

# **EFFECTIVE STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT**

**Good Practice Guidelines 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition**

**Policy Champions Network**

# Foreword



The Northern Ireland Civil Service faces a new challenge over the next few years. The delivery of an outcomes-focused Programme for Government depends on the development and implementation of sound, effective and innovative policies.

The Executive's decision to move to a shorter formal consultation period of 8 weeks, as outlined at clause 65 of 'A Fresh Start' agreement, has brought renewed focus to stakeholder engagement. More than ever it is now vital, as part of a wider engagement and consultation process, that policy officials build robust and sustainable relationships with stakeholders.

Proper engagement is a demanding job. It requires skills in how we explain and set out our issues, it means we need to use our evidence in a way that others can understand. It needs good planning and time management and perhaps most importantly, it requires us to ensure that those we engage with are listened to and are given timely feedback throughout the policy-making process.

Engaging people and communities is certainly a major part of our work and one in which we have lots of experience. Done well, it can be an extremely valuable tool for both policy-makers and stakeholders alike, leading to better decision making processes and often better outcomes.

As Head of Policy Profession, I would encourage you to look afresh at your engagement practices. As we begin to work within an outcomes-focused environment, it is important that we continue to use our experience and successes to further develop our engagement practice as an integral part of the policy development process.

**Peter May**  
**Head of Policy Profession**

## **Introduction**

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## INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 This revised good practice guidance provides a comprehensive overview of stakeholder engagement and formal consultation in policy-making.
- 1.2 There is now widespread acceptance that early engagement with stakeholders as a precursor to formal consultation is crucial for good policy development. It is most effective when conducted in the context of a continuing dialogue with relevant stakeholders, when it can help secure early buy-in to emerging proposals for change, especially where there is a genuine attempt to develop these in partnership. Early engagement can also identify issues and problems within the policy area which policy developers may not have been aware of and therefore better inform their own approach to developing the policy.
- 1.3 There is now a new approach in which there will be slightly less time given to periods of formal consultation, with much greater weight being placed on developing effective long-term relationships with stakeholders, sustained by ongoing and regular dialogue. Early and continuous engagement is therefore the new starting position for policy development – not something that is done instead of consultation or as an afterthought.

### *Relationship with Local Government and Community Partners*

- 1.4 Community planning fits within this new approach. It will bring decision making closer to communities and citizens, creating a stronger and more effective democracy. It will improve service delivery by influencing place shaping<sup>1</sup>, facilitating greater integration and more effective relationships, and use our collective skills and resources to provide better services. Community planning secures a commitment from all community partners to partnership working to deliver better outcomes for citizens.
- 1.5 Community planning is a new power for local authorities brought about as a result of local government reform. Public services will work together with communities to deliver real improvements for local people. Councils will lead the community planning process and work with a wide range of community partners, including representatives from the statutory, business, higher education, community and voluntary sectors, to develop a long-term plan to improve the social, economic and environmental wellbeing of their areas.

### *Outcome-focused Programme for Government*

- 1.6 The move to an outcomes-focused Programme for Government will also be important in terms of enhanced engagement and partnership working. Outcomes-focused working is a disciplined way of thinking and taking action that communities can use to improve the lives

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.futurecommunities.net/why/place-shaping-0>

of children, young people, families, adults and the community as a whole. It uses a data-driven, decision-making process to help communities and organisations get beyond talking about problems to taking action to solve problems. It is a simple, common sense framework that everyone can understand. Outcomes-focused working starts with identifying the desired ends we wish to achieve and works backward, towards looking at what we need to do to achieve those ends (the means). It recognises that it takes a partnership of government departments, community and voluntary groups and citizens themselves to bring about positive results. More information on outcomes-focused working can be accessed here: <http://resultsaccountability.com/about/what-is-results-based-accountability/>

## ***Conclusion***

- 1.7 These guidelines therefore explore the underlying principles and benefits of effective stakeholder engagement. Case studies are also used to illustrate good practice methods drawn from across the NICS which will encourage policy-makers to engage with stakeholders in a way that engenders confidence and trust, embracing the trend towards more open and shared decision-making.

# Towards a broader concept of stakeholder engagement

## *Who are stakeholders?*

- 2.1 Stakeholders are any person or entity that can influence, or be affected by, an organisation's actions. They include individuals, charities, interest groups, businesses, wider public sector organisations, and voluntary and community groups.

## *Why do we engage with them?*

- 2.2 Engagement is a crucial part of the policy design, development, delivery, and evaluation process. Almost everything government does affects some or all stakeholders. There is a growing acceptance, and indeed an expectation, that establishing long-term sustainable relationships with stakeholders is essential to ensure robust design, delivery and evaluation of policy responses to the issues facing society.



## *How should we engage with stakeholders?*

- 2.3 There is no right or wrong approach in respect of how to engage with our stakeholders. What works for one individual or group may not work as effectively with another individual or group.
- 2.4 There are different ways to engage and there will be times where more engagement will be required than others. There will also be different types of engagement where those you engage with broadly fall into four classifications of influence and interest:
- High influence – High interest
  - High influence – Low interest
  - Low influence – High interest
  - Low influence – Low interest

How you engage with each of these four classifications of stakeholders will differ. In the case of the first two, you are likely to want to seek partnership and collaboration, perhaps through a co-design process i.e. an intense engagement. With the final two, more general

engagement is likely. Information sessions, surveys and opinion gathering may be sufficient. This conceptual way of thinking is further explained here:

[http://changingminds.org/disciplines/change\\_management/stakeholder\\_change/interest\\_influence.htm](http://changingminds.org/disciplines/change_management/stakeholder_change/interest_influence.htm)

## **Co-design/co-production**

- 2.6 Policy is not developed in isolation. The outcomes-focused approach places emphasis on partnership working. Partnerships should be established and maintained, policies should be developed in partnership with stakeholders, with voluntary and community groups, charities etc; as well as the people who are most likely to be impacted or otherwise affected by the implementation. In this way there is real buy-in, through a two way process, to the policy intervention being proposed, through a genuine co-design or co-production process.
- 2.7 People will have a sense of understanding of what is planned, why it is being done in a certain way, and what the proposed/expected outcomes will be. In this way there is a shared sense of ownership in the policy. People and organisations are invested in it, and will be more likely to make it a success.
- 2.8 In each policy, the method, level and intensity of engagement will differ. What won't change is the need to engage properly. By establishing robust relationships with your stakeholders, meeting and communicating regularly, the process of more structured engagement will be easier to initiate and sustain.

## ***How does engagement differ from consultation?***

- 2.9 We will come on to talk about consultation in the next chapter, but as a general guide consultation is a time bound (8 week maximum) process through which we seek views on our formal policy proposals, usually through published consultation documents, and with supporting events if required. If we have done our early engagement well and established solid relationships and good communication, then the consultation itself should not throw up any surprises for the stakeholders and ideally they should be able to see the influence which they may have had in shaping the proposals!
- 2.10 Accordingly, the focus of these guidelines is on the broader concept of stakeholder engagement, which is an ongoing process beyond consultation, through implementation and quality review.

## ***Additional sources of information***

- 2.11 Much work has already been done to outline the formalities of the consultation and engagement process, which these guidelines are not intended to replicate. Rather, the move to an outcomes-focused Programme for Government and the shortening of the formal consultation period to a maximum of 8 weeks has provided a timely opportunity for the Policy Champions Network to draw together the different sources of information available and to promote and encourage a refreshed engagement culture and practice.
- 2.12 Policy-makers are encouraged to locate other NICS guidelines and in particular, The Executive Office's *A Practical Guide to Policy-making in Northern Ireland*. ([http://online.nigov.net/final\\_pdf\\_version\\_policy-making-guide-2016-november\\_2016.pdf](http://online.nigov.net/final_pdf_version_policy-making-guide-2016-november_2016.pdf))
- 2.13 The Centre for Applied Learning (CAL) also offers a one day course on Public Consultation and Engagement and a one day Equality Impact Assessment Workshop as well as An Introduction to Section 75 e-learning package. Furthermore, policy-makers should refer to the Equality Commission's website which provides a range of advice, in particular, [Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act, A Guide for Public Authorities, 2010](#) and [Let's talk, Let's Listen, Guidance for Public Authorities on Consulting and Involving Children and Young People, 2008](#). In addition, the website for the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY) has some further material which sets out the impact of direct participation with children and young people in the development of departmental policies and strategies – [Walking or Talking Participation](#).





## What are the benefits of stakeholder engagement?

- 3.1 Stakeholder engagement can be an extremely valuable tool. Used properly, it creates a platform for the sharing of valuable knowledge and insights at an early stage in the policy development process, allowing both policy-makers and stakeholders to contribute to the development of more effective, responsive and relevant policies and improved public services. This 'no surprises' approach not only empowers stakeholders by giving them the opportunity to frame questions for the policy makers and participate in subsequent discussions about proposed policies, but allows policy-makers to quality assure their work for relevance and practicality at an early stage against the experience and insights of the stakeholders. In effect, the publication of a consultation document becomes the culmination of the development process rather than the starting point, resulting in more efficient and sustainable policy-making.
- 3.2 Effective stakeholder engagement can therefore be mutually beneficial for both policy-makers and stakeholders and the earlier we engage, the more likely it is that these benefits will be realised.

### Digital engagement

- 3.3 Traditional methods of engagement are now not always the most effective, so consideration should be given to using digital technologies, tools and platforms to reach and engage with your audience. Support for this approach can be sought from departmental marketing /communications colleagues and NIDirect. We need to consider developing our own digital engagement capacity and it is imperative that we as Policy Experts understand how Digital Engagement can fit as an important part of our overall Policy Toolkit.
- 3.4 Any successful engagement will be informed by detailed stakeholder analysis and research. Who your stakeholders are will determine whether they can be engaged directly or through representative organisations and how. For instance, sharing your consultation information with the Ulster Farmers Union on its Twitter or Facebook profiles (it has both) asking it to share with its members is a very quick, resource efficient, powerful and open way of engaging with a group that may otherwise be more difficult (and costly) to engage with using offline channels.
- 3.5 OFCOM research shows that NI has the highest uptake of smart phones in the UK, indeed 50% of online shopping is now done on a mobile device. A first step to engage digitally with citizens would allow them to access and respond to consultations online on all digital devices and use digital engagement to help them find our consultation and understand the reasons to participate. Experience globally, but also closer to home, England and Scotland

has shown this approach to be very successful, so much so they can now tailor more effective digital communications in direct response to initial engagement in real-time, whilst a consultation is still live, to help ensure the best quality responses.

*For departments, potential benefits include:*

<b>Enhanced reputation:</b>	Being proactive and genuinely listening to stakeholders builds trust and increases public confidence.
<b>More sustainable decision-making:</b>	Collaborative problem-solving allows for the pooling of knowledge and diverse perspectives to achieve mutual goals and sustainable and innovative solutions to complex policy issues which are more customer-focused. Early engagement also provides an opportunity to engage with Section 75 groups and individuals and to gather qualitative and quantitative data and information on the equality implications of the policy in question to inform screening exercises and equality impact assessments.
<b>Better policy-making:</b>	Having the opportunity to 'road test' and refine policy proposals through engagement with stakeholders before implementation enables the policy to be shaped by external experts, practitioners and service users. This leads to better planned and more informed policies that have broader acceptance; as well as leading to better outcomes for citizens.
<b>Strengthened skills and competencies:</b>	Delivering effective stakeholder engagement provides policy-makers with opportunities to develop a range of transferable communication skills and helps them build their confidence.
<b>Improved risk management and managing stakeholder expectations:</b>	Controversial issues can be anticipated and managed earlier in the policy development process thereby reducing the likelihood of a negative impact of the policy emerging at a later stage (e.g. during a statutory consultation period) which can slow down the overall policy-making process.

*For stakeholders, potential benefits include:*

<b>Empowerment and motivation:</b>	Stakeholders feel respected and valued having the opportunity to directly influence policies that affect their lives and those whom they represent.
<b>A sense of ownership and inclusion:</b>	Stakeholders feel a greater sense of responsibility for decisions, thus improving their acceptance.
<b>Capacity-building:</b>	Stakeholders gain a better understanding of the policy, political and decision-making processes and how they can influence these processes effectively with realistic expectations.
<b>Increasing the accountability of government:</b>	Through more open and transparent communication.

# PRINCIPLES OF STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT

- 4.1 Achieving the benefits of stakeholder engagement requires a commitment to the following guiding principles as set out in the Fresh Start Agreement at Annex F6<sup>2</sup>:

## DRAFT GUIDELINES ON GOOD PRACTICE IN PUBLIC CONSULTATION AND ENGAGEMENT

1. The objective of public consultation and/or stakeholder engagement in the development of policy proposals is threefold:

- (i) to enhance decision-making by ensuring all voices are heard and all relevant data is considered;
- (ii) to improve the acceptability of decisions reached by showing how opinions received have shaped the outcome and demonstrating inputs were taken seriously even in cases where they were not incorporated in the final policy outcome;
- (iii) to build capacity both internally in terms of relationships with interested parties and externally in enabling stakeholders to understand how best to influence policy, political and decision-making processes.

2. The following section sets out 8 key steps in ensuring an effective consultation process regardless of the duration of the formal consultation period. While the statutory and basic requirements of consultation should continue to be met, there remains significant concern about how government engages, with complaints about 'consultation fatigue' as a result of many documents with set times for response. It is important to recognise that stakeholder engagement is much wider than public consultation:

*Public consultation is the formal stage of seeking views on proposed policies. Whereas stakeholder engagement includes the latter, but also encompasses the longer-term continuous process of engagement, whereby stakeholders feel involved in the development process; and relationships are built and maintained through to implementation, evaluation and beyond.*

3. The steps outlined in the following section should enable the Executive to meet its twin objectives of the faster implementation of policy and a better quality of engagement to shape outcomes through meaningful dialogue with all interests.

<sup>2</sup> [https://www.northernireland.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/nigov/a-fresh-start-stormont-agreement\\_0.pdf](https://www.northernireland.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/nigov/a-fresh-start-stormont-agreement_0.pdf)

## **EIGHT STEPS TO GOOD PRACTICE IN PUBLIC CONSULTATION - ENGAGEMENT**

### **1. Preparation: early and continuous engagement - pre consultation**

Early consideration of the issues through a dialogue with stakeholders prior to policy decisions being more formally considered. Ask yourself:

- What are the issues and how is Northern Ireland impacted? Do you know who your stakeholders are?
- Who is interested / affected in the very widest sense?
- How will you reach them all? Consider community outreach, media partners and social media;
- Be innovative. Use local knowledge / amenities – schools, youth clubs, community hubs as well as business sector groups;
- How can government be as open and accessible as possible?; and
- How can government ensure that all stakeholders input in a meaningful way to the policy development process from an early stage?

### **2. Consider the timing, duration & cost**

This is about ensuring that engagement and consultation is meaningful, both to policymakers and consultees:

- Provide advance notice, through targeted advertising, digital communications etc. which provides opportunity for stakeholders to consider the issue in advance of engagement, potentially reducing the time needed for formal consultation;
- Avoid holiday periods where possible;
- Remember any statutory requirements (S75 & Sch 9 of the N.I. Act 1998);
- What constitutes best value for money in reaching your audience? and
- The same approach to engagement will not be appropriate for all issues.

### **3. Be clear on the scope and impact**

- Think about how you can motivate people to engage;
- Manage stakeholders' expectations – they often want to engage, but need to be assured that they can be heard. Need to be clear about what is and what is not within the scope of considerations, what consultees can and cannot influence; and
- Demonstrate the impact of inputs received as the policy develops.

### **4. Consider methods of engagement / consultation**

Consultation doesn't always have to be a written process – the target audience must be taken into account; as must the policy under consideration. Public and specific interest group meetings, smaller face to face interviews, questionnaires, teleconferences, digital media events are all useful methods.

Ask yourself:

- Who are you seeking to engage / consult with?
- What do you-they hope or expect to get out of such consultation?
- What is the most appropriate method of engagement?
- Would an independent facilitator help with the engagement process? and
- Which channels will reach your target audience e.g. social media for young people?

### **5. Be conscious of the burden on stakeholders**

- Many statutory consultees may be small organisations, often inundated with multiple consultations at once;
- Plan to mitigate that potential burden well in advance;
- Provide your consultees / stakeholders with sufficient notice of your intended consultation.
- If your continuous engagement processes are working, they should already be well aware; and
- Recognise there may be occasions where consultees want confidentiality.

### **6. Feedback-Feed-forward**

- Government must be seen to give due weight to consultation responses;
- Keep your stakeholders informed throughout the process. Nothing should be a surprise or present an opportunity for legal challenge;
- Analysis must take place and be published giving reasons and justification for the final policy decision; and
- The dialogue needs to be two-way. Decision-makers must have the information required to allow them to develop informed policy responses.

### **7. Share best practice**

- Evaluate your consultation / engagement process.
- What worked? What did not work? How can it be improved?

### **8. Implementation**

- Have you implemented your policy successfully?
- Is it understood and supported by your stakeholders?
- Is there an ongoing engagement with all, including those less supportive?

4.2 In putting these principles into practice, it is important to recognise that there is no 'one size fits all' approach when it comes to stakeholder engagement. There is a wide range of engagement methods and tools available and selecting those that are most appropriate will depend on a variety of factors such as the scale and scope of your project, the resources available and the needs of stakeholders.

# Consultation

- 5.1 Consultation is a time-bound process, through which departments ask stakeholders for their views on proposed policies contained in published consultation documents. Consultations give citizens a chance to contribute to the work of government. It is an important part of the policy-making process.

## *Benefit of consultations*

- 5.2 Although it is important, running a consultation is not simply about making government more transparent. It is about making policies more effective by listening and taking onboard the views of the public and interested groups.
- 5.3 Formally consulting with the public has a number of specific benefits including:
- it allows government to tap into the widest source of information possible which improves the quality of the decision reached;
  - it alerts policy-makers to any concerns and issues not picked up through prior engagement, existing evidence or research; and
  - it helps to monitor existing policy and decide if changes are needed.
- 5.4 In preparing for the change in formal consultation as outlined at Clause 65 of the 'Fresh Start' Agreement, we have held information sessions for key internal and external stakeholders. As part of this process one of the important issues for external groups and individuals is the need for advance notice of formal consultations. While attempts are made at present by departments to give advance notice of when they intend to launch policy consultations, this can be patchy. Our conversation with interest groups, particularly given the move to consult for a maximum of eight weeks, has demonstrated that we need to do this better. We intend to examine how we can do this better, and will continue conversations with external stakeholders and interest groups to ensure our proposals fulfil the identified need.
- 5.5 A further issue is the need to consult differently with children and young people, or groups with particular access issues. While all consultations will be carried out within the maximum eight week period, we will ensure that the engagement that has taken place in advance has taken into account and addressed the nature of the consultation and the particular organisations that need to be properly involved.
- 5.6 We will continue to listen and engage with stakeholders across sectors to ensure that the process of engagement leading to consultation is working and is inclusive.

## *Consultation guidelines*

- 5.7 Consultation documents follow guidelines<sup>3</sup> to ensure a common standard exists across government for consulting the public. When government consults it must:

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/public-consultations#toc-2>



- build a realistic timeframe for the consultation to a maximum of 8 weeks, allowing plenty of time for each stage of the process;
- be clear as to who is being consulted, about what and for what specific purpose;
- make sure the document is as simple and concise as possible - it should include a summary and clearly set out the questions it wishes to address;
- always distribute documents as widely as possible, using electronic means (but not to the exclusion of others); and
- make sure all responses are carefully and open-mindedly analysed and the results made widely available, with an account of the views expressed and the reasons for decisions finally taken.

## Statutory duties

5.8 The diversity of policies and services provided across NI government departments means that we interact with an extensive range of stakeholders. However, policy-makers are reminded by the Equality Commission in its Guide to Public Authorities<sup>1</sup> that *“although the legislation (Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 (see para 2.13)) requires a list of persons to be consulted, the Commission recommends that to ensure the most effective use of a public authority’s and the community/voluntary sector’s resources, a targeted approach to consultation is taken.”*

5.9 The Equality Commission recommends that *“all consultees are notified by email or by post of the policy being consulted on. Public authorities may then consider which consultees have a particular interest in the policy being consulted on and adopt a more targeted approach to consultation with them. In addition, particular policies may be more relevant than others to specific consultees, and we (the Commission) recommend public authorities take this into consideration when consulting to ensure that they consult directly with the most appropriate affected individuals or representative groups.”* Indeed establishing good networks between stakeholders and departments/policy teams is recommended as the best way forward.

## Section 75

5.10 Consultation is of course a necessary part of the policy development process. Policy-makers are encouraged to refer to their Departmental Section 75 Equality Schemes and are reminded that under **Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998** (see para 2.13), they must have due regard to the need to promote equality of opportunity and to have regard to the desirability of promoting good relations across a range of various groups. Schedule 9 to this Act requires departments to engage in consultation about the likely impact on the S75 groups of existing and proposed policies, and in making decisions about such policies, to take the consultation into account.

5.11 The Equality Commission’s Guide for Public Authorities further clarifies that *“Section 75 is underpinned by the building of relationships between those who make and deliver public*

*policy and those affected by such policy*". Building and sustaining these relationships relies on effective stakeholder engagement and while it does not in any way replace the duties under S75, it is increasingly becoming an essential tool to support the delivery of meaningful consultation.

### ***Rural Needs Act (Northern Ireland) 2016***

- 5.12 Section 1 of the Rural Needs Act (Northern Ireland) places a duty on government departments, along with other public authorities, to have due regard to rural needs when developing, adopting, implementing or revising policies, strategies and plans and when designing and delivering public services.
- 5.13 Whilst there is no specific statutory requirement within the Rural Needs Act (Northern Ireland) 2016 in relation to consultation, it can be a helpful mechanism to ensure that rural needs are appropriately taken into account and that any direct or indirect impacts of the policy have been identified, assessed and, if appropriate, mitigations put in place.

## Behaviours and skills

- 6.1 Following these good practice principles will provide a starting point towards meaningful stakeholder engagement but, for the process to be truly credible, it demands wider behavioural change. Indeed, it is important that departments meet their Equality Scheme training and awareness commitments so that policy-makers can build upon and deploy the right behaviours, skills and knowledge to support meaningful engagement, such as:

**Leadership:** setting aspirations and motivating others to encourage a responsive culture of participation and collaboration with stakeholders.

**Project management skills** to drive engagement strategies forward in a timely manner and within budget.

**Thinking strategically** and planning ahead to anticipate problems, issues and potential solutions.

**A strong analytical mind-set** to interpret evidence in a way that balances competing interests and captures the key messages and insights and equality considerations; and to feed that analysis back into the final policy.

For analytical skills to be effective, they must be complemented by developing other **interpersonal skills** needed to build trust among stakeholders such as the ability to demonstrate patience and empathy whilst remaining impartial.

**Communication** is a core competency for stakeholder engagement which draws on crucial skills of active listening and rapport building and requires continual development.

**Adaptability:** being flexible and comfortable with change and uncertainty.

**Facilitation skills** to manage group dynamics, including the ability to break down issues into manageable components and the ability to resolve conflict.

**Building capacity of consultees** through meetings and forums etc. to ensure meaningful consultation and engagement and, in particular, **encouraging participation** of people with disabilities in public life, in line with duties under [Section 49A of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995](#).

- 6.2 Engagement is a crucial part of the policy design, development, delivery, and evaluation process. Almost everything government does affects some or all stakeholders. There is a growing acceptance, and indeed an expectation, that establishing long-term sustainable relationships with stakeholders is essential to ensure robust design, delivery and evaluation of policy responses to the issues facing society.
- 6.3 Strengthening these skills and abilities, coupled with leadership support, is critical to improving engagement capacities across the NICS. Though generic to many lines of work, the ability to communicate, not just presenting and persuading but listening and empathising, will enhance our understanding of best practice in engagement and ensure that our relationships with stakeholders and ultimately our engagement methods are meaningful.



## Putting principles into practice

7.1 These guidelines highlight 3 good practice examples to demonstrate what is involved in putting the principles of engagement into practice:

- The Higher Education Big Conversation;
- Tenant Participation; and
- United Youth.

## Example 1



### Stakeholder Engagement Case Study – The Big Conversation

#### Overview

Following a period of challenging financial circumstances in higher education in Northern Ireland, the financial sustainability of the higher education sector reached a tipping point in 2015, leading to significant losses in university places alongside a growing requirement for higher level skills in the Northern Ireland economy. In September 2015, in an attempt to raise awareness of, and seek solutions to, these issues, the Minister for Employment and Learning, Dr Stephen Farry, launched a public engagement exercise called the [Big Conversation](#). This innovative process of public engagement was designed to help catalyse the debate on higher education funding, and put the issue firmly on the agenda for a new Executive after the May 2016 elections.

#### Approach

The engagement process was designed to be iterative. A first stage, called 'Did You Know?', was aimed at raising awareness about the purpose and importance of higher education in Northern Ireland. The second stage was then aimed at addressing the key financial challenges facing the sector, through consultation. In order to engage as many people as possible, both formally and informally through a range of media, the engagement process was conceived as a 'wider conversation' rather than as a traditional consultation process, and key stakeholders – including local universities, colleges, student bodies, the business sector, etc – were all invited to join the debate and contribute in their own way.

Launched on 15 September 2015, the whole process was planned to last just six weeks, concluding on 23 October, in order to provide time for its findings to inform the budget preparation process for 2016-17. Though the timescales were ambitious, the extent of engagement, and the breadth of techniques used, ensured very high response rates and a thoroughly successful consultation period.

#### Promoting the Process

The Department promoted the process through a range of channels. Short, succinct and intelligible key fact sheets and posters about the higher education system and its impact were disseminated widely and with a distinctive Big Conversation brand identity, which helped to unify the overall messages and instil familiarity with the process. Local press were approached early to promote the process through news editorials and platform pieces when possible, and the Minister was active in seeking promotional opportunities on local radio and television. Other non-traditional media,

especially social media platforms, were also used frequently to put the key messages out, including through daily tweets, each promoting key facts about higher education aligned with the theme of the week. During the process, the Department issued 44 tweets to 25,300 followers and LinkedIn was also used, with posts achieving 7,163 'impressions' on members.

But the most effective means of promotion was through working collaboratively with stakeholders. After securing buy-in early on in the process, a range of key stakeholders – including local universities, colleges, student bodies and business organisations – promoted the process widely through their own media channels, including press activity, email distributions, and direct engagement with their students, staff and membership.

### **Physical Engagement**

Throughout the process, the Department hosted various meetings, workshops and focus groups with stakeholders. Departmental officials toured Northern Ireland's universities and colleges to deliver presentations on the process and seek feedback, and the Minister delivered similar presentations to various groups such as the Northern Ireland Chamber of Commerce and the Royal Irish Academy.

Some assistance was also sought from external organisations, to broaden the reach of engagement. For example, Parenting NI was contracted to engage with parents through focus groups held in various regions, in addition to promoting the process via its Parenting Forum, social media sites and website. In total, Parenting NI conducted 6 focus groups across Derry, Omagh and Belfast with a total of 34 participants.

Physical engagement was also taken beyond Northern Ireland itself. Study and engagement visits were carried out in Scotland and the Republic of Ireland to investigate their unique models of higher education funding, and to gain expert advice on the issues facing Northern Ireland. Looking even further afield, in the final week of the process the Department hosted a panel discussion to examine international models of higher education funding and delivery. The panel included a number of experts in the field of higher education policy and funding from different parts of the world, such as Professor Sir Ian Diamond, Vice-Chancellor of Aberdeen University, and Nick Hillman, Director of the Higher Education Policy Institute, and was very well attended and received by nearly 100 key stakeholders.

### **Use of technology – *Citizen Space***

While all traditional channels of contact were open to respondents, the primary platform for formal engagement with the consultation during both stages of the process was a new digital consultation tool called Citizen Space, which the Department piloted on behalf of NI Direct and the Northern Ireland Civil Service.

Citizen Space provided a much more intuitive and user-friendly platform for respondents to participate in the consultation through well-designed digital surveys. The Citizen Space web page acted as a 'one-stop-shop' where respondents could not only respond to the consultation, but also read it, access all other promotional material and find out about all related events through a calendar tool. The software also generated a Big Conversation email distribution list, to which all respondents to the stage one surveys were automatically added, and this allowed for easier promotion of the second stage.

Citizen Space was not only more manageable for respondents, but also for the Department. Offering 16 different question types, optional 'fact bank' functions, rich media embeds, various structural options for the consultation (linear and chaptered), and intelligent skip logic<sup>4</sup> options, the Department was able to construct the surveys and consultation in innovative new ways to improve the experience for users. Using the media embed functions, the Minister filmed a short video for the Big Conversation home page, which offered a more compelling introduction to the process for users. The software's inbuilt consultation analysis tools also proved invaluable in turning around response summaries promptly following the conclusion of the process, allowing its findings to properly inform decisions during the budget 2016-17 preparation process regardless of the tight timescales involved.

Social media was also extensively used, not only to promote the process, but to engage with people on a more informal basis. On 16 October 2015, in order to engage with a broader audience, the Minister hosted an hour long Twitter Q&A session on the NI Executive Twitter feed in which he answered 32 questions relating to the Higher Education Big Conversation.

## **Outcomes**

Although the process was short (6 weeks), it yielded a much higher than normal response rate for the Department. Through the Citizen Space platform, some 120 people participated in the stage one surveys, and another 90 responded to the stage two consultation. In addition, over 500 people put their views across more informally through emails and social media platforms. On the back of the Big Conversation, the Department was able to bid for, and secure, significant additional finance (£25 million) for the new Department for the Economy in 2016-17 to support higher education, and the Executive Budget document for that year firmly recognised the importance of securing a long-term sustainable solution in the 2016-21 Assembly term. Since then, the Department has published an [Options Paper](#) on higher education funding, intended for the consideration of a new Executive after the May 2016 Assembly elections.

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<sup>4</sup> <http://support2.constantcontact.com/articles/FAQ/2138>



## Example 2

### TENANT PARTICIPATION STRATEGY

Over a number of years a series of reviews had looked at the way in which social housing was delivered and managed in Northern Ireland. In January 2013 the Executive agreed to the exploration of options and the Social Housing Reform Programme was established.

One of the elements of the programme was the Tenant Participation Strategy - for tenants underpinning all the previous reports, are the principles of fairness and equality in the provision of housing services.

We, as a team, needed to understand what the people we were developing this strategy for actually thought about current provision and how things could be improved. We felt that rather than bring something pre-prepared it would be better to have a process of development which involved tenant's representatives from the start.

One of our very first meetings on this subject was with the Central Housing Network facilitated by Supporting Communities Northern Ireland (SCNI). As part of the opening of that meeting we explained that the tenant participation strategy was one of the issues we wanted to talk to them about and the then chief officer of SCNI asked to see a copy, only to be met with the reply that we were there to get him and the group to help us write it – we came with a blank piece of paper.

That blank piece of paper can present issues – we did not want this to become an unachievable wish list and as policy-makers, our remit must include all the stakeholders and part of the skill involves a balancing act so that everyone's views are represented. If you like there is a continuum of outcomes for stakeholders and those outcomes are not consistent across the stakeholder group. The Department has to find a way that ensures the final policy lands on that point on the continuum which, while not giving everyone everything they want, has the potential to deliver against as wide a set of outcomes as possible. As an example for the Tenant Participation Strategy, we discussed giving the maximum flexibility to landlords as to how they document their participation approach either in a formal document or in a number of other ways. Landlords would have been content with the flexibility we proposed, however, the responses were in the main in favour of each landlord having a formal Tenant Participation Strategy and that is the option we decided to pursue.

Of course it wasn't all plain sailing – one of the comments that sticks out was “***we have been waiting for this for 20 years***”. While welcoming what we were trying to do, the speaker was clearly referring to the advances that had been made in other jurisdictions.

#### ***Pre –consultation work – tenants views***

Our very earliest engagements with tenants groups were exploratory; they were clearly pre-consultation work and for us, were about hearing the tenant's voice and ensuring that voice spoke loudly from the pages of the strategy.

Our approach at this stage was to discuss, listen, refine and repeat. So we had discussions and we generated debate. We listened to the words and phrases that were being used. We went away and refined those words, grouped them and turned them into meaningful input for the

strategy and we then repeated the process by bringing those outputs back to the participants to check our understanding and their acceptance of what we had produced.

Of course, this is the right way to do this but it is time consuming and resource intensive. However, we ended up with a much better product to take to the full public consultation. Our pre-consultation period lasted 9 months before we reached the formal consultation phase.

## **THE FORMAL CONSULTATION PROCESS**

Having done all of the pre-consultation engagement, we then had to take the draft strategy out to public consultation. There is an established process for this, but again we decided to vary that – we wanted to enhance it so as to generate a better result.

### ***Consultees***

The Department maintains a central list of groups to be consulted with – we chose to add to that list and included all the groups that we had come into contact with as part of the pre-consultation work. In the end we made contact with 382 groups and individuals.

### ***Consultation Events***

Typically the Department runs 3 open sessions which the public and interested parties can attend to hear about the consultation and to quiz officials. These are advertised in local press. As part of our initial contact we offered to come and speak at any events the consultation groups had organised – this resulted in many invitations and we attended and spoke at 22 events during the consultation period. This included tenants groups, Housing Associations meetings and other housing related conferences.

We asked the consultees to promote the events and the draft strategy via their websites. Many organisations, including a number of our local housing associations did that, not only posting our flyer about the events, but also providing links to the consultation document.

### **Social Media**

We also used Twitter and other social media to publicise the draft strategy and to increase awareness. Further communications included;

- 98 tweets
- 4 Facebook posts
- 31 website articles
- 3 press articles
- 1 stakeholder newsletter article
- 1 You Tube video
- 1 Storify article

### **Total: 139 items**

The total audience reached was **483,227**.

The consultation document was issued to 382 stakeholders; this included those on the Department's Consultation list and the Programme's stakeholder list.

We received;

- 171 responses via survey monkey;
- 35 written responses from organizations (voluntary and community sector, political parties, housing support organizations, resident groups); and
- Feedback from events.

With over 121,000 social tenants, we were challenged about the number of responses received, however, we had responses from SCNI, Chartered Institute of Housing, Housing and Residents associations that represent a large number of tenants.

We are confident that we did ensure that the tenant's voices were heard.

## **Lessons Learned**

### **Planning**

Most teams do not understand how resource intensive a proper consultation will be and as officials, we need to build that in and consider the resources at the outset. It is recognised that many teams from a day to day basis are not involved in consultations but the planning stage is crucial.

### **Early contact**

Early contact does generate a better product – involving the impacted group or groups at an early stage helps break down barriers and misconceptions and pays dividends. This is not about paying lip service here - among the most positive comments made about our work on this strategy was from one of the tenants when she saw the final consultation document who said “you can see our fingerprints all over this”!

Repeat the exercise – we revisited the groups we worked with on a number of occasions distilling their input and checking our understanding – by the end most of them trusted that we were taking their views into consideration.

### **Extend your reach**

Extend your reach – for us this was the first time a consultation had taken to social media and used it as much as we did which meant the audience reach was much greater than would have been the case with the traditional approach.

### **Narrow your reach**

Narrow your reach – and this appears to be contradictory and it's not an issue that is easy to solve but instinctively we need to consider this. Many of the organisations on the Departmental list are small and there could be any number of consultations out at the same time. Government business has to continue and it is right that we consult but could we do it better.

Consultation fatigue is always an issue and the Department and NICS need to use the information we have to better plan and target consultations. For example, if we were to plan better we could write to all the groups first to ask if they want to be involved – this may reduce the chances of consultation fatigue. But participation should be a decision for the organisation rather than the Department.

## **Hard to reach**

“Hard to Reach” or “easy to ignore” groups are the subject of much work and each presents a number of issues that we need to consider if we are to engage with them fully.

Research would suggest that those practical barriers to participation are particularly true of the easy to ignore groups like young people, older people and ethnic minority tenants. Barriers such as physical access, costs, transport, communication and support needs must be addressed to ensure meaningful participation for all tenants and in particular, in respect of disabled tenants.

We felt in our team that if we as officials were suggesting that landlords must not make assumptions about needs when developing participation activities, but must ask their tenants what can be done to help them participate more fully, then surely we must consider the same in consulting properly with all stakeholders. It was for this reason that we met with groups like Disability Action and had them facilitate our sessions with their interest groups.

As with the pre-consultation, additional effort put into working with easy to ignore groups will pay dividends – even if they have no interest in engaging on the subject under discussion, you are preparing the ground for future consultations.

## Example 3

### Department for Employment and Learning

#### Co-design and the United Youth Programme Pilot Phase

Co-design within public services engages all who have an interest in a policy or service development. Stakeholders can range from the centrally important service user, to others who devise, plan, commission or deliver policies, services or programmes. It is a process which encourages formulation of solutions or actions based on a *deep understanding* of the circumstances and *lived experiences* of the service users or citizens who will be impacted by the initiative.

This means that the service user or intended beneficiary of a policy, service or programme needs to be engaged to play a key role from the outset. The process essentially begins with in-depth primary research to understand fundamental realities for the target group, before moving forward.

#### Developing the United Youth Programme

For the development of its United Youth Pilot Phase, the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) took up the co-design baton from the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) early in 2014. The United Youth Programme described in the Together: Building a United Community Strategy is intended to support young people who are not in employment, education or training to develop personal capabilities, including capabilities for citizenship, good relations and employment.

From an early stage, it was determined that an *outcomes focus* would form the basis of programme design and delivery. The mix of outcomes that the United Youth Programme would embrace meant that a new approach needed to be explored in order to effectively deliver the integrated programme required.

OFMDFM had led on a major design focused United Youth conference in January 2014 after which DEL embarked on a wide range of further discussions with interested stakeholders. These included organisations with an interest in, or who were already working with, young people in the target group and age range (16 to 24 years) and, of course, young people themselves.

DEL assembled a cross-departmental and cross-sectoral *United Youth Design Team*. Other Departments on the Design Team were OFMDFM, Department for Social Development and Department of Education. The Youth Council for Northern Ireland and the Education and Library Boards Youth Service were represented (the functions of these organisations have since transferred to the Education Authority). Other organisations taking part are the Public Health Agency, Youthnet, Community Relations Council, and the International Fund for Ireland.

#### Engaging with key stakeholders on programme design

An early step in the co-design process focused on a number of ‘conversation’ events at locations and events across Northern Ireland to share views on possible United Youth programme content and approach. Tentative programme possibilities had been identified from the feedback from stakeholders up to that point, review of relevant literature, available data in relation to young

people not in education, employment or training, and exploration of relevant international examples.

Following this, a draft United Youth *outcomes and principles framework* was developed. This described a range of *outcomes* that the United Youth Programme would help young people to achieve. It also included *principles* which reflected fundamental aspects of the *way of working* with young people that needed to be apparent in the programme. Stakeholder feedback had emphasised the need for a youth development or youth work approach.

Engagement with stakeholders via eight regional meetings in August 2014 followed, including a residential experience at Corrymeela and two other meetings specifically for young people. At these events, the draft outcomes and principles framework was examined and adjusted. The final outcomes and principles document was used in September 2014 as the basis for invitation of *concept proposals* or ideas for how United Youth could be delivered. This invitation process was supported by a further four meetings with interested organisations across NI.

Fifty proposals were selected from the 150 plus received and these organisations were invited to take part in a further series of three workshops to help them develop a full application for a project which could be included in a United Youth Pilot Phase. Thirteen pilots were selected from the proposals received and ran from August 2015 to March 2016.

### Co-design within the Pilot Phase

The co-design discussions did not end with the commencement of the pilots. Much co-design work was facilitated within the pilot phase as young people were engaged with in a manner that encouraged them to influence and, in some cases, actively design the content of their own programme. Young people made decisions about pilot content. They were supported to reflect on what they felt had worked best for them and to analyse their experience to consider where they would make changes to the approach to help it work better. This produced a range of insights into preferred and effective content and methods.

Key lessons have already emerged from the Pilot Phase in terms of the complex needs which exist within the target group of young people, the intensity and duration of the approach that is required in order to achieve lasting change in relation to the United Youth outcomes, the activities and processes that underpin sustainable change, and the skills needed by practitioners in order to support the young person's journey effectively.

### Staying clear about what co-design actually means

Within United Youth the *two core aspects* of co-design have always been emphasised. The 'co' aspect of co-design has been reflected in two main ways. The first is the involvement of all stakeholders in the task of *fully understanding the challenge*, especially from a service user or beneficiary perspective, before pen is put to paper in terms of detailed policy development or programme design.

The other 'co' aspect has been young people, pilot delivery organisations and DEL *working together* during pilot delivery to better understand the programme journey.

The '*design*' aspect of co-design brings a host of additional tools to help build common understanding of a challenge and drive relevant and effective responses.

Design tools and techniques that were reflected in the journey towards the United Youth Pilot Phase and, indeed, within the Pilot Phase itself, included:

- significant *direct and meaningful engagement with young people* in an effort to understand the lived experience of young people in the target group for United Youth – as well as ongoing face-to-face contact with young people, early work included construction of *participant personas* and *participant journey mapping* to aid consideration of possible approaches;
- *generation of a wide range of ideas or 'solutions'* with stakeholders in the form of the concept proposals – opening up to many possibilities rather than arriving at a solution at too early a stage and thus losing the opportunity for new ideas to be formulated and tested;
- *testing* a number of proposed solutions or programme '*blueprints*' via the pilot phase; and
- ongoing *iteration* within the pilots to adjust and develop content to meet participant needs closely.

Each pilot took forward its own participant engagement methods.

One pilot – STRIVE – added a further layer of co-design activity by utilising an '*Expert by Experience*' model where young people with previous first-hand experience of participation in youth development programmes acted in a voluntary capacity during the United Youth pilot to advise on content and methods and engage other STRIVE participants in the pilot as experts in their own right.

**STRIVE volunteer 'Experts by Experience'**



The pilot taken forward by the NI Youth Forum involved an initial group of 12 young people developing a programme for a second group of young people based on their own programme experience.



**NIYF first group participants during their programme design residential**

#### Capturing the learning from the co-design process

A structured evaluation process including an independent, external evaluation of the United Youth Pilot Phase is capturing the very significant learning that has been produced from the co-design journey and will inform United Youth activities going forward.



## Notes



