



Introduction

Consultation is the key role of community councils. I am now a community council simply because I grew increasingly frustrated with the lack of consultation in previous incarnation of Portobello Community Council.

Community councils were legislated for in [part IV of the Local Government \(Scotland\) Act 1973](#): *"In addition to any other purpose which a community council may pursue, the general purpose of a community council shall be to ascertain, co-ordinate and express to the local authorities for its area, and to public authorities, the views of the community which it represents, in relation to matters for which those authorities are responsible, and to take such action in the interests of that community as appears to it to be expedient and practicable".*

Edinburgh Council's [Scheme for Community Councils](#) further states: *"The general purpose of community councils is to act as a voice for their local area. This will involve them articulating the views and concerns of local people in their area on a wide range of issues of public concern and make representations to the City of Edinburgh Council, other public sector bodies and private agencies on matters within their sphere of interest"... "You should establish and reflect, through the community council, the views of the community as a whole, on any issue, irrespective of personal opinion. You should ensure that you are, within reason, accessible to your local community and local residents. Various mechanisms to allow the general community to express their views, i.e. websites, suggestion boxes, community surveys, opinion polls, should, where possible, be made available".*

As a community council we should have a range of measures identified that we can use to consult with our community and ascertain their views. We should use these measures to carry out both routine surveys and consultation tied to important issues.

It is also very important that when we make a representation to another body that we are transparent and summarise the consultation carried out to reach our position.

This document will describe a range of consultation measures we could adopt, along with a variable level of consultation dependent on the importance of the issue at hand. It is intended only as a starting point in a wider discussion on consultation.

Another important resource is [Communicating with your Constituents](#), a best practice guide produced by the Association of Scottish Community Councils (which disbanded in 2012)

Consultation measures

Our area is a wide demographic: we need to consult with people old and young, all ranges of education and social mobility. This means we need to have a wide range of consultation measures available so we do not exclude responses from specific sectors.

Consultation can be broadly split into two divisions:

- Online
- Physical

Additionally we can consult with our member organisations, plus others in the local area, to ascertain their views.



Online

Online forms of consultation are likely to be the quickest and can reach an increasing large proportion of the community. However it will exclude those without computer or smart phones access. Forms of online consultation to consider include:

- **Online questionnaire:** a well-designed survey will allow for well-structured responses from those completing it. A lot of care needs to be taken in the design as to not lead or limit the responses. This has been used to good effect recently with Ask Porty.
- **Free-form discussions** on Facebook, Talk Porty and other forums: these can allow for complexity in issues to be discovered and discussed. However they can also lead to rants and lack of focus. It is also hard to distil comments in to clear points for representation.
- **Email:** invite people to email us their views. This has similar challenges to that above re lack of focus and challenge to distil comments.

There are a number of ways we can promote engagement by informing people of the consultation measures above:

- Email mailing lists (e.g. ours and local city councillors)
- Facebook (including paying for promoted posts)
- Twitter (including advertising)
- Blog posts, local websites
- Physical notice boards, shop windows, newspaper articles

↳ With any consultation it is crucial that we spend time to create an accessible summary of the issue. It is not good enough to simply link to online planning applications. We need to briefly describe the issue and any pertinent history. Images, maps and photos are much more successful in helping people to understand.

Physical

To address some of the limitations of online consultation it is important to also carry it out in the real world. Possible ways to do this include:

- **Suggestion boxes:** simply a stack of paper, with pens, next to a box. Anyone can write anything and let us know about it...
- **Surgeries:** community councillors could man a public place (e.g. super market, high street) and talk to members of the public about issues that may concern them.
- **Questionnaire:** essentially a printed version of the online-questionnaire to allow those without online access to complete it. Would be paired with a box for posting completed forms or done in person (e.g. super market, high street) with community councillors
- **Ball polls:** you supply a stack of balls (think those in children's soft play) and two boxes: e.g. supporting or objecting to a given issue. Please take a ball and place it the relevant box. A quick and simple straw poll. Would likely need a level of supervision to avoid it being spoiled. This could be librarians handing out the balls, and the boxes being opaque.
- **Face-to-face:** just community councillors talking to people as part of their daily life. This should be used with caution as it is the least objective measure and can be hard to distinguish from a community councillors' own personal view.
- **Public meetings:** dedicated meetings open to the public on a specific issue. We should be very careful to always try and invite both side of a given issue to talk, including at regular meetings.

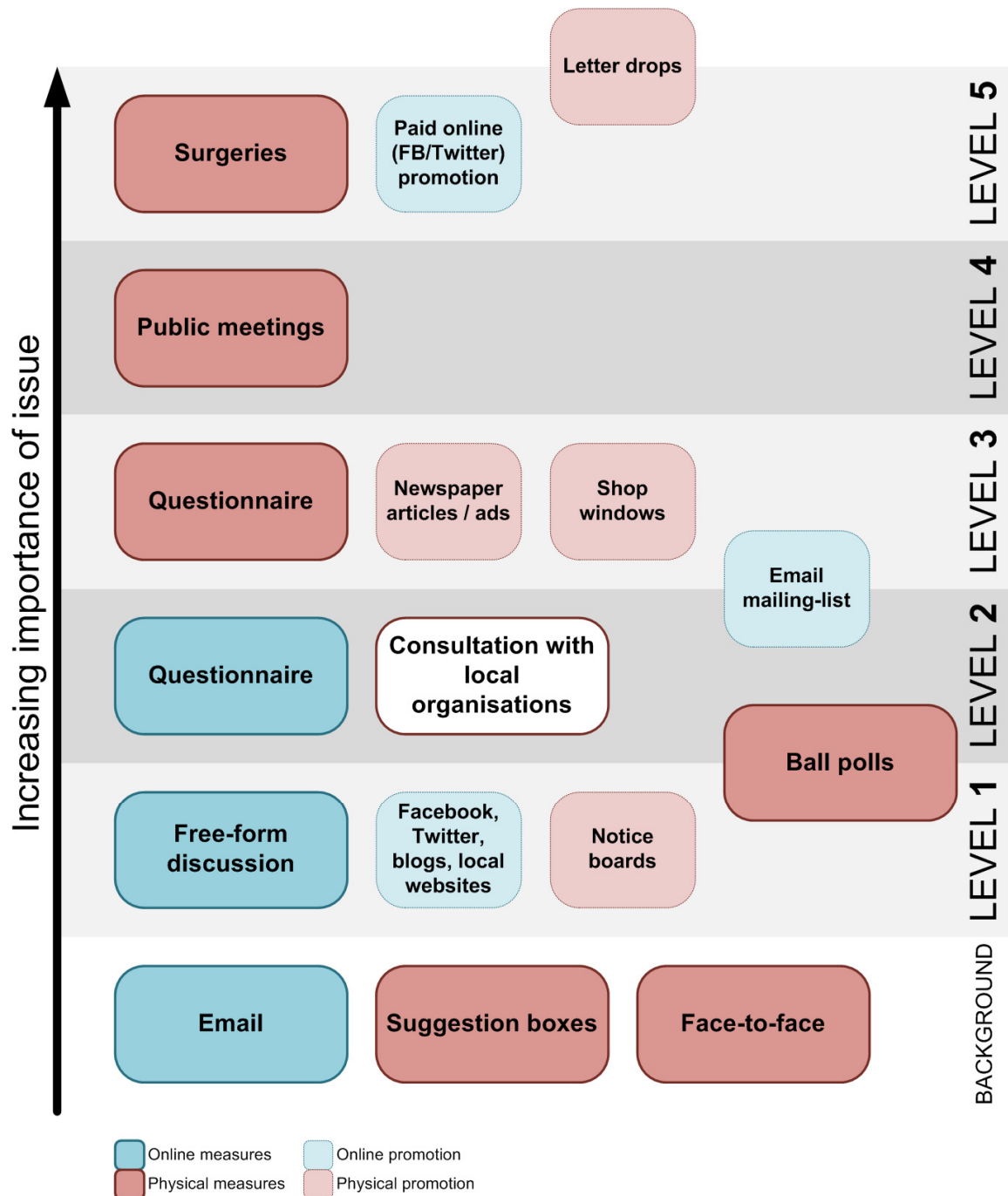
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- Physical notice boards, shop windows, newspaper articles
- Letter drops



Levels of consultation

If we always carried out every form of consultation above we would never get anything done. Clearly the level of consultation carried out needs to be relative to the importance of the issue. A possible prioritisation could be:



In addition to background communication with members of the public we should consider annual surveys.



It's not just counting numbers (gotchas)

When it comes to evaluating the consultation responses there are a number of issues we need to be aware of:

- **Does the respondent live within the community council area?** Should we exclude the response if not – it will depend on the issue
- **What is the quality of the response** – is it simply a basic object or support without rationale? Compare with planning applications and the treatment of material (considered) and non-material representations (ignored)
- **Should we weight responses?** For example by geography, age group or other characteristic – again, it will depend on the issue

When we make a representation as a community council we should reflect on our statutory duty of consultation with the community and clearly summarise the steps we have taken. We should also detail any concerns we may have with the consultation and groups who may not be represented by it.