and community workshops across Moray to ascertain the views of those living in Moray as to what services they would prioritise in view of the proposed £30 million reduction over the next four years in local authority funding.

Given the scale of the reduction and the long term nature of the financial difficulties of the council, the administration elected members and Corporate Management Team were supportive of a priority led planning process based on robust engagement with the community. It was recognised that investing in community engagement at this early stage would be crucial to ensure that long term financial planning was well informed, well planned and therefore ensure transparency and validity.

The development and use of community focus groups, which included representatives made up of older people, young people, business community and community based representatives e.g. community Councils / village halls / area forums, throughout the process was crucial in that they put forward suggestions on how best to ensure the engagement was successful i.e. providing transport for the elderly to attend road-shows and evening workshops.

Moray Council has learned a number of lessons from this exercise which highlight that it is important to:

- Begin planning early and get the right level of members on the planning group i.e. those who can take decisions and direct others’ work
- Implement a communications strategy from the outset
- Involve equalities staff from the outset in preparation of any future need to undertake Equality Impact Assessment.
- Harness local knowledge to improve the format and methods of consultation.
5. Methods of Consultation

Councils and CPPs use a wide range of methods and techniques to consult with communities and key stakeholders, as can be seen in Figure 9. However, the methods we use to communicate and engage within society are changing as new technology becomes increasingly available to everyone in society.

Figure 9 shows that local authorities remain reliant on traditional methods of engagement, such as public meetings, questions issued on flyers/letters or postcards, focus groups, postal surveys and face-to-face surveys. These methods are resource intensive to operate, organise and administer. Officers report that response rates and turnout at meetings is often extremely low, especially in urban communities, and therefore the small amount of information gathered limits the scope and use of the consultation to the council.

There is therefore a need for local authorities and CPPs to think about how to engage people in more creative and cost-effective ways.

Figure 9: Methods of consultation reported as being used by local authorities

Questionnaires and surveys remain the most commonly used method of engagement by local authorities. They are easy to analyse and there is a range of free or low cost software available to support the analysis and breakdown of results by numerous characteristics, such as age, gender, postcode and employability. Officers indicate that surveys and questionnaires are increasingly issued online. This is far more cost effective...
than a paper survey by reducing printing and postage costs. However, online surveys should be complemented by other methods to ensure that people without internet provision are not excluded.

The digital age continues to change the way we consult. Social media such as Twitter and Facebook are evolving the way in which society interacts. Whist these changes offer great possibilities to engage more people across communities, challenges remain around ensuring employees and the wider public have the skills and, where necessary, access to training to make effective use of the technology.

The survey found that just over half of local authorities use social media as a means to promote consultation, however there are currently no examples of social media being used by local authorities as a formal consultation tool in its own right. Certainly Twitter and Facebook offer new and exciting ways to engage with members of the public who may not previously have engaged well with the local authority. Officers suggested that the general reluctance of colleagues to embrace social media is partly due to a lack of training and restrictions on accessing social media sites from local authority PCs and smartphones. Local authorities who are using social media praise it for encouraging much wider participation. Local authorities who do not currently engage with the public through social media should actively consider doing so, as it is an increasingly valuable communication tool for spreading information about a consultation.

All of the results of a consultation using any of the methods above, from a simple electronic survey to a public meeting require analysis to be carried out. It is essential that local authorities understand the information they have collected and are sufficiently equipped to use the information in service planning and to inform decision making and promote the delivery of better services for local people.

Providing good analysis for policy makers is a skilled and specialist task and it is helpful for officers to have access to the local authority's corporate research team.

The case study below from Glasgow City Council demonstrates the merits of using key specialists internally to improve the quality of the analysis of a consultation process.

**CASE STUDY: Corporate Research Team (Glasgow City Council)**

Glasgow City Council has a corporate research team based within the Chief Executive’s Department which is part of Corporate Services. The team is comprised of 8 analysts and researchers who are responsible for carrying out consultation on issues of strategic importance for the entire council or where an issue is deemed politically sensitive or affects a wide range of stakeholders, such as the recent consultation on the redevelopment of George Square. The team also supports services carrying out consultation by maintaining a central database of all consultation being carried out across the council, compiling checklists and good practice guidelines for staff. The team also assists in the analysis of consultation results and are responsible for ensuring consultation results are fed back to senior managers and used to inform service planning and performance improvements.
Two methods of engagement used widely across Scotland by local authorities and CPPs for consulting with communities are Citizens’ Panels and Residents’ Surveys. Both these tools can be highly useful and provide local authorities with a wide range of information and data ranging from feedback on budget priorities to satisfaction with service delivery. However both methods are resource intensive and require on-going financial and employee support to function.

5.1 Citizens’ Panels

Citizens’ Panels are used extensively across Scotland. As of April 2013, 24 local authorities had an active Citizens’ Panel. Broadly speaking Citizens’ Panels serve several functions:

- To consult the public on service changes.
- To gather customer satisfaction data for performance management.
- To gather citizen’s views on the local area so that outcomes can be delivered which match these needs.

In discussions with officers, who are responsible for the delivery of the panel, many believe that their panels offer an excellent opportunity to gather evidence and gauge public opinion on service performance and potential changes to policy and service design. However, they stress that ensuring the panel reflects the demographics of the local authority area can be particularly challenging and requires regular refreshing of the membership.

Currently there is huge variation in the methods authorities use to question panels, the frequency with which panels are consulted, the representativeness of the panel and how the membership is recruited.

5.1.1 Method of survey

Panel questionnaires are generally distributed in paper form via post or distributed electronically, via email. Currently no Citizens’ Panels run by local authorities in Scotland are delivered over the phone or face-to-face. Understandably, there are pros and cons to both electronic and postal based surveys. Interviews with officers highlighted the perception that younger people are more likely to be receptive to an electronic survey, whilst the majority of older panel members prefer a postal survey. The significant advantages of electronic surveys are reduced distribution costs and a reduction in the time need to analyse the results as the information is electronically organised.

Currently, the majority of local authorities offer panellists the option to complete the survey on paper or electronically. Response rates in panels where the questionnaire is available in an electronic format, either via a web link or email, are consistently higher than those in local authorities where the questionnaire is only mailed out. Local authorities should consider offering the Panel in multiple formats to encourage as high a participation level as possible. The table below shows the split in the way panels are delivered.
5.1.2 Frequency of surveys

Variation also exists in the frequency with which panels are surveyed. Figure 11 shows the frequency with which surveys are carried out by Citizens’ Panels. 75% of panels are surveyed quarterly or every six months. Only two local authorities use the panel on an annual basis. Panels which survey less frequently than this are unlikely to be in active use. Some local authorities also indicated in interviews that they can supplement surveys of the whole panel with smaller sample surveys.

5.1.3: Membership size and response rate

Membership size ranges from panel to panel between 600-1500 members. However, Figure 12 demonstrates that response rates for panels vary considerably across local
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authorities from a high of 82% to as low as 28%. This has a far greater impact on the validity of results than the total size of the membership. Citizens’ Panel Officers suggest that an average response rate of over 70% is required to make a panel effective. Panels which achieve an average response rate of below 50% are not statistically robust enough to provide meaningful information for authorities to use.

Figure 12: Average response rate (%) of Citizens’ Panels

![Average response rate (%) of Citizens’ Panels](image)

Source: IS Survey April 2013

5.1.4 Recruitment

Panels are comprised of local residents who are selected at random, either from volunteers responding to recruitment drives such as flyers to households, adverts in newspapers and on the local authority’s website or they are selected from the electoral register either by local authority employees or external consultants. Figure 13 shows a clear preference for targeting panel membership through the electoral register. This helps to ensure that the panel’s membership broadly matches the demographics of the local authority area. However, significant challenges exist in retaining panel members and ensuring that the membership remains representative of the population. Panel memberships need to be frequently refreshed to ensure the membership remains consistently high, however this process is time consuming and expensive if external consultants are required to facilitate the membership refresh.

Figure 13: Methods used to recruit panel members

![Methods used to recruit panel members](image)

Source: IS Survey April 2013
5.1.5 Representation

Generally, panels which are recruited against the electoral register are considered to be representative of the local authority area. However, interviewees recognise that it is almost impossible for a Citizens’ Panel to be truly representative. Figure 14 shows that it is particularly difficult to recruit a panel which has a balance of men and women and which includes people from a wide range of age groups. More complex divisions in representation by geography, ethnicity, employment status and disability are generally not factored into the panel’s demographic because this overly complicates the recruitment process and requires additional resourcing.

Figure 14: Gender representation on Citizens’ Panels

Figure 15 shows that the age representation on panels varies across Local Authorities. Local authority officers report that younger people and the elderly are less willing to be involved in the panel and Figure 15 clearly indicates that younger people are particularly under represented on panels. There is little evidence to suggest why this is the case, certainly panels which are recruited against the electoral role do not include young people under the age of 18 or those who have not registered to vote. Interviewees also highlight the difficulties in persuading younger people to engage with the panel because they do not consider it worthwhile.

Ensuring proportional representation is therefore challenging for local authorities as information obtained from a respondent group with a clear age bias does not provide a particularly representative set of results. In response to this problem a number of local authorities invest considerably in promotional material and publicity campaigns to encourage younger and older residents to volunteer their time.

Some interviewees commented that they believe some panel members think that their views do not affect council policy or services, which may have a negative impact on response rates.

Interviewees also stressed that citizens are only interested in participating in panels when their views have a tangible impact on service delivery. Officers therefore have to continually demonstrate the impact that Panel members have. One of the most common, but effective forms of feedback to panel members, is a newsletter or bulletin to accompany a survey following a simple “You said, we did”. It is essential that local
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5.1.6 Costs

Costs of maintaining a Citizens’ Panel were consistently highlighted as a reason for not investing in a panel. Three local authorities noted in the survey that they previously had panels but have ceased them to meet budget reductions. Capturing an accurate picture of costs associated with operating Citizens’ Panels is particularly complex. Figure 16 shows the indicative costs of operating a Citizens’ Panel. This information was provided anecdotally during interviews with local authority employees. Creating an accurate picture of spend was beyond the scope of this work. Where information is available, costs range from £12,000-£50,000 p.a.

Variation in costs can partly be explained by the widespread use of contractors and external consultants, as indicated in figure 16. Contracts for assisting in the delivery of panels are not collectively procured by local authorities, therefore prices and the range of services provided with contracts vary across Scotland. The involvement of local authority officers in running panels is also not included in the associated costs indicated overleaf.

Figure 17 clearly indicates that external contractors are used extensively to support the delivery of Citizens’ Panels, with a majority of local authorities requiring external support to design and issue the questionnaires to panel members and to analyse the results.

Currently only Dundee City and Angus Councils jointly procure their Citizens’ Panels. Collective procurement allows local authorities to drive down the costs of consultants, by reducing the costs and time of tendering for contractors and sharing questionnaire templates and question designs.

Figure 15: Indication by officers of how well different age categories are represented on Citizens Panels

Source: IS Survey 2013
Another option currently being explored by several local authorities is to share the costs of the panel across the CPP. There are a number of benefits to this approach:

- Expenditure for local authorities is significantly reduced ensuring the long term financing of panels.
- Panel results are available to all partners, which can reduce the need for individual partners to gather information.
- Panels can be asked questions around the CPPs’ priorities and how successfully panellists believe they are performing against their stated outcomes.

The case study from West Dunbartonshire CPP is an excellent example of good practice.
5.2 Residents’ Surveys

Currently 12 local authorities in Scotland carry out Residents’/ Peoples’ Surveys. Several local authorities are reviewing their use of Citizens’ Panels and are piloting surveys in conjunction with their panels.

Whilst there is a degree of similarity in function between Citizens’ Panels and Residents’ Surveys there are a number of key differences which make Residents’ Surveys a far more statistically robust form of information collection.

Residents’ Surveys are made up of large samples of people selected at random, either through the electoral register or by knocking on doors or stopping people in the street. Residents’ surveys are always conducted face-to-face. A team of interviewers is required to continue completing questionnaires until the required number of responses
is reached. Response rate is therefore not a concern when commissioning a survey. The size of the surveys varies across local authorities from 1000 to 5000 responses.

When conducted professionally, most exercises on this scale should be considered a robust sample size and the data is less likely to contain the level of bias found within a Citizens’ Panel. Local authorities are also able to benchmark results against previous results because the sample size remains consistent. This data can then inform long term planning for local authorities and CPPs.

Figure 18 shows that Residents’ Surveys are not carried out with the same frequency as Citizens’ Panels, typically every alternate year or more.

Figure 18: Frequency with which Residents’ Surveys are issued

The infrequency of surveys is explained by the high operating costs. Specialist external contractors like Ipsos Mori are required to facilitate the process and this makes a Residents’ Survey more expensive to deliver than a Citizens’ Panel. This is due to the high degree of expertise required to create the questionnaire and manage and collate the responses before the data can even be analysed. Currently no Scottish local authorities have the expertise or capacity available to co-ordinate or manage a Residents’ Survey without external support.

Officers estimated that current contract costs for Residents’ Surveys for large local authorities are estimated to be in excess of £150,000 per annum. However it is difficult to accurately cost these contracts, as many form part of a wider contract of research and analytical support, nor do estimated costs account for internal staff time and resourcing.

It is therefore understandable that Residents’ Surveys can be cost prohibitive to smaller local authorities.

Similarly to Citizens’ Panels, in local authorities where there is an identified need for a survey, consideration should be given to resourcing and procuring this work through the CPP.
6. Evaluation and Providing Feedback

Evaluating consultation practices and providing stakeholders with good feedback is often the most challenging aspect of any consultation process, especially if the results of the consultation have already been considered by the appropriate decision makers.

Figure 19 shows that there is a wide variation in the frequency with which local authorities are undertaking an evaluation of their consultation processes. The graph indicates that the majority of local authorities evaluate consultations infrequently and only two undertook an evaluation after every consultation.

**Figure 19: Frequency with which consultations are evaluated**

[Bar chart showing the frequency of consultation evaluations]

One explanation for the lack of evaluation currently being undertaken is that thorough evaluation can be time consuming. Officers consistently highlighted that time constraints make evaluation and proper reflection almost impossible. It is vital that local authorities acknowledge that there is a need for evaluation, as this is the only way they can ensure that consultation practices and procedures are continually being refined and improved upon.

As previously discussed, consultation is about supporting local authorities and CPPs to deliver better outcomes for communities. In order to do this, local authorities must first engage with communities and establish good channels of communication. This can be challenging for local authorities as it requires communities and stakeholders to feel sufficiently empowered to make their voices heard and have sufficient trust that their opinions matter and are being listened to. Trust and confidence in the process cannot be gained if the results of a consultation are not properly communicated and if local authorities don’t clearly demonstrate how the information gathered from communities and stakeholders has influenced the development and delivery of policies and services.

An example of good practice in feedback is a simple “You said, we did” model whereby officers collate consultation responses and then demonstrate how this information has been interpreted and used to influence the decision making process, be that through...
policy change, the redesign of services or a shift in the use of resources. “You said, we did” ensures that the decision making process is clearly communicated to all involved. It is also imperative that consultees have an opportunity and a range of ways to feedback on their perceptions of the consultation process.

It is essential that public sector organisations assess, monitor and seek to improve their feedback and evaluation practices. This should also be underlined by a commitment to ensure employees have the skills and opportunity to build their knowledge of consultation as this is essential to the delivery of robust and effective consultation.

Figure 20: Methods of providing feedback on a consultation process

Feedback is provided in a variety of ways, as shown in figure 20. As stated previously, the use of emails, social media and websites to communicate consultation findings is becoming increasingly more important.

Providing timely and robust feedback to consultees is a challenge for local authorities. Currently 54% of authorities provide participants of a consultation with feedback.

In local authorities where feedback is not provided, officers indicated the following reasons for not doing so:

- Practice is inconsistent and difficult for the authority to standardise. It is therefore easier to protect our corporate reputation by not issuing feedback to the public.
- Consultation results are an amalgamation of individual views and therefore a collective reply is not appropriate.
- Providing feedback is more work for officers and puts additional pressure on their time. There are simply not the resources available to provide every consultee with feedback.

It is essential that local authorities provide employees with adequate support and resources to provide the public with feedback on consultation. Feedback ensures the authority is always accountable for its actions and demonstrates how influential consultation results can be on service design and delivery.
Further support and contacts

- Information on good practice in consultation can be found at: The Consultation Institute - [www.consultationinstitute.org](http://www.consultationinstitute.org)
- Information about consultations currently in progress at national level: The Scottish Parliament - [www.scotland.gov.uk/Consultations/Current](http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Consultations/Current)
- Information on Community Engagement: Scottish Community Development Centre (SCDC) - [www.scdc.org.uk](http://www.scdc.org.uk)

Consultation strategies

- [Aberdeenshire: Code of Practice](http://www.scdc.org.uk/co-production-scotland/)
- [Argyll & Bute: Improving community engagement in Argyll and Bute](http://www.scdc.org.uk/co-production-scotland/)
- Dumfries and Galloway: Corporate Guidance on Community Engagement
- East Lothian: Consultation and Engagement Strategy
- [Orkney: Community Consultation and Engagement Guide](http://www.scdc.org.uk/co-production-scotland/)
- Renfrewshire: Consultation Strategy
Appendix One: Who will we be engaging with in the future

What kind of participants will we be consulting and engaging with in the future? Society is changing and in years to come we will be interacting with citizens who are different from those in the past.

This overview of current trends - prepared by David Jones from The Consultation Institute and based on categories identified by Edward Andersson of Involve provides an insight into what kinds of participants we might engage with in the future:

Citizens will be:

- **More individualistic** - The number of single person households has increased and the role and influence of collective organisations has dropped in numbers. Individuals will dip in and out of participation not for altruistic motives of civic duty but because of the personal impact.

- **Less differential** - The population is less respectful towards figures of authority and more likely to complain when things go wrong with little evidence of giving decision-makers the benefit of the doubt. There is evidence of increased challenges and Judicial Reviews of consultation and issues which may have been relatively participation free will need to absorb the views of an increasingly mistrustful public.

- **More demanding** – In future, people’s experience of private sector services, especially online will raise and influence citizens’ expectations. A ‘one fits all’ approach to participation will no longer be appropriate or adequate and how we consult and engage will have to rise to these challenges.

- **More diverse** – In terms of socio-economic and cultural backgrounds, language and identity, society has become more fragmented. Appropriate and meaningful ways to consult and engage with the ‘seldom heard’ must be embedded into the culture of each organisation. Traditional notions of community, based around geography and family ties will continue to be important but may be less relevant than geographic virtual communities who will come together on issues. The advent of ‘digital natives’ (people born into the digital age) is a challenge for many public bodies.

- **Busier** – Time is now the resource that people value most in their lives and we need to adapt our processes to fit with them. With multiple options as to how people spend their time, it is wrong to assume that many will give up that precious time to participate with public bodies. This plays an increasing role in minimising time requirement but it presents challenges in terms of co-design and co-production.

- **Older** – The aging population will have an impact on participation. Currently considerable focus is placed on engaging young people and given low turnout rates there is a need to continue this. However, a sharp reduction in participation is commonly seen in the over 70s and as the population ages there is an increasing risk that a growing cohort of citizens will not be properly heard.

- **More mobile** – There is a global trend of citizens being more mobile; migration reduces people’s identification just with one area. Therefore people may want to
participate in issues which impact on aspects of their lives at a given time without a long-term commitment.

- **Less engaged** – If disengagement trends continue the management of this trend is important to prevent reaching a ‘tipping point’ where democratic legitimacy is challenged. The impact of current economic recession and the subsequent long-term changes that will require to be made to ensure sustainable public services does however present opportunities for public bodies through creative consultation and engagement to slow down the trend.

These issues give us food for thought. Public bodies will therefore need to give serious consideration to how they rise to these challenges and make provision to devise appropriate responses.