

# CONSULTATION TOOLKIT

## CHILDREN'S CENTRES & EXTENDED SCHOOLS

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## Background

All Lead Agencies are expected to “involve and consult everyone who is benefiting or could benefit from the centre and all those involved in delivering services to children. It is particularly important that children’s centres consult parents and children as well as local voluntary organisations and the private sector”. (Sure Start Children’s Centres Practice Guidance 2005, page 16)

There are three groups with whom you will want to consult:

- Parents with children under five and expectant parents
- Children under five
- Providers of services for children under five in your community (this will include local schools, childminders, day nurseries, pre-schools, toddler groups, health services etc)

## Parents

Consultation with parents and the wider community is particularly important since it provides information about the services that families in the area want and the way they would like them provided. You can contact parents through services they already use like baby clinics, toddler groups, pre-schools and schools. Day nurseries and childminders can be the best way to reach working parents.

It is important to involve specific groups such as fathers, lone parents, minority ethnic families and parents with disabled children.

Using a variety of methods will help to provide the widest response from parents.

Methods include:

- Semi-structured interviews- based on a small number of key questions
- Focus groups – conducted by a facilitator and carefully recorded
- Maps of the area on which parents mark their house and the services they use
- Timelines – on which parents note the services that were helpful (or would have been if they had been available) at points before their child’s birth and in the early years

A summary of consultation findings and what is being done as a result should be written and made available to everyone who took part.

An effective method of gaining views of parents is by using focus groups. These can be run as stand-alone sessions or as part of a family fun day or similar event. This guidance includes details of skills required to run focus groups, a suggested topic guide and a data recording/analysis sheet covering the relevant issues for services for children 0-4 years.

For further suggestions see “Community Consultation” ref TDAD/0135/2006 published by the Training and Development Agency for schools [www.tda.gov.uk/remodelling](http://www.tda.gov.uk/remodelling)



## Children

Recent projects have shown how children under five can be consulted about the provision of services they receive through use of painting, music, cameras, story telling etc. Coram Family children's centre has developed an innovative and comprehensive resource for listening to and working with young children so they can really participate in matters that affect their lives. The resource is called "Listening to Young Children" (Lancaster, P and Broadbent, V, Open University press) [www.coram.org.uk](http://www.coram.org.uk)

The Daycare Trust have published a useful document entitled "RAMPS: a framework for listening to children" by Penny Lancaster which contains information about ensuring children's active participation and a helpful list of references [www.daycaretrust.org.uk](http://www.daycaretrust.org.uk) National Children's Bureau (NCB) have produced a series of six leaflets entitled "Listening as a way of life". The following titles are available free of charge from [www.ncb.org.uk](http://www.ncb.org.uk)

- Supporting parents and carers to listen. A guide for practitioners
- Are equalities an issue? Finding out what young children think
- Why and how we listen to young children
- Listening to young disabled children
- Listening and responding to young children's views on food
- Listening to babies

"Building a culture of participation" by Kirby et al includes research findings from how to embed participation into an organisations culture as well as a handbook to work from. It is published by DfES and can be ordered free of charge from DfEs publications ref DfES/0827/2003

Children's centres should, where possible, link existing provision such as local primary schools, local nurseries, pre-schools and other maintained, private and voluntary providers. Partnership working with health services; Jobcentre Plus; schools; and the private, voluntary and community sectors are all important.

The first step is to make contact with all providers of services for under fives in your children's centre community. You will probably want to invite prospective partners to a series of meetings to explore partnership working. You can use these meetings to find out what services are already being provided, identify any gaps and consider ways to fill these gaps.

## Creating a public consultation plan

The details of all public consultations need to be recorded in a consultation plan. A consultation plan should detail the objectives of the consultation, methods to be used, target groups, how the data will be collected, data analysis and evaluation.



A template is attached at Appendix 1 and when completed should be made available to local communities.

## Recording and analysing the information

The attached data recording sheet - Appendix 2 can be used to record the views from focus groups. Data will need to be analysed at local level to help you plan provision in your community.

To help plan provision at **county level**, please also return the copies of your data analysis to: Helen Ashdown Room 162a County Hall, Hertford, Pegs Lane SG13 8DF



## What methods can be used to consult?

Consultations should be 'fit for purpose' in terms of being within budget and timescale and clarity over what they need to achieve, so that useful information can be collected and fed into the development of the children's centres/extended services and activities. Some consultations will incur little expenditure as many of the community groups, such as parents of children already using services, can be accessed through existing communication channels.

### Focus groups

Focus groups are ways of obtaining information from members of a group on a predetermined set of discussion topics. Typically, there will be six to eight participants. Focus groups are a way of listening to people and learning from them, and for participants to share and compare their views. Care will need to be given to ensure that a representative cross-section of the community is invited to take part.

### Community surveys (usually through a questionnaire)

The questionnaire could be asking what sorts of activities people would like to see and take part in at the children's centre/extended school, as well as asking for information about what people presently do, how much they are prepared to pay etc. Questionnaires are sometimes seen as a poor method of gauging community opinions due to a low response rate. Care should be taken to involve relevant stakeholders in helping to draw up the questionnaire, especially those that know the community, so that they have a sense of ownership and involvement in the process and can include relevant questions. It is also likely that the size and language of the questionnaire will need to be varied according to the target audience. Above all, care should be given to devise appropriate distribution and collection procedures to enable maximise response rates (e.g. distribute questionnaires at the school gate at going home time; visit the local shopping centre, local supermarket or mother and toddler groups).

### Community meetings

By working, for example, with voluntary and community groups, invite members of the local community to attend a meeting to explore community needs on a face-to-face basis. Interpreters, if required, should be available at such meetings, to ensure that the views of all members of the local community are heard. It should be recognised however, that some members of the local community may be unwilling or unable to attend such meetings and other means should be sought to engage them in the process. There may be opportunities to plug into existing meetings.



## Listening

A longer term approach to needs assessment. It is based on the idea that genuine assessment of community needs involves a continuous process of listening in both formal and informal situations. Such an approach argues that a genuine assessment requires familiarity with the community and the community having confidence in those who are assessing their needs. The information from persistent listening will be a valuable resource for future planning of provision.

## Networking with other organisations

This will inform consultation in a number of ways, for example, to help to build up a picture of community needs and to inform other partners of proposed activities in the children's centre/school. Sharing information with others can also prevent duplication and encourage a strategic approach to community provision and a network will also provide the opportunity for regular and systematic evaluation of community needs. Members of the network could include local businesses, community-based clubs and societies, schools and colleges, local authority departments, faith organisations, youth organisations, police, primary care trusts, Sure Start, Connexions, regeneration groups, the local Learning and Skills Council and local strategic partnerships, representatives of the local authority. Children's trusts will be a mechanism which will facilitate these networks to be made. Developing networks take time and needs to be based on trust, mutual support and partnership. Where networks already exist it will be important to manage complex relationships, and consultations should set clear objectives at the outset so that unrealistic expectations are not raised.



## Running a focus group

The usual format for a focus group interview is a series of small group discussions running for a maximum of 2 hours. Ideally, a series of 3 groups is better than just one or two. Multiple groups are recommended since each discussion is highly influenced by who is involved and the comments that arise in each session.

### Prior to the meeting:

- Prepare a series of open-ended questions on the topic under discussion which will form a semi-structured schedule. This format needs to be the basis of all other group discussions in the series of meetings in order to ensure consistency.
- The emphasis is on obtaining insights, responses and opinions rather than specific facts.
- Plan ahead to ensure the physical settings and timings of consultations are culturally sensitive, venues accessible to disabled, near to public transport, are when people are available and has appropriate refreshments.
- Ensure consultees know what they are being asked about and what is expected of them and give plenty of time so people can make arrangements to attend.
- Try to build rapport or links with groups who you want to involve, as this can create trust and increase numbers or diversity involved.
- Be clear on what influence people can have and focus on where they can have real influence and be positive, give a clear message that they and their views are valued, respected and wanted.
- Prepare yourself well, know the topic and the process in advance.
- Plan how to involve people from different backgrounds and groups, consider accessibility issues: transport, venues, cultural, religious and age appropriate events.
- Plan to make the process and content meaningful and enjoyable for people. Be prepared to listen to their ideas as one of the biggest barriers to hearing their views may be adult attitudes.
- Follow the Consultation Plan to ensure correct procedures are followed about publishing results.
- Be prepared to enjoy and learn from the process.



## At the meeting:

- Explain about children's centres/ extended schools.
- Provide clear explanations of the purpose of the group, and the roles e.g. facilitator and recorder.
- Help people feel at ease.
- Facilitate interaction between group members.
- Actively encourage people to value their personal experiences and knowledge, but do facilitate in a way which doesn't leave people feeling over-exposed as some issues may bring up upsetting feelings.
- Follow basic group work or interview processes, clarify confidentiality, including what will/will not be taken away, clarify everybody's roles, who is going to do what, agree ground rules, include everyone and be open and honest.
- Avoid jargon and be aware that people may not have understood what is being communicated.
- Empathise and appreciate their concerns/anxieties about both the process and the issues they raise
- Record accurately what people say as this allows you to check back with them afterwards and to analyse the data too.
- Promote debate by asking open questions.
- Challenge participants, and draw out people's differences.
- Tease out a diverse range of meanings on the topic under discussion.
- Probe for details.
- Move things forward when the conversation rifts or reaches a minor conclusion.
- Keep the session focused and steer the conversation back on course if necessary.
- Ensure everyone participates and gets a chance to speak.
- Avoid favouring particular participants by showing too much approval.
- Avoid giving personal opinions so as to prevent influencing participants towards a particular position or opinion.



## After the meeting:

- Store the data securely, use the information people give us only for the intended purpose and send a copy to Helen Ashdown room 162 County Hall Hertford.
- Publicise results and rationale for decisions as set out in the Consultation Plan.
- Where it is not possible to give feedback on decisions affected quickly, consider feeding back what you have heard and what the next steps will be, reaffirming when final feedback is due.
- Reflect back on your practice to see what outcomes/impact have been achieved and how the process can be improved

## What type of questions to ask?

- Questions should be open ended so that “yes /no” responses are minimised.
- “How” or “What” questions are best as these encourage people to expand on what they mean.
- The number of questions should ideally be small of eight or less and go in sequence from very general to specific.

## The following are some key characteristics of effective moderators:

- Show interest in the participants and believe that they have something to contribute to the session regardless of their education, background or experiences.
- Interact informally with the participants before and after the focus group.
- Listen attentively, use non-verbal communication techniques and show respect towards participants.
- Have knowledge about the issues being discussed.
- Refrain from expressing personal views.



## A number of potential problems could arise during focus groups, which will all need addressing:

- If one participant tries to dominate the session, the moderator should invite each person to speak in turn
- Avoid interviewing friends in the same group as they can form cliques - if cliques do form, suggest taking a break and changing seating positions upon returning from the break
- Avoid personal confrontation - allow the group to police itself (e.g. “do others in the group agree?”)
- Respect someone’s right to be quiet, but give them a chance to share their ideas on a one-to-one e.g. during a break.
- Use difference of opinion as a topic of discussion. The moderator should avoid taking sides.

## Recording what was said:

Using the proforma attached at Appendix 2, record in a way that tries to capture:

- The sense of what each person says
- Who said what e.g. relevant profile information, not names
- The general flow of the discussion (the common ideas expressed)

## Analysing data gathered from focus groups

After each session the moderator and anyone with an interest in the outcome should meet, bringing all the notes and any other relevant data together for analysis. The aim of this analysis is to look for trends and patterns that reappear within either a single focus group or among various focus groups, and to ensure a meaningful understanding of the participants’ experiences. In other words, it is important to consider process as well as content as part of the analysis stage.

## What should happen after consultation?

The analysis of the information from the consultation will allow proposals to be developed and decisions to be made. Part of this process will include discussions around how these services will be resourced, who will co-ordinate and run them and when they are going to be made available (during the daytime, evening, weekends, holidays?). These discussions should result in a development/project plan. This plan should be inclusive, flexible and responsive to evolving community needs.

A good consultation will also build in feedback on the outcomes of the consultation. For instance, what has been changed as a result of the ideas fed in what expectation cannot be met and why?



## Topic guide for focus groups

Focus group: approximately 1.5 hours

The main objective of the consultation is:

To define the key issues, solutions and priorities for families with children aged 0-4 and their communities within the boundaries of DfES Guidance on Sure Start children's centres

Section	Objective	Time
<p>Introduction</p> <p>Thank respondents for coming, introduce self</p> <p>Clarify objectives, process &amp; timescales of decisions</p> <p>Confirm confidentiality</p> <p>Confirm structure of group discussion</p>	<p>Sets boundaries for the consultation</p>	<p>5 mins</p>
<p>General background information</p> <p>Ask participants to present themselves</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Name</li> <li>Where do you live</li> <li>Number and age of children</li> <li>Ethnicity etc (how they describe themselves)</li> </ul> <p>Record on flip chart/ proform</p>	<p>Introductions &amp; warm-up</p> <p>and</p> <p>Gather data about people at the group</p>	<p>5 mins</p>



<p>ASK GROUP WHAT THEY FEEL ARE THE MOST <b>IMPORTANT ISSUES</b> FOR FAMILIES WITH CHILDREN AGED 0-4 IN THEIR COMMUNITY</p> <p><b>Record on flip chart/ proforma</b></p>	<p>Gives group a chance to share important issues to them and allows you to 'car-park' them and focus on what they can influence</p>	<p>10 mins</p>
<p>GIVE OUT CARDS WITH MAIN ISSUES COVERED BY CHILDREN'S CENTRES :</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• CHILD CARE</li> <li>• HEALTH SERVICES</li> <li>• SUPPORT FOR PARENTS</li> <li>• INFORMATION ON SERVICES OF UNDER 5's</li> <li>• INFORMATION FOR PARENTS ABOUT WORK</li> <li>• ADULT AND COMMUNITY LEARNING</li> </ul> <p><b>1 card with 1 issue on it between two people</b></p>	<p>To inform group role &amp; function of Children's Centres</p>	<p>5 mins</p>
<p>ASK PARTICIPANTS TO WORK IN PAIRS TO WRITE DOWN WHAT THEY THINK ARE THE MAIN PROBLEMS WITH THESE SERVICES</p>	<p>To identify problems</p>	<p>5 mins</p>
<p>ASK EACH PAIR TO FEEDBACK TO WHOLE GROUP WHAT THEY FEEL ARE THE <b>PROBLEMS</b> AND OPEN UP FOR BRIEF DISCUSSION</p> <p><b>Record on flip chart/ proforma</b></p>	<p>To identify problems</p>	<p>10 mins</p>



<p>IN THE WHOLE GROUP, DISCUSS THE PROBLEMS IDENTIFIED AND ASK WHAT COULD BE DONE TO <b>SOLVE</b> THESE</p> <p>GO THROUGH EACH IN AS MUCH DETAIL AS POSSIBLE, BEARING IN MIND HOW MANY PROBLEMS ARE RAISED</p> <p>DO FEEL FREE TO BREAK INTO SMALL GROUPS OR PAIRS IF IT WORKS FOR YOUR GROUP AND COVERS THE AGENDA MORE FULLY</p> <p><b>Record on flipcharts/ proforma</b></p>	<p>To determine possible solutions</p>	<p>30 mins in total</p>
<p>IF THERE IS TIME, ASK THE GROUP TO CONSIDER WHICH PROBLEMS/ SOLUTIONS THEY WOULD IDENTIFY AS A <b>PRIORITY AND WHY</b></p>	<p>To suggest possible priorities to focus on first</p>	<p>10 mins</p>
<p><b>Conclusion/summary</b></p> <p><b>SUM UP</b> WHAT YOU HAVE HEARD, WHAT WILL HAPPEN NEXT AND WHEN &amp; WHERE MORE INFORMATION CAN BE OBTAINED</p> <p>THANK PARTICIPANTS</p>	<p>Sum-up &amp; end</p>	<p>5 mins</p>



# APPENDICES

1

## ■ Consultation Plan

### **Purpose:**

To involve local communities in each local extended school/children's centre on behalf of the Herts Children's Trust Partnership

### **Aim:**

All extended schools/ children's centres to consult approximately 50 local people, including men, women, children, minority groups, young parents and parents-to-be about the services in their area for children aged 0-5 and their families. In particular, to define their key issues, solutions and priorities

**Lead person ( County):** Helen Ashdown

**Lead person ( give local details ):** add name

### **Methodology and rationale**

A 'focus group' discussion method is to be used to enable consultees to explore issues in detail and suggest solutions and priorities

### **How will CPA requirements for involving: BME, children, travellers, disabled people, faith groups?**

Add details



## **Use, ownership and sharing of data**

A template is attached to record the data

The coordinating agency will own the local data, the County Early Years Partnership will own the county wide data.

## **A summary of local response will be published**

(please state where and when)



# APPENDICES



## 2

### Data Recording Sheet

Location of the group:

Numbers of people and membership ( age/gender, ethnicity etc):

Date of group:

Organisation:

Facilitator:

Issues and Outcomes	What was said: Problems, Solutions, Priorities.
CHILD CARE Economic Well-Being	
HEALTH SERVICES Be Healthy	
SUPPORT FOR PARENTS Economic Well-Being	
INFORMATION ON SERVICES FOR UNDER 5's Economic Well-Being	
INFORMATION FOR PARENTS ABOUT WORK Economic Well-Being	
ADULT AND COMMUNITY LEARNING Economic Well-Being	



Other issues raised: Enjoy & Achieve	
Other issues raised: Stay Safe	
Other issues raised: Make a Positive Contribution	

Please also return copies to:  
Helen Ashdown Room 162a County Hall, Hertford, Pegs Lane SG13 8DF

