How to consult

INTRODUCTION TO HOW TO CONSULT

Consultation is one way of recognising the dignity of the person or persons with whom you consult. It demonstrates that you respect them and their needs and that you are interested in improving their circumstances.

And this is what the true meaning of *Batho Pele* is all about – respecting the dignity of the end-users. In the past, before 1994, the attitude to public service delivery was high handed and patronising, stemming from the belief that the authorities knew what services ought to be provided. There was little or no understanding of or concern for the needs and circumstances of the end-users.

The customer is "king"

Once the end-users are perceived as customers the whole picture changes. The customer, after all is always "king" and consultation becomes an imperative.
Consultation informs and legitimises decisions about what services should be provided and how they should be delivered. It clarifies customer expectations and fosters co-operation. It focuses the attention of management and staff on customer concerns and it helps to set priorities.

Consultation leads to sound planning and decision making

Consultation is integral to modern management and leads to sound planning and decision making. To achieve customer satisfaction, key stakeholders, especially customers, should be consulted in the early stages of strategic planning so that services are more responsive to their needs and expectations.

Consultation ensures that services remain relevant and realistic standards are set

All public service departments should consult their customers at least annually, when strategic plans are reviewed and evaluated and progress is monitored. Some departments may need to consult customers more often, particularly when services are undergoing change or when it is important to get opinions on current service levels. This will assure that services remain relevant and that realistic standards are maintained.

Apart from entrenching the spirit of *Batho Pele* and helping to assure customer satisfaction, consultation is undertaken for the following reasons:

- where there is genuine flexibility of an outcome and one needs to confirm the desired result;
- to allow for participative decision making;
- where government has needs to acquire more information on a particular issue; and
- where government wants to assess the impact of a possible decision.

WHY IS CONSULTATION IMPORTANT IN THE PUBLIC SERVICE?

One may well ask why one should bother to ask one's customers what they want or think of the services they receive. In the private sector the answer is usually obvious – if customers are dissatisfied with the service they get, they go elsewhere. The business environment in the private sector is very competitive and there are usually several service providers to choose from. But the situation is different in the public sector. Customers often have little or no choice in service provider. For example, if one needs a passport or identity document, it can only be provided by the Department of Home Affairs. We cannot choose who to go to for our travel or identity documents.

So, if choice is limited and customers have to use us, why consult? One might answer, quite correctly, because it makes you a better manager.

But there are basically three key reasons to consult, namely:

- it helps you to plan, prioritise and deliver better services;
- it creates a working partnership with your customers; and
  it entrenches

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

This guide is designed to point you in the right direction to start the consultation process

This guide is designed to point you in the right direction and help you get started on the path effective service delivery through consultation. It does not set out to debate the philosophy behind consultation and involving customers in the delivery of public services. Its intention is rather to provide some practical guidance on translating some of the principles of public service delivery into practice.

This guide:

- defines what consultation is and highlights why consultation is important;
- explains how consultation can be used as a learning opportunity;
- provides guidelines and best practices regarding the process of consultation;
- outlines the objectives, outcomes and key performance indicators of consultation;
- illustrates the links to legislation and the *Batho Pele* White Paper;
- suggests some of the possible challenges of consultation and responses to these;
- introduces some of the more commonly-used ways of consulting users;
- sets out some of the key issues to think about when considering methods of consultation;
- explains the difference between qualitative and quantitative standards of service delivery;
- provides a step-by-step guide on how to consult;
- offers some key considerations to think about during the process of consulting;
- refers you to additional resources and training opportunities that are available in this field.

WHAT IS CONSULTATION?

For the purposes of this guide, consultation can be defined as a two-way process whereby customers are invited to share their views on their needs and expectations regarding a particular department's services and these perceptions are discussed and taken into account in planning service delivery.

Consultation is not merely asking customers for their views, it involves listening and serious consideration of customers' perceptions. It is, as we have said, a two-way street.

It is a means of establishing service delivery priorities objectively.

CONSULTATION AS A LEARNING OPPORTUNITY

Consulting one's customers provides one of the best opportunities of

Consultation affords an opportunity to learn about oneself and one's own organisation

demonstrating one's concern for their well-being and winning their support and co-operation. But more than this, it is a wonderful opportunity to learn, not only about one's customers, but especially about oneself and one's own organisation.

In particular, it offers the following learning

- understanding the circumstances of your customers
- knowing what your customers need and expect;
- understanding one's own shortcomings;
- understanding one's own limitations;
- realising what is realistic and "doable" and what is not; and
- coming to a deeper understanding of *Batho Pele* or putting "people first".

It would be foolhardy to assume that your services are perfect. If you do not receive any complaints, it may well mean that customers do not know how to complain, cannot be bothered, or think that their views would not be taken seriously. The best way to find out whether your services meet customers' needs is to ask them.

Complaints may well increase as a result of consultation, but you should regard this as a positive. If customers who are unhappy with the service suffer in silence, it does not allow you the opportunity to improve. Use complaints to improve your systems and services, it is one of the cheapest ways to learn from your customers.

Use consultation as a learning opportunity to improve service delivery

Whatever response one gets from customers and other stakeholders during the consultation process will provide useful information. Even no response is an answer and tells one something about oneself, one's approach and the need to try harder. Remember, one could be investing considerable time, effort and other resources, including money, to provide a service that the end-users do not actually want, so use consultation as a learning opportunity to improve service delivery.

Do not assume that you will get agreement or consensus from all. customers, as this is highly unlikely. Everyone has different perceptions and consultation means discussion and negotiation and taking everyone's point of view into account. The department or component or institution will make the final decision, but this will be done from a better, more informed understanding of the issues and customers' views, if you have consulted first

GUIDELINES FOR CONSULTATION

Consultation needs to be planned and its effectiveness monitored

If consultation is to work for you and your customers, it needs to be planned and its effectiveness monitored. You will have a good chance of success if you follow these relatively broad guidelines:

- Get buy-in and commitment.
- Make consultation part of the integrated planning process.
- Ensure that consultation is regular and systematic.
- Be clear and give customers relevant information.
- Be sensitive and maintain confidentiality.
- Be realistic and ensure that the process is manageable.
- Make sure customers can access the consultation process.
- Ensure that all stakeholders are represented in the consultation process.
- Balance expectations with resources.
- Learn from others.

We shall deal with each of these guidelines in turn.

Get buy-in and commitment

Commitment from staff is central to effective consultation

Ensure that all staff are fully informed on the need for consultation and that they understand the issues involved and se it as a positive opportunity to improve service delivery. Commitment from all staff is central to effective consultation. It is a challenge that they should relish. In addition to understanding why it is important to talk to customers, staff must be prepared to respond to what is learnt and to make changes – even if what people want requires changes in working methods, culture or operation. To this end public service departments are encouraged to exercise innovation and creativity, using a minimum set of prescriptions, rules and regulations when delivering services – the shift is from a preoccupation with administration to effective and efficient service delivery.

Consultation and integrated planning

Build consultation into your planning cycle

Make consultation an integral part of the way your department works. Build it into your management systems and planning cycle so that service delivery improvement becomes a continuous cycle. Develop a consultation strategy to involve people as early on in your planning process as possible – once you've started planning services it will be much more difficult to stop or change things. It is the ideal way to weave the spirit of *Bath Pele* into your department's service delivery.

Consultation must be regular and systematic.

All public service departments should consult their customers at least annually, but many will need to do so far more often, particularly when services are undergoing change. The rule of thumb is that consultation should take place as often as it is thought that new information will emanate from the process. However, it should happen at least once a year, when the department's strategic plan is reviewed and evaluated, so that progress can be monitored and service levels improved.

Be clear and give customers relevant information

Give people information they need to make informed comments

Set clear objectives for consultation and make sure that these are clear to those you are consulting. Specify the areas you have the authority to consult on and what you cannot consult on. Give people the information they need in plain language to enable them to make informed comments. Customers may not be aware of all the issues, but it does not usually take them long to learn.

Be sensitive and maintain confidentiality

Ensure confidentiality, courtesy and anonymity wherever you can

In some areas such as health services or police services customers could be concerned about criticising services they consider as being essential. Ensure confidentiality, courtesy and anonymity wherever you can and make it clear that you welcome feedback, both positive and negative. Reassure customers that they will not be victimised or intimidated as a result of participating in the consultation process.

Be realistic and ensure that the process is manageable

Set realistic targets – be sure the process is manageable

Set realistic targets and be confident that the process is manageable. Do not put pressure on customers to get involved and do not expect too much from them. Consultation may mean reaching a wide range of people, so be realistic about how much time is available. Be realistic about the skills and resources that are available to carry out the process effectively. Be aware that the results obtained may be very different from those expected – do not be discouraged if this happens. Your credibility with customers will increase if you deal with the more difficult and unexpected results openly and honestly, rather than simply making the changes that are easiest for you.

Be prepared and willing to re-organise and re-structure so that the spirit of customer service is put into practice. Often excellent consultative processes are simply a waste of time because the organisation refuses to be flexible and change its structures to accommodate customers' views. This leads to a loss of credibility and customers will tend not to take the process seriously in the future.

Accessibility

It is essential that consultation should include the views of historically disadvantage communities and those who have previously been denied access to public services. Consider the illiterate and disabled and those living in remote rural areas and devise means to ensure that they all have the opportunity to participate in the consultation process. This may involve additional time and resources, but the results of consultation can easily be skewed by consulting only those groups or individuals that can be reached easily.

Be sure that the consultation process is accessible to all groups

The method or methods adopted during consultation must suit the characteristics of the customers. Whatever the method, consultation must cover the entire range of existing and potential customers and stakeholders. Reaching different groups of people increases the range of views received. Think about the needs of different groups and identify ways of making it easy for them to get involved.

Remember that some of those you wish to consult may be busy people. They may well be interested in participating, but do not have the time to get involved. Make it easy for people to participate. Think of ways to encourage participation by stakeholders.

Representivity

The sample must be representative of different groups

It would be a tedious and almost impossible task to consult with each and every stakeholder, but you can make sure that the sample you consult with is representative of all the different groups of people served by your department or institution.

Balance expectations with resources.

There should be a balance between what citizens want and what departments can afford

There should be a balance between what citizens want and what national and provincial departments can realistically afford – and have the resources and capacity to deliver. If customers are allowed to have unrealistic expectations, they will be disappointed and will not appreciate the services provided for them.

It is a good idea to adopt an incremental approach to service standards and explain to customers that the quantity and quality of services will be increase steadily over time, of course, always in consultation with them. This builds them into the planning process and reassures them that their needs and circumstances are taken seriously. (See also the guide on Setting Service Standards.)

Learn from others

Talk to other public service departments and institutions and learn from their experiences: What have they done? How did it work? What tips do they have? What pitfalls should you avoid? They may also have useful views on your services.

Consider using a simple peer-review to evaluate your consultation process. (Refer to the guide on Peer Review)

THE OBJECTIVE OF CONSULTATION

The main objective of consultation is to put the citizen at the centre of service delivery

The main objective of consultation is to place the citizen at the centre of service delivery. This speaks directly to the spirit of *Batho Pele*. By adopting a citizen-orientated approach to service delivery one is genuinely putting "people first" and ensuring that the services one delivers will address the needs of the people.

There is no clearer evidence of respecting the dignity of others than to ask them for their views on matters that concern them. It is the very opposite of the patronising approach so frequently adopted in the past which assumed that the authorities knew what was best for he people and so did not need to consult with them on their needs.

Other, secondary objectives of consulting are to:

- focus the attention of management and staff on customer concerns;
- improve work structures, processes and systems;
- use resources efficiently and effectively;
- understand customers better;
- inform citizens of their rights and obligations;
- ensure realistic expectations and service standards;
- enhance communications; and
  improve the image of the public service.

LINKS TO *BATHO PELE*

The *Batho Pele* White Paper states that all national and provincial departments must regularly and systematically consult their users, not only about the services currently provided, but also about the provision of new basic services to those who lack them.

The results of the consultation process must be reported to the relevant Minister/MEC/executing authority and the relevant Portfolio Committee and they must be made public, for example, by publishing them in the media.

LINKS TO LEGISLATION

The principles in the Constitution that govern public administration stipulate that the public service must be accessible and responsive to people's needs. One of the best ways of making this happen is to consult with the consumers of services, namely, the customers of the public service.

The Public Service Regulations reinforce this message and urge executing authorities and service providers in government to consult with end-users and be innovative in responding to their needs. A sure way of finding innovative responses to customers' needs is to involve them in the process of service provision. Customers will often come up with new and effective ways of providing services.

KEY PERFORMANCE INDICATORS

It will be evident that a service provider is consulting effectively with stakeholders if:

- services are delivered in line with customer needs and expectations;
- there are fewer complaints from customers about service standards and delivery;
- there is full participation be all sectors of the community in the consultation process;
- service standards improve from year to year;
- regular customer opinion surveys are conducted;
- there is evidence of suggestion boxes and questionnaires at

service points; and

- information desks are used to solicit customer opinions.

OUTCOMES OF CONSULTATION

If consultation is effective, it will have the following outcomes

- There will be a balance or compromise between what citizens want and what national and provincial departments can realistically afford and have the capacity to deliver.
- Customers will be happy or at least satisfied with the quality and quantity of service delivery.
- Improved and improving service delivery.
- Above all, there will be mutual respect between service provider and customer and this is the ultimate outcome of service delivery driven by the spirit of *Batho Pele*.

CHALLENGES AND RESPONSES

Challenge:
Methods on consultation may be inappropriate/inaccessible to users.

Response:

The method for the consultation process must suit the customers concerned

The method or methods adopted to involve customers in the consultation process must be chosen to suit the characteristics of the customers concerned. For example, it is pointless using written questionnaires to obtain the views of a community that has a high level of illiteracy or where the postal services are unreliable, especially if a large percentage of the community is expected to respond to the questionnaire.

Whatever methods are adopted, consultation must cover the entire spectrum of existing and potential customers. It is absolutely essential that consultation includes the views of those who have been previously denied access to public services.

Challenge:
Customers may have reservations/inhibitions about airing their views

Exercise sensitivity during the consultation process

Response:
The consultation process should be undertaken sensitively, for example, people should not be asked to reveal unnecessary personal

information and they should be able to give their views anonymously if they so wish. Interviewers and facilitators must be trained to help customers feel at ease and encourage them to participate freely and honestly.

Challenge:
Customers may be inclined to express unrealistic expectations or to make unrealistic demands on government.

Response:

Customers must be informed of what is realistic

While the consultation must be fair, frank and open, it must also be firm and it must be made clear to customers what is reasonable and what is beyond the capacity of government to deliver. As mentioned before, a good approach is to engage customers in a plan to improve service standards incrementally over time. The idea is to work with customers in a spirit of co-operation and not to have confrontational debates and discussions.

Challenge:
The consultation process may tend to drag on and hamper or even delay service delivery.

Response:

Good management - be Frank, be Fair, and be Firm

As mentioned above, while every effort must be made to consult sensitively, one must be firm. If customers are seen to be dragging the process out unnecessarily, they must be encouraged to reach a conclusion. The three Fs of good management are a useful rule in situations like this, namely, be Frank, be Fair and be Firm.

STEP-BY-STEP GUIDE

When consulting stakeholders always bear in mind that the ultimate objective is to help you improve the levels of services you provide to customers. A useful mindset for consultation is that you need them more than they need you.

As is the case with all management interventions and processes to help improve service delivery, consultation needs to be:

- planned;
- implemented; and

- monitored.

For effective consultation, the following questions need to be addressed during these three phases:

Planning ("knowing"):

- What do I want to achieve?
- What do I want to know?
- Whom do I need to consult?
- What approach or methodology is best suited to my needs?
- What human, financial and other resources do I need?
- What resources do I have?
- What is the "gap"?
- How much time do I have?
- What are my priorities?

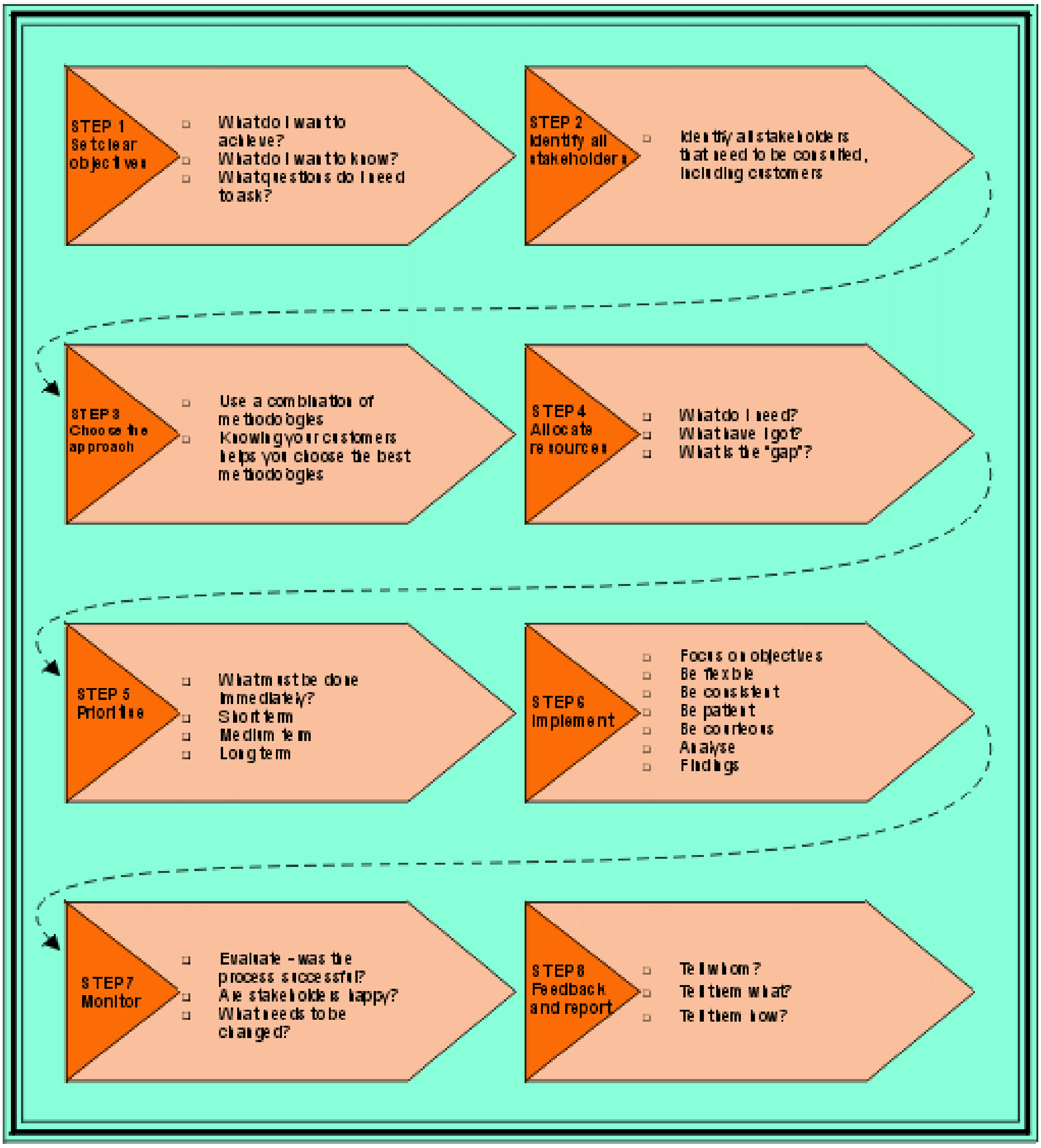
Implementation ("doing"):

- Was my planning accurate and comprehensive?
- Was I able to implement my plan?
- What needs to be changed?
- What form of analysis (of the results) is most suitable?
- What are my findings?

Monitoring:

- Are my findings valid?
- Will these findings help to improve service delivery?
- What must be reported and to whom?

STEPS TO SUCCESSFUL CONSULTATION



STEP 1

GETTING STARTED

Set clear objectives

For consultation to be successful it must be focused and directed and for this to happen, you should have very clear objectives**.**

For example, when consulting on setting service standards, your main objective will clearly be to improve service delivery. However, this is the desired outcome of the consultation process rather than a specific objective. In fact, the desired outcome of virtually all public service consultation will be improved service delivery.

Set clear objectives in line with the desired outcome

By setting specific objectives, in line with the desired outcome, you will be able to steer the consultation process towards this outcome.
The specific issues that you will be consulting on will relate to the quality and quantity of the services provided by your department/component/institution. So you will need to formulate questions around these issues, for example:

- "What services do you (the customer) need that you are not getting now?”
- “What problems do you (the customer) have with the quality of current service delivery?”
- “How can we improve the quality of our service delivery?”
- “What service standards do you think would be acceptable?”
- “Are you (the customer) able to access our services easily?”
- “Are our staff knowledgeable, helpful and friendly?’
- “Do you have to stand in long queues?
- “For how long do you have to queue before you are served?”
- “Is the signage to service points helpful and easy to understand (see guide on Wayfinding and signage)?”
- “How can we make your life easier?”
- “How often do you use our services?”

Know you business – be familiar with aspects of service delivery

In order to formulate useful and meaningful questions, you must know your business. You must be familiar with every aspect of your unit’s service delivery and with the sort of problems encountered in the past.

Before you even think of contacting stakeholders to ask them for their opinions on the current levels of service delivery, make sure that you have a very clear idea of what it is you wish to discuss and what you expect to learn from the consultation. Set clear objectives for the consultation process right from the start.

Set realistic targets in terms of what you can afford and your capacity to deliver

Another important thing that you have to bear in mind when formulating questions is not to raise customers' expectations unrealistically. Make sure you do not give them the impression that they can have anything they want or that they can have five-star service delivery in terms of first world standards, when that is not affordable or achievable in the short to medium term. Be realistic in terms of what you can afford and in terms of your capacity to deliver.

The above questions relate to consulting in order to set service standards, rather than to how to consult, which is the topic of this guide. For more detailed information on how to set service standards please refer to the guide on setting service standards.

"What I hope to achieve" normally relates to a broad, overall objective or outcome, such as improved service delivery in the case of setting service standards. Answers to "What I need to know" will help us define specific objectives such as specific service standards.

It may seem like stating the obvious, but it is a helpful discipline to identify from the outset what exactly it is that you want to know. This usually falls into three categories:

- Things I have to know.
- Things it would be helpful to know.
- Things it would be interesting to know.

Answers to these questions will help you direct and focus the consultation process and not waste time and resources on largely irrelevant discussions. However, one should be careful not to be too rigid as you may find that there are things your customers wish to tell you that you had not thought of asking them and which could be very helpful in helping you to improve the consultation process and achieve your objectives.

Setting clear objectives is important as it sets the tone for the rest of the consultation process

Setting clear objectives is critically important as it sets the tone for the rest of the consultation process. Care should be taken to ensure that objectives do not refer to vague outcomes, but rather to tangible and measurable results of the consultation process. For example, if one were consulting to set service standards, the objective would be to come up with standards that are S.M.A.R.T., which, as we all know, stands for standards that are **S**pecific, **M**easurable, **A**chievable, **R**ealistic and **T**ime-bound.

If care is taken to ensure that one has specific and measurable objectives the whole consultation process will be simplified and it will be so much easier to evaluate and monitor progress

Apart from the specific objectives, there are general objectives that apply to all consultation processes. These objectives relate to effective consultation.

In this sense, what I hope to achieve is:

- co-operation and buy-in to the consultation process by all participants and stakeholders; and
- a constructive consultation process that yields good and reliable information.

And what I need to know might be:

- How can I get my customers' buy-in and co-operation to the consultation process?
- How can I ensure that the consultation process is constructive so that I am able to get good information? And
- What do I need to do to help my customers relax and participate freely and honestly in the consultation process?
- How will I prevent disputes and how will I resolve them if they do arise?

In relation to the last question, it is a very good idea to establish the ground rules of the consultation process with customers right at the outset. Agree with them what consensus means, how disputes will be handled and who will arbitrate if consensus cannot be achieved.

Some people have found that it is very useful to get all the key stakeholders to sign a protocol, which spells out the ground rules of the consultation process and stipulates how people are expected to behave. Then, when or if things go wrong, one can simply revisit the protocol. This can help to prevent avoid unpleasant situations from arising, as once the protocol has been signed by all key stakeholders, one has a basis for getting on with the job at hand without unnecessary interruptions and stoppages.

Implant the values of Batho Pele into your consultation process

The values of *Batho Pele* and the principles of *courtesy, information* and *openness and transparency* will be very helpful and relevant here and will ensure that the spirit of *Batho Pele* informs the whole consultation process

A good principle in working through these questions is to try to put yourself in your customers' shoes. Try to imagine what it is like to be one of your customers and how you would respond to consultation. Go through the process internally, using staff who will be involved in the process, and ask the sorts of questions as listed above for setting service standard objectives. Write down the responses. Discuss these responses among yourselves and then plan your consultation process.

Apart from being a very good way of preparing for the consultation process, this role-play will help to get buy-in and commitment to the process from your staff.

STEP 2

WHOM DO I NEED TO CONSULT?

Once the objectives have been set, it is necessary to define the target audience

Once the objectives of the consultation process have been set, it will be necessary to define the target audience of the consultation exercise very carefully. For example, if the purpose or objective of the consultation process is to establish whether people in rural areas are able to access your services satisfactorily, there will be little or no need to consult with customers in urban areas.

Thus the main question to ask here is:

- Whom should I consult and what are their responses likely to be?

Again, it is a good idea to role-play this question internally to prepare for the consultation process.
Make sure you define your stakeholders, including customers,

carefully, not overlooking any group or individual and taking special care to identify the following categories, of customers, among others:

- rural and urban;
- young and old;
- educated and uneducated or literate and semi-literate; and
- historically marginalised customers.

These different categories of customers might have very different needs and expectations and will certainly need very different approaches to the consultation process.

For example, semi-literate or illiterate customers will not be able to respond effectively to a postal survey unless special arrangements are made to provide interpreters to help them respond to the questions. The same may apply to children and old people. The elderly may not be able to attend focus group discussions or they may expect you to come to them rather than the other way around. The strategies employed to help children co-operate and feel at home and comfortable in the consultation process will be very different from those employed with adults.

Certain stakeholders will tend to be more important, depending on the nature of the issues being discussed. For example labour unions will tend to be more relevant to consultation on conditions of service and employment, while certain pressure groups may be more interested in issues affecting the environment and certain CBOs and NGOs will need to be involved in matters concerning the communities in which they operate.

The following are examples of issues that affect specific stakeholder groups and may be used as a guide to assist in deciding who should be consulted on certain issues:

- issues that directly affect a significant group in the community, for example the care for AIDS orphans or school entry levels
- a proposal that will significantly affect the rights and entitlements of community members;
- an issue that directly and significantly affects the natural environment;
- issues on which a significant number of people, or particular groups, are likely to have strong views;

- issues that are likely to affect the quality of life of citizens; and
- issues on which government has insufficient information to make a decision.

Talk to front-line staff

As mentioned earlier, it is a good idea to involve staff in planning for consultation. Front-line staff are at the coalface of service delivery. They are close to your customers and should be well positioned to express their views on certain issues and on how to deal with customers in the consultation process. Make sure that they and their input is not overlooked when deciding who should be consulted.

STEP 3

WHAT IS THE BEST APPROACH?

After defining one's objectives and deciding who should be consulted, the question that needs to be addressed is: What approach is most likely to give me the best results, one-on-one interviews or group discussions or postal questionnaires, etc?

All sorts of considerations influence the method

There is no one 'right' method or approach that will work for any given circumstance. All sorts of considerations influence the decision on which consultative process to use and there are no guarantees that just because one method worked well once, it will do so again.

The methodology selected should suit the stakeholder/customer, not the provider of the service. In fact it is a good idea to ask your stakeholders what approach or combination of approaches would suit them best. In the end you will have to decide how you wish to conduct the consultation, but your stakeholders/customers will appreciate being consulted and are likely to be more co-operative as a result.

Using a variety of methodologies will normally provide a more reliable result, but, if you do this, be prepared for apparent differences to arise. These will have to be resolved in the analysis exercise.

The following are some useful tips when choosing your method of consultation:

- Use more than one method. This increases the chances of a better and more representative response – both in terms of quality and quantity.

- Be prepared to deal with seeming differences or contradictions if and when they arise. There is no single view that represents the "customers' view", and consensus between all customers is highly unlikely. The "customers' view" will need to be arrived at through a process of analysis, either statistical or interpretative.
- Knowing something about the stakeholders you wish to consult, will help you choose the most suitable method or combination of approaches. The table below gives some general advice on reasons and methods that can be used.

A summary of different consultation methodologies or approaches is provided below.

Opinion surveys

These are scientific and objective and are helpful in identifying overall customer concerns, establishing baselines and tracking changes over time. The surveys can take the form of postal surveys where questionnaires are sent to respondents for them to fill in and return or they can be based on face-to-face interviews. In the latter case far fewer respondents are used and the interviewer meets with all the respondents on a face-to-face basis and discusses the relevant issue(s) with them.

Postal surveys, involving a large number of respondents lend themselves to statistical analysis. This is referred to as the quantitative approach as the findings can be presented or expressed in percentages, such as, 65% of respondents would like clinics to be open in the evenings from 18h00 to 22h00.

Face-to-face interviews are better suited to determining people's perceptions and can be very effective if only a small group of people can be surveyed. In the interview situation the participant can be asked for his or view and why he or she holds this view. This type of probing is not possible with postal surveys.

This approach is referred to as the qualitative approach and the findings are based on interpretative analysis. Results are never expressed in terms of percentages and are more likely to be couched in the following terms: "There is a clear need for clinics to be open in the evenings to accommodate working mothers and other people who find it difficult to attend during normal working hours."

These types of surveys are best carried out by outside consultants as stakeholders, especially customers, often find it difficult to be frank with departmental staff and they require

The main advantages of postal surveys are the low unit cost of each response and the potential to achieve a fairly high volume of returns, increasing confidence in the validity of the final results.

Questionnaires for postal surveys must be kept short, should be couched in simple language and must be relatively easy to complete. Long, complicated forms will reduce response rates. Care must be exercised when constructing questions; they should:

- be written so that each respondent will read them and understand them in the same way;
- be neutral in tone so that the respondent is not led to a particular response; and
- flow logically, following a particular logical sequence and train of thought, rather than making abrupt changes in subject matte.

Care must be taken in introducing the questionnaire. A covering letter explaining the purpose of the survey and underlining what will happen with the answers will help those responding

Useful tips on developing questionnaires

- **Use simple everyday language**. In particular, avoid jargon and acronyms – no matter how familiar the terms may be to you, you cannot be sure your respondents will know what they mean.
- **Keep questions simple.** Do not use complex constructions and try to avoid negative statements where possible.
- **Be consisten**t. When developing possible response frameworks, go from extreme positive to the extreme negative, with a neutral answer in the middle and maintain that approach throughout. For example, offer respondents the choice between "Never", "Sometimes" and "Always" or between "Poor", "Average" and "Excellent".

Telephone surveys are being increasingly used as a means of collecting data quickly and at a relatively low cost. They involve calling targeted individuals, usually without prior warning, running through a series of questions on the telephone and writing down the answers given on a prepared, standard answer sheet.

The main advantages are that a relatively high volume of data can be obtained fairly cheaply and at off-peak times of the day, which allows contact with people who might be hard to reach during working hours.

The principal, but very substantial disadvantage is that many people fear that these calls are actually thinly disguised sales pitches and react badly to them.

A well designed telephone survey can actually combine data gathering and data entry, as the response given can be captured immediately and the results can be generated very speedily.

Clipboard surveys involve approaching customers using public services and prompting them to answer a set of pre-determined questions. Clipboard surveys need to be kept reasonably short; as customers will not welcome being detained for extended periods. The questions also need to be fairy short and simple, capable of being understood without having to be read.

One major advantage of clipboard surveys is the opportunity they provide to show cards or other visual aids, which can be very useful in reminding people of possible answers.

Unless a substantial sample of customers can be surveyed, it is better to use a qualitative approach based on face-to-face interviews, which employs interpretative analysis rather than statistical analysis. Statistics can be misleading, especially if based on inadequate samples. The preferred methodology to establish customer and stakeholder perceptions is undoubtedly the qualitative and interpretative approach.

There is an old saying about statistical research that goes like this: “Be careful not to use statistics like a blind man uses a lamp post, for support rather than illumination."

Focus groups

These are small groups of stakeholders/customers, meeting together informally to discuss a particular issue with the help of an independent facilitator and without anyone from the organisation present. The group is brought together by invitation in a relaxed and informal setting.

The ideal number of participants in a focus group is between 8 and 12.

The facilitator takes the group through a series of questions that are deliberately designed to prompt discussion on the relevant issue and he or she tries to ensure the maximum level of participation from all members of the group. The facilitator may also use prepared materials to stimulate discussion. It is usually necessary to provide an incentive for people to attend in the form of a cash payment and refreshments are also normally available.

It is important that the facilitator is someone with proper training for this kind of exercise who is recognisably independent of the department/institution and the issue being discussed. This will defuse possible confrontations and will also help to eliminate the natural inclination of people to avoid the truth where it might offend.

Unskilled facilitators may find themselves drawn into the argument, rather than just prompting and observing. This can cause serious problems of objectivity and credibility.

Individual contact

Every exchange with individual customers provides an opportunity to find out what they think. Staff should be encouraged to use personal interviews, telephone calls and letters to seek customers' views. Follow -up interviews can also be used to find out how individuals feel about the consultation process and/or the services offered.

Public meetings

Public meetings are often presented as consultation, but usually fall well short of what is needed if one genuinely wants to seek the views of the public. Meetings with a good turnout there are usually too big to

allow for much discussion, so that the only views heard are those from the front or perhaps those of a vocal minority.
More often, these meetings have very poor and unrepresentative turnouts and attract only those with a special or vested interests. They can however serve as a platform to provide information to stakeholders and customers and this can be coupled with other methods of consultation, such as distributing and collecting questionnaires.

Panels

Panels are groups of people who have committed themselves to responding on a regular basis to consultation exercises. They are thus very useful to track changes in the way people see things
and because of the commitment involved they can usually guarantee a higher response rate than a fresh, random sample of respondents would. The main disadvantages of panels are the need to maintain the database of addresses and the possible perpetuation of any bias that may exist in the panel.

The table below provides guidance on the method of consultation and the rationale that may be used for different target groups:

TARGET GROUP	TYPE OF CONSULTATION	RATIONALE
Frequent and regular users of the service: □ Individuals and special interest groups who know about your service □ The general public if your service or the issue is popular or particularly important □ Staff	□ Postal questionnaires □ Face-to-face interviews	The participants: □ are already aware of the Issues; □ are probably interested; and □ do not need detailed additional information.
Infrequent users of the service: □ Potential users □ Broad interest groups □ Non-users	□ Meetings □ Open days □ Focus groups □ Discussions	They need information before they are able to respond.

The table below indicates the types of views you might expect from different stakeholders

TYPE OF GROUP	EXPECTED VIEW
Individual users	A view of service as individual has experienced it. A snapshot of the way services are experienced.
User groups/panels/meetings	'Non-expert' views from customers of your service. This can help you see a different perspective.
Representative groups	Considered thoughts and proposals based on good knowledge of the service you provide and what customers of your service want. Sometimes views may be stronger than those of the average customer.
General public	Can be useful indicators of problems and preferences with service provision.
Sounding boards (non-users)	Relatively impartial views on proposals – useful for testing proposals and plans
Staff	Experience of a range of customers' views, combined with knowledge about the practical aspects of providing the service

When deciding on a methodology think about the type of responses you are likely to get from different groups. Be prepared for differing responses from stakeholders who are experts in a field and those who are less familiar with it.

Decide how you are going to weight views. Whose opinions are most important? Can you please everybody? How are you going to explain the decisions you have taken to different stakeholders?

STEP 4

RESOURCE ALLOCATION

Having decided what the objectives of the consultation process are, who should be consulted and what approach or approaches should be employed, one needs to resource the exercise.

Resourcing starts with determining what resources in the form of manpower, money and other physical resources such as vehicles, meeting rooms, etc, will be required for the consultation process. At this stage one should also establish the timeframes for the consultation – how long is it going to take and by when are the results required.

Once this has been done, one needs to check what resources one has available. This will enable one to determine the shortfall or “gap” in resources. Clearly the gap has to be addressed and one must determine to what extent and how one can “fill” the gap. For example, human resources may need to be trained and/or recruited, time frames extended and buildings hired.

All of these considerations have financial implications. If there are insufficient funds to do everything, one will have to prioritise the activities – see next section, Step 5.

Develop appropriate time frames

The length of time consultation takes is often underestimated. Different methods of consultation will require different timeframes. Timing of consultation should be built into the planning process from the beginning to have the best prospects of improving the proposals concerned and so that sufficient time is left for it at each stage.

Timeframes should be flexible to allow for the communities and community groups to consider and respond to consultation items. Talking to stakeholders and finding out about their schedule can be of assistance in this regard, so that you can be able to accommodate them.

It is advisable to allow:

- adequate time to design your survey instrument properly;
- more time than you anticipate you need for active consultation; and

- adequate time to analyse the consultation results and to write the report.

Develop a budget
Consider all aspects of the process and allocate funds so that that the process is sustainable.

STEP 5

SETTING PRIORITIES
As mentioned above, once one knows what is possible within available resources, one needs to set priorities for the consultation process.

For example, it may not be possible to recruit or train a person or to hire the services of a consultant through the tender process to conduct face-to-face interviews, within the prescribed time limits. This will mean either scrapping that particular element of the consultation process or deferring it. Either way, one will have to decide what should be done now.

In setting priorities it is useful to divide objectives into the following two categories:

- Must dos or Must haves; and
- Nice to dos or Nice to haves.

Things that have to be done are those that are essential to get a valid result. For example a set of face-to-face interviews, involving the services of a professional consultant. There may not be time to conduct an extensive postal survey to verify results or sufficient funds to conduct focus groups on particular aspects. In these circumstances one may well decide to go ahead with the face-to-face interviews, noting that focus groups will only be relevant if there are major discrepancies in the findings or if serious issues are raised that need to be resolved by way of focus groups.
If a statistical result is required, one may need to scrap the option of also conducting the interviews and focus groups and put one's limited resources into ensuring a sufficiently large response to validate statistical analyses.

Another example of setting priorities would be if one wanted to introduce a helicopter emergency medical rescue service in a rural area where there were no roads, one would not necessarily have to consult customers in urban or other rural areas. In fact, this may simply raise a whole host of issues related to customers feeling neglected in the light of the services being offered to the particular rural area. Thus, if time and limited resources did not allow for fully comprehensive consultation, one could decide to proceed as suggested.

In setting priorities, one should be careful not to base one's decisions entirely on financial considerations. Often, one or two relatively expensive exercises, delivering quality results, are preferable to a range of affordable, but less significant operations.

There is a saying in the field of management, which states that if money or finances are the only or main consideration in deciding what can and cannot be done, the tail will often wag the dog. Rather set priorities based on deliverable and desired results, than on affordability. It is often the case that one is able to do more with less, by which we mean, a few good results are worth more than a lot of dubious results.

Finally, in the case of improving service standards, always consult customers when setting priorities. They will guide you on what is essential right now and what can be implemented over time.

STEP 6

IMPLEMENTATION

Once you have clearly identified your objectives, your customers, your approach or methodology, allocated your resources and set your priorities, it is time to implement the consultation process.

The first thing to do is to communicate your objectives to your customers. While consultation is one of the *Batho Pele* principles, the whole process should be conducted within the spirit of *Batho Pele*. Thus it is important to be open and frank with your customers and tell them precisely what you wish to discuss with them, why you wish to consult them and what you hope to achieve through this process.

This will help you establish whether your planning was thorough and relevant and whether it was implementable or "doable". Be prepared to amend your approach as a result of the input you receive from stakeholders/customers at this point. Clearly, you must ensure that, if you amend your approach, you will still achieve your objectives.

If you have to adjust your strategies at this point, do so and then get on with the actual consultation. Implement the approaches you have chosen and record the results.

Next you have to analyse the results, either statistically or interpretatively and come up with your findings. Once your findings are clear you need to confirm that they are valid. As mentioned, the analysis process can lead to invalid deductions, if for example, the sample was too small to support a statistical finding or if the interpretative reasoning was faulty and led to the wrong conclusions. Check your findings for consistency and accuracy. Do they make sense? Are they supported by the facts? Will your approach stand up to critical scrutiny?

It may be necessary to test your findings against a sample group of stakeholders/customers. For example, if one of your findings is that only customers in urban areas want to be consulted, you will certainly have to go back to a sample of rural customers and test this finding on them.

STEP 7

MONITOR

Evaluating the effectiveness of your consultation is vital. There are many models for evaluation, but try to keep it simple. If you have planned properly, with clear, measurable objectives, then the evaluation process should be straightforward.

Effective evaluation tells you what worked and what did not and why. It helps to make sure that you get the best value for money from investments in time, effort and resources. If one particular method has not worked well, try to establish the reasons. Problems are always much clearer with the benefit of hindsight and, once identified, will help you avoid the same pitfalls the next time. Equally, if something worked well, try to assess why it was successful, so that you can build on it.

At the end of the process you want to be able to evaluate the:

- ***Outcomes***
- Did you achieve your stated objectives? For example, to build as clinic and has this led to improved service delivery?
- Were the views of the target group(s) obtained?
- Was feedback given to those consulted?
- Did stakeholders feel that the consultation was worthwhile?
- Has anything changed as a result of the consultation?
- Did you get views and information that you could use?
- Have you actually used those views?
- Has the consultation lead to some identifiable change in your services and/or policy?
- Has the consultation changed the relationship between the department and its customers?
- Are there areas that need further improvement?

- ***Methods***
- Were the methods used right for your objectives?
- If you used more than one method, which worked better and why?

- ***Time***
- Were the time-lines clear and kept to? If not, why not?
- Was sufficient time allowed for responses?

- **Costs**
- Did you manage your resources cost effectively?
- Was the process adequately budgeted for?
- Were savings made in particular areas or was there over-expenditure in others and what were the reasons?
- Were there unforeseen costs, and what were they?

STEP 8

FEEDBACK/REPORT

There should be clear timeframes outlining when the outcomes of consultation will be known. This should be done as part of the initial planning process. The planning process should identify the people that need feedback and how it will be given to them.

It is very important in order to cement relationships with respondents and win their confidence in the consultation process that they should be singled out for special feedback, perhaps at a special function organised to thank them for their participation.

Reports detailing the outcomes of consultation should be written in plain language and should include:

- acknowledgement of the contributions by the various participating parties;
- an outline of the consultation process;
- evidence that customers' inputs have been taken into account; and
- a summary of the results.

Where major changes are being implemented after wide consultation, consideration should be given to obtaining exposure in the mass media such as newspapers, radio and television. Media consultants are normally the most effective way of obtaining such exposure, but whatever approach is used, the spokesperson for the department or institution must be clearly identified and trained to handle the media.

KEY CONSIDERATIONS

- Consultation must be seen to benefit stakeholders. If there is a suspicion that consultation is mere "window dressing" the process and the department/institution will lose all credibility. Thus the findings of the consultative process must be made public and it must be demonstrated how these findings have been taken into account in subsequent decisions and actions.
- Staff must commit to the process.
- Staff must be trained to consult effectively and to handle complaints.
- Consultation takes time and money and thus it must be carefully planned.
- The actual consultation is often best left to experienced professionals who are familiar with the different methodologies or approaches and who are unlikely to arrive at invalid conclusions.
- Avoid being patronising. Take customers and their views seriously.
- Finally, when in doubt, consult your customers and other stakeholders. This will entrench the spirit of *Batho Pele*.

USEFUL REFERENCES

1. The *Batho Pele* White Paper; Notice 1459; 1997
2. The Constitution; Act 108;1996
3. Consultation Manual; Australian Capital Territory Government; 2002
4. An Introductory Guide -How to Consult Your Users; United Kingdom Government – Cabinet Office; 2002
5. Committed to Quality-Buckinghamshire Country Council- How to Consult; 2000