

## Performing Consultations: Guidance for Connexional Team Members

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### PRINCIPLES

#### What work should be subjected to a consultation process?

In a number of cases, the Conference or another governance body will request that the Team perform a consultation. In addition, any work that fits the following criteria could benefit from a connexional consultation process:

- **Work to develop strategy or policy of the Methodist Church**
- **Work to develop a programme which has implications beyond the Connexional Team**

The need for a consultation process for a particular piece of work should therefore be considered in a Development Brief. For information on writing a Development Brief, see the document *Writing a Development Brief: Guidance for Connexional Team Members*,

#### What are the basic steps in a consultation process?

There are eight basic steps to the proposed consultation process. Not every piece of work will require each of the stages to be performed, but most will require consideration of the majority:

- 1. Pre-consultation scoping and research**
- 2. Specialist consultation**

Key stakeholders identified as having a specific interest in or information on an issue should be consulted so as to offer any background information, specialist knowledge or particular perspectives in the early stages of strategy, policy or programme development. These stakeholders may include particular committees, particularly the Law and Polity and Faith and Order Committees. This form of consultation may involve specific research tasks such as interviews or focus groups. Full, general consultation is not intended to replace these important discussions.

- 3. The drafting of an Options Paper**

See below for more information about the Options Paper.

- 4. Verification of principles behind the work**

The SRC, and the Law and Polity and Faith and Order Committees should be consulted at this stage, if they have not already been consulted as part of the development process.

- 5. Options Paper approved by the Strategic Leaders**

Where relevant, an Options Paper should be approved by the appropriate Strategic Leader before being sent out for formal consultation in the name of the Connexional Team.

- 6. Options Paper circulated for general consultation**

- 7. Responses collated and analysed**

- 8. Report for SRC / Council drafted**

A report, informed by the outcomes of the consultation, is drafted for the SRC (if it has strategic and / or resource implications) and the Methodist Council.

### **The Role of Connexional Team Members**

Responsibility for a consultation process lies with the Connexional Team member leading the work to develop the relevant strategy, policy or programme. This member of staff should be identified as the principle contact for the consultation exercise and should ensure that this work links into all areas of the Team with relevant skills or areas of interest. However, all Team members have the responsibility to:

- Interact with stakeholders in relevant areas and inform the whole Connexional Team of any appropriate feedback and/or changes that the consultation has brought about in their area of work.
- Endeavour to keep up to date with the outcomes of other consultations and incorporate the findings from these into their work when relevant.

### **Whose views should be sought?**

In many cases, it will be appropriate to consult specialist interest groups and stakeholders before drafting any documents for wider consultation. The use of specialist consultation will ensure that sufficient weighting is given to the opinions of experts and help prevent unnecessary errors appearing in documents made widely available. In most cases, after specifically-targeted specialist consultation, as wide a cross-section of stakeholders as possible should be involved in a 2<sup>nd</sup> stage of consultation. However, in a limited number of cases, specialist consultation will be sufficient for a piece of work.

During a general consultation, a variety of methods should be used to ensure that as many people as possible can be involved in this process. Relevant stakeholders to consult could include:

- *Members of the Methodist Church*
- *Members of a particular district, area or social demographic*
- *Circuit meetings, District synods and other similar meetings*
- *Connexional committees and other official connexional networks and groups*
- *Practitioners / office-holders*
- *Ecumenical partners and Partner Churches*
- *Non-governmental organisations*

***With any significant piece of policy or strategy development work it is important to involve the Law and Polity and Faith and Order Committees at the earliest possible stage.***

Special care should be taken to ensure that groups that are often overlooked in the decision-making process are not ignored. Alternative means of communication may be necessary to achieve this.

Nevertheless, as with any form of research, the views of some stakeholders may legitimately have particular significance in this process. If this is the case, responses can be weighted to reflect this. Wherever this is done, reasons for the weighting should be clearly stated.

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## PERFORMING A CONSULTATION

The process below details the standard stages of consultation that should be considered in the Connexional Team's work for strategy, policy or programme development. This is general guidance and the details of each consultation process will vary depending on its aims, subject and audience. **Staff leading a consultation should communicate with key specialist staff before performing any consultation** whenever this may be useful. In particular, research, policy, IT and communications officers should be contacted for general assistance and particular guidance on consultations.

### (1) Pre-Consultation Scoping and Research

When designing a consultation on a piece of strategy, policy or programme development, it is important to ensure that the process is well planned and has the capacity to produce valid and valuable outcomes.

Background and supporting information should be set out in the Development Brief drawn up at the start of any piece of strategy, policy or programme development, but it may also help to ask the following questions about your piece of work:

#### Is a consultation needed?

- Conduct research to ensure that this work justifies the opening of a new consultation
- Establish whether this information has been gathered before. A Connexional Team think tank could help with this process
- Set out plans for consultation in the Development Brief for the work
- *A consultation should not be initiated unless its responses could affect the outcome of a piece of work.*

#### What information needs to be established and to be given to stakeholders?

- Team members should explain why a consultation is taking place and how responses to this will be used.
- Factors which can and cannot be affected by the consultation should be clearly stated to avoid creating any unrealistic expectations.

#### For how long should proposals be open for consultation?

- To gather worthwhile information rather than instant reaction, everyone asked to respond to the consultation needs to be given enough time to offer a thorough response.
- The process must give anyone who can contribute their views on the formulation of strategy, policy or programmes sufficient time to share their opinion before any proposal is finalised.

Consideration of this should take place before a consultation and a detailed timeline produced, which should be shared with participants and stakeholders.

**(2) Specialist Consultation**

*Who?* Key stakeholders with a specific interest in or knowledge of relevant issues should be identified by Team members and informally consulted.

*Why?* This will give these people the opportunity to offer background information, specialist knowledge and/or a particular perspective in the early stages of strategy, policy or programme development.

**Collecting Information**

- a. It is important first to identify which the key stakeholders are for specialist consultation. This may be best done in conversation with a think tank or informally with relevant other specialist staff in the Team.
- b. Next, the sample groups you wish to use should be discerned. This will impact on, and be impacted on by c) below.
- c. It is important to discern the best method by which to consult these groups. In order to do this you will need to have clear ideas about the sort of information you wish to glean and how you will use this once it has been collected.

In some cases, potential policy options may already be formulating at this stage; in others the first steps in specialist consultation may be research work such as surveying stakeholders to gain quick data on particular points. Specialist consultations may benefit from running focus groups, study days, think tanks with external members, or other research techniques.

In discerning the best way forward, you should discuss possible options and seek guidance from the research officers and other research specialists they identify as useful contacts. **You should also conform to the standards of research best practice as set out in the policy of that name** (available on the intranet).

**Analysing the results**

Having decided who and how you will consult, initial decisions about analysis of the data should have already been made.

Should you require assistance with analysis of the data, the Research Officers will, by agreement at the earliest opportunity, provide guidance on this or identify others who can. Should the analysis of any data require either specialist skills or any significant amount of time which you do not have or cannot commit, you should agree in advance of conducting the consultation who will do this work and when.

**Analysis of data should only be performed by those with relevant skills in this area.**

### Using the Results and Analysis

Using the results of a consultation is an obligation on those asking others to contribute to their work.

Using any specialist analysis, the results of specialist consultation should be used to draft an **Options Paper (3)** to set out a proposed strategy, policy or programme, or a series of differing possible proposals.

- Where appropriate, an Options Paper should state any preferred option for development whilst making it clear that other courses of action have not been ruled out.

**The Law & Polity and Faith & Order Committees should also be consulted at this stage (4) to verify the principles behind the piece of work if they have not already been part of the development process.**

- When general consultation is identified as a necessary further stage, the Options Paper should be adapted in light of the input of these committees and approved by the relevant Strategic Leader **(5)** and, where appropriate, the SRC, before being sent out for formal consultation in the name of the whole Connexional Team.

### **(6) General Consultation**

*Who?* All interested and potentially-interested parties in this area of strategy, policy or programme development.

*Why?* To give as many stakeholders as possible the opportunity to comment on its proposals. To develop work into its best possible form.

### **Is General Consultation Needed?**

In some cases, Connexional Team members may feel that only a specifically targeted consultation process is required and that development work would not benefit from being subjected to a general consultation. However, as a general rule, consultations should aim to engage as wide a range of stakeholders as possible.

Before a consultation is initiated, Connexional Team members should carry out adequate research to ensure that the information sought has not been previously gathered to avoid any unnecessary duplication of work. An appropriate starting point for this may be a think tank.

### **Who is responsible for the consultation process?**

Responsibility lies with the Team member responsible for the development of the strategy, policy or programme concerned. He or she will draft the Options Paper to be put out for consultation and will be responsible for the collation of responses.

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The details of a consultation will vary depending on its aims, subject and audiences. However, all Team members conducting consultations should:

1. Determine a suitable methodology.
2. Identify an appropriate audience.
3. Set a clear and realistic timescale.
4. Draft the Options Paper
5. Collect and collate all responses.
6. Offer open and honest feedback to those who responded to the consultation.
7. Draft a report for the SRC / Council in the wake of the consultation.

In every case, initial work and discussions on the above should be set out in a Development Brief.

**Where uncertainties exist as to specifics in points 1-3, staff members should consult specialists in the Team, such as the research, communications, IT and policy officers.**

### **Running the Process**

#### **The Options Paper**

An Options Paper is the central document in the general consultation process. It should contain:

- Thorough background to the consultation in plain language. This should clearly state why the consultation is taking place and how responses will be used.
- Information on development work already undertaken
- Proposals for future work set out.
- Factors in the strategy, policy or programme development process which can and cannot be affected by the consultation ( to avoid creating any unrealistic expectations).
- As some option papers may include a number of potential options for a suggested policy or programme, it may be appropriate to state in this document any preferred option whilst making it clear that other courses of action have not been ruled out.

*It is extremely important that any Options Paper being put out for consultation is done so in the name of the Connexional Team. Therefore, that paper should be approved by the relevant Strategic Leader or all the Strategic Leaders before being sent out for formal consultation. (5)*

#### **How should stakeholders be asked to contribute to a consultation?**

In most cases, information should be provided on the Church website or via other appropriate electronic means. You should consult communications officers in advance of the consultation to explore how this might happen.

A variety of methods of consultation should be used to ensure that as many people as possible can be involved. This might include *enews*, stipend mailing, Methodist Recorder etc. and media which is more accessible to those who cannot access standard written materials.

### **How long should the consultation period last?**

In order to gather informed opinion rather than instant reaction, everyone asked to respond to the consultation needs to be given enough time to construct a thorough response. The consultation process must give anyone who wants to contribute their views sufficient time to share their opinion before any proposal is finalised.

### **What if the consultation doesn't produce an obvious conclusion?**

As there is a wide variety of voices and views across the Connexion, the consultation process will not always produce a unanimous, obvious or definite outcome. When there is no single, clear conclusion from the consultation, it may be appropriate for Connexional Team staff, particularly specialists and Strategic Leaders to discern the most appropriate consolidated response. In other cases, options and their supporting arguments could be presented to Council and / or Conference, which will then determine the preferred course of action.

### **What if the consultation responses are outweighed by other factors?**

In the development of some strategies, policies and programmes, factors other than consultation responses may prove to be the determining ones. If this proves to be the case, the reasons for this should be explained openly and honestly to everyone who contributed to the consultation.

## **(7)-(8) Managing Consultation Responses**

No matter what methodology has been used in the consultation process, the lead staff member must ensure that responses to the consultation are dealt with appropriately. This includes:

### **i. Collecting and collating the responses (7)**

- All responses should be acknowledged and assessed.
- These responses should be considered alongside all other information gathered as part of the development process.

### **ii. Offering open and honest feedback to anyone who contributed**

- Any document produced as a result of the consultation process should be circulated to all stakeholders and anyone who responded to the consultation prior to its wider circulation, except where information is confidential (in which case this should be made clear when individuals and groups are asked to participate).
- In some cases, other factors than the consultation responses may prove to be the determining factors in the development process. If this proves to be the case, the reasons for this should be explained openly and honestly in this feedback.

iii Using the outcomes of the consultation to contribute to reports to SRC/Council **(8)**

- Appropriate analysis of the results should be performed. This may involve specialist staff contributions, which should be agreed as soon as possible in the consultation process.
- A report, informed by the outcomes of the consultation, is drafted for the SRC (if it has strategic and/or resource implications) and the Methodist Council.
- If the consultation process does not always produce a unanimous, obvious or definite outcome and thus when there is no single, clear conclusion from the consultation, it may be appropriate for:
  - *Connexional Team staff, particularly specialists and Strategic Leaders, to discern the most appropriate consolidated response; or*
  - *Options and their supporting arguments to be presented to the SRC, Council and/or Conference which will then determine the preferred course of action.*
- The report produced as a result of the consultation process should normally be circulated to anyone who responded to the consultation in a timely manner before it is more widely published.