

1. Who is this Code of Practice for?

- Voluntary and Community Sector Groups
- Public Sector Bodies

2. What is the Gloucestershire Compact?

The Gloucestershire Compact is an agreement between local public sector bodies and the voluntary and community sector to support and improve partnership working between the sectors. It is underpinned by Codes of Practice, based on the national Codes, which cover the following areas:

- Advancing Equality
- Commissioning
- Community Groups
- Consultation
- Mediation
- Multi-sector Partnerships
- Volunteering

The Gloucestershire Compact and its Codes contain specific undertakings for each sector, as well as a series of joint undertakings, which aim to make a positive impact on partnership working in the county. In this context, the term “undertaking” commits partners to work towards the principle or action in question.

3. What is the aim of this Code of Practice?

This Code of Practice aims to make a positive impact on the relationship between the public sector and the voluntary and community sector (VCS) and their joint commitment to implementing effective consultation processes to enhance partnership work. It aims to set a framework for:

- Understanding the purposes and need for effective consultation
- Encouraging better practice in planning and undertaking consultations
- Enabling policy development and service planning to take account of the needs of a diverse range of groups

4. What is Consultation?

Consultation is the process by which organisations seek the views of individuals, local groups and the wider community, in the course of planning and delivering services. Effective consultation helps to ensure that public sector bodies develop and review their policies, taking into account the potential impact that these policies and proposals may have on different sectors of society.

For voluntary and community organisations, consultation presents an opportunity to bring their knowledge, experience and expertise to bear on behalf of the people and causes that they work for. Voluntary and community organisations may also carry out consultation exercises with their member organisations, users or with public sector partners.

Consultation has to be an open and meaningful process if it is to command credibility and make the best use of time and resources for all those involved. A variety of methods may be used, including postal surveys, meetings, focus groups or user panels. Each method may involve a different level of participation, and it is important to be clear about the level of participation required from those being consulted.

Whatever level of participation is desired, the key principles of consultation are:

- Be clear about why you are consulting, for example as part of an Equality Impact Assessment - make it clear what can and can't be changed as a result of the consultation
- Ensure that the method chosen is appropriate for the target audience - be flexible and sensitive to the needs of those you wish to consult, and encourage them to give honest views
- Report back on the views received and what you have and haven't done as a result

The principles outlined above, and the undertakings which follow, cover all forms of consultation, whether relating to the development of new policies, strategies and services, or to the review of existing ones. Enabling others to contribute to this process will lead to more realistic policy which better reflects people's needs and wishes, and will help to deliver better services.

5. Joint Undertakings

All partners to the Gloucestershire Compact are committed to working together to continually improve the effectiveness of the relationship between the public sector and the voluntary and community sector, and undertake to:

- 5.1 Adhere to the key principles as outlined in Section 4 above.
- 5.2 Build consultation processes into planning cycles and consult at the earliest opportunity.
- 5.3 Prepare consultation methods and materials that will be easily understood by the intended audience.
- 5.4 Ensure that seldom heard groups are considered and included when planning consultations, making use of appropriate good practice proofing tools such as equality impact assessment tools.
- 5.5 Recognise that allowing 12 weeks is good practice when consulting with the VCS in order to accommodate the work cycles of organisations, but that this is not always practical or the most appropriate timescale. If a period of less than 12 weeks has been chosen, give clear reasons why.
- 5.6 Comply with Freedom of Information, Data Protection and Human Rights legislation when preparing and running consultations.
- 5.7 Publicise any major consultation exercises and encourage wide participation by working with VCS support and development organisations.
- 5.8 Give feedback on the outcome of the consultation to those who have been consulted.

- 5.9 Evaluate consultation methods with a view to developing and spreading best practice.
- 5.10 Work together to improve co-ordination of consultations and to enable the sharing of consultation results across agencies.
- 5.11 Be sensitive to the resource implications for organisations if they are expected to consult with their members
- 5.12 Ensure that research and consultation is conducted and used in an objective and unbiased manner

6. Public Sector Undertakings

The Gloucestershire Compact public sector partners undertake to:

- 6.1 Build consultation into plans to change policy, strategy and service development, consult as early as possible and, where appropriate, involve the VCS at the developmental stage to identify implications for the sector.
- 6.2 Involve the VCS where appropriate when reviewing existing policies, strategies and services.
- 6.3 Be sensitive on a case by case basis to any additional resource implications for both the VCS and public sector in disseminating consultations.
- 6.4 Analyse the results of consultation exercises, and provide appropriate feedback to consultees.
- 6.5 Make it clear, if using VCS support and development organisations during a consultation, whether they are seeking the views of those organisations based on the knowledge and experience gleaned from direct contact with their members, or whether they are expecting those organisations to canvas the opinions of member groups and users in direct response to the specific consultation exercise.
- 6.7 Be aware of any potential conflict of interest arising from the subject of the consultation and those being consulted.

7. Voluntary and Community Sector Undertakings

The Gloucestershire Compact voluntary and community sector partners undertake to:

- 7.1 Strive to play a full and active part in responding to consultation exercises with the public sector.
- 7.2 Use the most appropriate methods to ensure effective participation when consulting with users, volunteers, members and supporters.
- 7.3 Make it clear when responding to consultations, if the views represented are based on their knowledge and experience gleaned from direct contact with their members over a period of time, or if they are the actual opinions of member groups and users in direct response to the specific consultation exercise.
- 7.4 Ensure that consultation responses are accurate, objective and unbiased.
- 7.5 Consider the implications for public sector partners when developing new policies and procedures, or when reviewing existing ones.
- 7.6 Act professionally, transparently and responsibly when responding to any consultation from which it could potentially benefit, financially or otherwise.