



& LARIA

Using surveys for consultation
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About this guide

This guide is intended as a source of advice for local authority staff intending to use survey techniques to seek the views of the public on an issue of local concern, such as the provision of new services or amenities, or a planning proposal.

It is not a definitive guide; it simply highlights the key issues to consider, and provides information on how and where to go for professional help. Conducting survey research is a specialist skill; a poorly designed and conducted survey may give unreliable or misleading results; it may breach the rights of individuals and the credibility of the consultation exercise may be compromised.

The Market Research Society (MRS)

MRS is the world's largest international membership organisation for professional researchers and others concerned with marketing, social and opinion research. It has over 8,000 members who are individual researchers within agencies, independent consultancies, client-side organisations and the academic community. All MRS members agree to comply with the MRS Code of Conduct, which is supported by a Codeline advisory service and a series of best practice guidelines. For more information see www.mrs.org.uk.

The Local Authorities Research and Intelligence Association (LARIA)

LARIA was established in 1974 to promote the role and practice of research within the field of local government and provide a supportive network for those conducting or commissioning research. LARIA has a total membership of about 1,000. For more information see www.laria.gov.uk.

Background

Surveys can be a useful means of consulting the public on proposed local developments or other planning issues. Local issues often have a political dimension and feelings often run high, so it is important that any consultation is seen to be fair, rigorous and unbiased.

Before you start

- Be clear what the objectives of the exercise are; this will help you to focus the research and concentrate on the questions you really need to answer.
- Consider data analysis before you start thinking about data collection. If you design questions in the wrong way, they will be difficult or impossible to analyse. There are a number of survey and analysis packages but, unless you are familiar with them, the best advice is to seek expert help (see section *Sources of Advice*).
- Consider how to make the questions meaningful to your potential respondents. If the questions seem irrelevant, confusing, or misleading then you will get a lower response rate and poorer quality data. If the topic is a technical one and explanation will be needed, consider carefully whether a questionnaire method is appropriate.
- Check that you are not asking questions that could be answered from existing sources.

Below are a few simple guidelines:

*The question examples given are not intended as models but are simply to illustrate the point; they do **not** attempt to deal with whether questions are 'open' (respondents are free to give any response) or 'closed' (respondents select from options provided).*

Independence

You need to be sure that a survey is seen as **independent**; it must be clearly neutral in the questions it asks:

- Questions should be phrased in a neutral way and must not steer the respondent to a particular answer.

Example:

*Ask 'What are your views on the proposed shopping precinct?' **NOT** 'Do you agree that Anytown needs a new shopping precinct?'*

- The sequencing of questions is important too, as you may unwittingly steer the respondent towards a particular answer.

Example:

If you ask:

Q1: *'Do you support the Council's efforts to encourage new employment opportunities in the Anytown area?'*

Q2: *'Do you think building a power station in the Anytown area would reduce local unemployment?'*

Q3: *'Do you support the siting of a nuclear power station in the Anytown area?'*...

you lead the respondent to link the siting of the power station with employment opportunities; put Q3 before Q1 and you might get a different answer.

- If you need to provide information to inform people's responses, this should be separate from the questionnaire. Also be clear whether it's fact or opinion. If it is opinion, say whose. Don't include 'persuasive facts' in the questionnaire.

Example:

***Don't** say 'Nuclear power is far safer than it was 30 years ago. What are your views on siting a nuclear power plant on the outskirts of Anytown?'*

- If you are including a developer's prospectus (or similar) with the questionnaire you must be clear that it presents the developer's rather than the authority's proposals. Provide a covering letter from the authority to make this clear.

Example:

*'Enclosed with this letter is a questionnaire seeking your views; to help you understand what is proposed, we also enclose some promotional material from the developer. The authority wants to know what **you** think, whether or not you agree, and will make a decision based on this consultation'.*

- Using a reputable independent survey organisation will help to ensure your survey is seen as unbiased.

Clarity

Questionnaires should express questions in a clear and simple way:

- Layout and design of your questionnaire is important, especially for self-completion questionnaires; a confusing layout may result in respondents missing questions or unintentionally ticking the wrong answer. An attractive and clearly laid out questionnaire, which is easy to follow, is much more likely to be completed correctly.
- For those whose first language is not English, you will need to provide a translated version of the questionnaire (self-completion) or interviewers who are fluent in respondents' first language.

- Don't ask more than one thing in the same question; respondents may agree with one part and not the other and you will not know which part they are responding to.
- Don't include complicated qualifications – these will just confuse people and may not allow them to say what they want to.

Example:

*Say 'Do you agree or disagree with the proposal to build a new shopping precinct?' then separately 'Are current bus services adequate to service the proposed precinct'? **NOT** 'If the council puts on more buses, do you think the shopping precinct would be a good idea?'*

- Avoid using too much jargon in a question. Explain any technical terms in layman's language.

Example:

When talking about a road, do not use the number, like A4103, use instead "the road from Hereford to Worcester".

- Testing or 'piloting' your questionnaire before starting the main survey fieldwork is good practice and will help iron out problems with the questionnaire.

Fairness

You must make sure that respondents have time to give a fair and considered response, to avoid biasing your results.

- If the affected population is large, you may need to use a sample. You will need to be sure that the sample accurately reflects the total population. There are special techniques for selecting a reliable sample and certain information you need to collect from respondents to check you achieve it. Seek advice; an unrepresentative sample will make your results invalid by distorting the views of the population as whole.
- If you are using a self-completion questionnaire, you need to be especially careful to ensure you get a comprehensive and balanced response. **Don't** include surveys in magazines, unless you are sure that the readership (rather than recipients) clearly reflects the population you are interested in.
- Leaving piles of questionnaires in civic centres, libraries etc is most unlikely to give you a balanced view of opinion – it will simply reflect the views of those who visit that place and notice the pile and bother to pick one up and complete it.

- If you are sending a postal questionnaire, they should all be sent out at roughly the same time and allow at least four clear weeks to respond (remember, some people may be away for a few weeks).
- In order to get an acceptable response rate, you may have to send a reminder letter; if so, you will need to allow extra time for this.
- Always enclose a reply paid envelope for returning the questionnaire or give a freepost address.
- If it is a face to face interview, make sure that the time and place is as convenient as possible for the respondent (you won't get a reasoned answer if they are worrying about their parking ticket expiring).
- Make sure you include all those who will be affected by the decision in your sample (some groups e.g. disabled or elderly people, or children might need to be approached in different ways or in different places).
- Always provide respondents with a contact point, in case they have any queries or concerns about the survey.
- You need to ensure that everyone only has their say once. This should not be a problem with postal questionnaires but is a risk, for example, with anonymous phone-ins. Your survey will be discredited if it is open to abuse. There are special techniques for ensuring that people only express their views once – seek the advice of an expert.

Respondent's Rights

You need to be sure that you respect the rights of those involved in the survey and that you are not placing an unnecessary burden on them.

- You should explain what the purpose of the survey is and how the information will be used. You must **not** use information for any other purpose.
- Consider carefully what information you need to collect to avoid overburdening respondents. The shorter and clearer the questionnaire, the more likely that respondents will answer all the questions.
- Questions which require respondents to select from a number of predetermined answers are less demanding and much easier to analyse. Keep 'open questions' to a minimum.
- Check what information is available from other sources, before deciding on questions; this will save you wasting respondents' time and minimise necessary analysis.

- Participation in surveys of this kind should be clearly voluntary; nobody should be pressurised into taking part or to answer particular questions.
- Information collected in surveys must be treated as anonymous and confidential; this means you must not present research results in such a way that individuals could be identified. Respondent quotes, if used, must also preserve individual confidentiality. This might especially be an issue in small communities or in localised consultations.
- There are special rules for interviewing children or people who are vulnerable because of ill health, disability, age or some other social reasons. You may cause unnecessary distress, annoyance or confusion if you don't follow these rules. Seek advice.

Presenting the results

If you conduct a survey, it is good practice to make clear that you will publish the results; you must do this in a way that presents the facts honestly and fairly. If you use a professional researcher, they will normally write the report for you, but you should check press notices etc with them too.

- You need to say how many people you consulted and how, and how many replied.

Example:

'The survey was sent to all council tax payers in the borough and 50% of them responded'.

- You need to present responses in a neutral way and stick to what the survey found.

Example:

*'90% of respondents said they were not in favour of siting a nuclear waste plant in Anytown' **NOT** '90% of Anytown's residents were outraged at the proposal to site a nuclear waste plant in their town'.*

- Quoting findings out of context can be misleading.
- Anonymised quotes can be a powerful means of illustrating a point but they must be used with great care to avoid giving a distorted view of what the research found.
- Politicians may want to comment on the findings, but keep political views clearly separate from survey findings.

Sources of Advice

Your best option is to engage the services of a research expert. There may be researchers working in your authority who can advise. They are most likely to be located in the Chief Executive's Department (in a research or communications team) or in the Planning/Environment Department. Buying the services of an accredited market or social researcher will also help to ensure your survey is conducted properly. Most reputable survey organisations have members in The Market Research Society (MRS). The MRS sets high standards for its members and investigates any complaints. You can also look at the MRS website www.mrs.org.uk for copies of the MRS Code of Conduct and associated guidelines. If you have a specific query, you can contact MRS Codeline on 020 7490 0608 or email codeline@mrs.org.uk. LARIA (in conjunction with the LGMB) has produced 'Guidelines for Commissioning Research'; see the LARIA website www.laria.gov.uk. For further advice on consultation see 'Viewfinder' on www.policyhub.gov.uk

Finding a suitable Research Contractor

You will obviously need to adhere to procurement rules for your organisation. As is usually the case, you are likely to obtain best value for money by inviting more than one bid; beware of inviting large numbers; this is labour intensive and may deter good contractors from putting in a bid. You need to ensure you hire a competent contractor, who is equipped and experienced in the kind of research you are planning. 'The Research Buyer's Guide UK and Ireland'; see www.rbg.org.uk which provides full details of research organisations with MRS members, and the services they offer.