

Consultation Toolkit

Introduction



Chapter one explores the reasons for consulting—and for not doing so. It sets out some key consultation principles and explains the purpose and structure of the toolkit.



Consultation Toolkit

Chapter 1: Introduction

Why listen to London?

TfL exists to meet the transport needs of all of London's diverse communities—subject to financial, legal, safety, technical and other constraints—within the framework of the Mayor's Transport Strategy. We can only fully understand and attempt to meet those needs if we listen to the public at every stage of business planning and service delivery. But we also need to act: consultation and research must help us to deliver results.

In meeting London's transport requirements we may infringe upon the interests of local residents and traders, businesses, transport employees and users of other modes of transport. We need to understand their needs, even if we are not always able to provide them with exactly what they want.

For the first time, we have an elected Mayor of London—overseen by an elected Assembly—who the public can hold accountable for the state of public transport in the capital. Having voted for someone to sort out London's transport—someone who has repeatedly emphasised the need to listen to Londoners—the public expect the organisation he chairs to follow his lead and conduct market research, encourage complaints and suggestions, meet with stakeholder groups of all kinds and consult on proposals for change.

Do we really need to improve? ▲

At its best, TfL consults as well as anyone, as some of our good practice examples in this toolkit show. But we do not always maintain this standard.

Research for TfL's (and GLA's best value) Listening to London review, for example, identified public dissatisfaction with TfL's consultations and managers' need for detailed advice. [See 'Listening to London' research in [Appendix 6 \(full text on intranet version only\)](#)]

Repeated criticisms by Assembly members, boroughs and members of the public have increased the urgency of TfL's response.

Reaching a wider audience ▲

We have a range of statutory obligations to consult. Many of these specify particular stakeholders—such as the Boroughs or the London Transport Users Committee—or residents whose properties are directly affected by proposals. But business units generally go beyond the legal minimum and carry out research, look at complaints and suggestions, and engage the public and stakeholders in a wide range of meetings, phone calls and correspondence.

Gathering this 'intelligence' helps us to develop proposals with maximum support and public benefit. For example, managers in London Buses are finding that breaking complaints down by route is helping them to develop a more productive dialogue with operators. Likewise, early and continuing discussions with those who may be affected by a proposed change are helping to lower the temperature on potentially controversial new services.

Constraints on decision-making ▲

Public services operate within financial, legal, safety and technical constraints. Transport policy in London must fit within the framework laid down in the Mayor's Transport Strategy. Some decisions are taken jointly with partners and, as such, may require compromise to reach a workable solution. Decision-making frequently involves trading-off the interests of one part of the community against another: you cannot meet the needs of all of the people all of the time.

These distinctions and constraints do not negate the importance of listening to London. But they do have an important bearing on the best way to do so.

Reasons for not consulting ▲

Public servants can regard listening to the public as a chore. Some feel that:

- There is no time
- The public are never satisfied
- The public are apathetic and 'swamped' by repeated consultations
- They all want different things
- They do not understand how things work
- There is too little money either to listen or to act

Reasons for consulting ▲

There is enough truth in these perceptions to give them some appeal, but they are flawed because:

- lack of money, political consensus and legal powers impose more delays on projects than listening to the public
- without consistent, meaningful dialogue and explanation, unrealistic expectations—high and low—will flourish
- while stakeholder groups are understandably irritated by uncoordinated approaches from TfL, research shows that the majority of the public feel under-consulted
- without understanding the public's conflicting needs and priorities we cannot make the best decision on technical, financial, legal and democratic grounds. Equally, we cannot explain our decisions to them unless we know who to contact and what they want to know
- the public do not always understand technical and financial constraints. Sometimes they get it wrong—but then so do we. Ultimately, it is up to us to get better at explaining how things work and what is possible
- we cannot afford not to listen to the public. Money spent engaging them at the outset often saves time and money later on. If we want more of taxpayers' money we need to demonstrate that we are spending it wisely
- market research indicates that the best way for public services to improve overall public satisfaction is to get better at listening (source: annual residents' surveys carried out for the Association of London Government by Taylor Nelson)

Even where public servants' negative perceptions are justified, the conclusion should not be to consult for the sake of it, but to do so in a targeted fashion that will meet defined objectives.

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What is this toolkit for?

In auditing TfL's best value performance plan, financial consultants KPMG recommended that a consultation strategy should be developed. In response, TfL identified the need for a corporate consultation policy and toolkit [[See the Consultation policy](#)].

Making informed decisions

The primary audiences for this toolkit are project managers, consultation managers, customer service managers and specialist support staff (such as market research experts and press officers). It is designed to help managers and their staff to identify the needs and experiences of the travelling public and engage them in decision-making. The toolkit offers guidance on how to put the consultation policy into practice. Its aims are:

- *To ensure value for money*— Helping managers to target their consultations more effectively saves staff, printing and distribution costs and obtains a higher percentage of responses
- *To speed up planning and approval processes for major schemes*—By advising on techniques that can minimise objections, claims for financial compensation and long drawn-out public inquiries
- *To save resources*— The toolkit will put a stop to consultations that serve no useful purpose
- *To help the businesses to discharge the Mayor's Transport Strategy and business plan commitments*— Setting out a consultation framework allows for maximum flexibility for different kinds of consultation
- *To maximise understanding and support for TfL's plans*—Public and political criticism of TfL's consultations will be minimised by consistently high professional standards for consultation and feedback
- *To advise on effective ways of engaging traditionally excluded groups*—Knowing the opinions of everyone affected will lead to more effective and satisfactory decision-making
- *To avoid wasteful duplication of effort*—Stakeholder and consultation databases will be centrally developed and maintained. They will be directly linked to the toolkit and to the businesses

Large and small projects ▲

TfL provides transport facilities and services. Some policy decisions—the progressive introduction of low-floor buses, for example—may have major costs and benefits affecting the whole of London. The decision to alter a pedestrian crossing or move a bus stop, on the other hand, may be more limited in its impact.

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Rules of thumb

The following is a series of practical approaches that are worth bearing in mind whenever you are contemplating consultation.

Know what you are trying to achieve

In this toolkit, you are invited to set objectives for each consultation effort you undertake. Setting your own objectives not only provides you with a frame of reference for everything that you plan and execute, but it also helps you to communicate to other parties what you are doing [[See 'Setting Consultation Objectives' in Chapter 2](#)].

Objectives are only so much use; attitude matters a lot too. Ask yourself: Do Londoners deserve a say in what happens to their transport system? You don't need to read the consultation policy to know the answer.

The quiz at the beginning of the next section is light-hearted but its message is serious. Bad consultation experiences often have a lot to do with a flawed approach or a negative attitude on the part of those doing the consultation. Certainly, you may often feel as if you can't win – everyone has their opinion and you can't please them all – but you can achieve a surprising amount if you take a positive approach. And the occasional letter of congratulation on the quality of your materials or the range of methods used can go a long way to compensate for the tough public meetings.

Consult as early as possible ▲

The sooner you bring your audience into the planning process, the better. If people feel that they've been denied an opportunity to consider all the options or to contribute to your thinking on long-term objectives, this will have a negative impact. But, if you involve them early on and keep them informed about progress, you will soon find that you are working in partnership with them. As you each develop a shared view of what the problems are, your consultees will begin to sympathise with the constraints of any proposal that aims to meet a diversity of needs. They will then start to understand the effects those constraints have on the options available to you. Remember, however, that the decision about precisely when to consult is a matter of fine judgement and needs careful consideration. [[See 'Early consultation' in Chapter 2](#)]

Put energy into developing key relationships ▲

All the consultation in the world will not help you if you have poor relationships with the most important stakeholders.

Be honest ▲

This is important. If you aren't going to be able to change what's proposed, don't say that you are. If what you're giving them is an information leaflet, don't call it a consultation leaflet and don't ask for comments [[See 'Do I need to consult' in Chapter 2](#)].

Speak the audience's language and understand their perspective ▲

A lot of emphasis is placed in this toolkit on analysing your audience. This is crucial to successful consultation. As well as taking account of what they already know or think, you should appreciate their position. How well are they likely to understand bus operations? How much time can they give to filling in your questionnaire if they have a full-time job and a family to look after? What if their English isn't good? Remember—even the word 'consultation' can be a turn-off [[See 'How to put it across' in Appendix 2.1](#)].

Use a range of methods ▲

Accessibility is a watchword for your consultation, but unless your consultation objectives are very limited, no single approach is likely to reach all of your target audience. Offer every reasonable way for people to contribute and try to make it as easy as possible [[See 'Techniques' in Chapter 3](#)].

Communication is a two-way street ▲

The best consultation is actually a dialogue; it is up to you to keep your audience informed. At the simplest level, this means acknowledging contributions and offering feedback. But consultation is part of the overall business of planning and delivering transport. If they are kept aware of what's going on, the people and groups that contribute to your consultation exercise this year could be more active participants next year.

True communication involves being willing to change position. Your audience will be watching to see whether your consultation is lip service: will the proposition change at all as a result of the two thousand completed questionnaires? Work out in advance how much room there is for manoeuvre to ensure that your approach is appropriate. By demonstrating to your audience that you've revised your plans in light of what you've learnt, you build their trust in you for the future [[See 'Feedback' in Chapter 4](#)].

[Next theme >> How the toolkit is organised](#)

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How the Toolkit is organised

Chapter 2 explains:

- when to consult
- the possible alternatives to consultation
- how to set detailed objectives

Chapter 3 helps you to think about how to get people's views. You will learn how to:

- identify your target audience in detail
- manage key stakeholder relationships throughout the process
- choose an appropriate combination of consultation techniques
- handle enquiries and responses during the consultation period

It provides links to databases of stakeholder groups, and helpful tips and short cuts. There are also links to useful contacts in TfL: tap into your own specialists to advise on design; exhibitions; advertising; using the media and web pages; legal obligations; equality and inclusion.

Chapter 4 covers what to do when the consultation period has finished. It looks at:

Analysing responses

- making a decision, including what weight to give to responses
- feedback
- making responses available
- monitoring implementation

Chapter 5 shows you how to learn from your experience. It covers:

Ways of reviewing the effectiveness of your consultation:

- Corporate evaluation framework for consultations
- Sharing what you have learned

Finally, **Chapter 6** helps you to bring your plans together in a consultation strategy and to put together an action plan to deliver that strategy.

Next theme >> Learning lessons



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Learning lessons

This toolkit is not a manual. While there are certain policy commitments and legal obligations you must fulfil, much of the toolkit leaves it to you to apply principles to your unique situation. In part, this reflects the subjective element of consultation: you will work out for yourself the right way to do things. Consultation is an evolving field; all sorts of agencies have carried it out over the years, but a good deal of what has been produced has been unimaginative and defensive.

Good consultation is still being defined. New methods are developing and this toolkit reflects that. Try to make time to think about the experience. Pick out the lessons, and share these lessons widely.

We will continually update the toolkit and amend it in the light of your comments, so please let us know how we can improve it.

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Next chapter >> CHAPTER 2: Consulting with a clear purpose