

Consulting Your Community: Guidance Notes

Introduction

As church members, it can feel daunting to know how to do this for the communities in which we live. This is especially true in rural parishes, where PCCs and congregations can already feel overstretched beyond their capacity.

As a church, you may have come to Community Consultation because you have a vision for the future but acknowledge that you will need help to achieve this. Or it could be that you really have no idea what your community might want or need. More likely, you are somewhere in between.

But whatever your plans, whether vague or fully formed, consulting your community will be a vital part of moving forward.

Why consult your community?

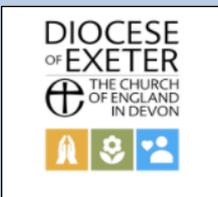
It can be all too easy for us to assume that, simply because they do not attend church regularly, our communities don't care about the church. For many, particularly in rural communities, the church has been the centre of village life for centuries and holds special memories for people.

The presence of the building, in particular, can be hugely significant to members of our communities. And so, if changes are planned to the building or worship pattern for example, you will need community support. Pressing ahead with plans without allowing your community to have a voice can lead to difficult relationships between church and community.

But giving your community an opportunity to hear about your plans, to discuss them with you and to give their opinion will speak volumes to them about how you see your church as part of community life.

Consulting your community will enable you to know who is around you and what they need or would like to see happening in your church building. You may well find there is lots of help and support in your community, and whatever you choose or are able to do as a result will be far more likely to succeed as it will be born out of genuine community need.

Lastly, if your vision involves a project that will need grant funding to go ahead, you will need evidence of community support for your application. Grant assessors are very good at spotting when a consultation has been done simply to satisfy a grant application and not to genuinely shape the project itself.



We are grateful to [Exeter Diocese](#) for kindly sharing their expertise in this field with us and whose guidance notes formed the basis of this document. Links to Exeter's [How to Write a Survey](#) document and their [Interactive Consultation](#) video are included below and are highly recommended resources to draw on as you plan your community consultation.

What to expect/ be prepared for

If you ask for the community's views you need to be prepared to respond to them. When you consult your community it is important that you go into the process with an open mind. It is very likely that you will get some comments and suggestions that excite and challenge you, or that you disagree with or which are difficult to hear.

Are you open to making changes that might be outside your comfort zone if there is a community need for something different? Spend some time as a group thinking this through. It can be helpful to spend some time reflecting on how these possibilities make you feel, both on an individual level and as a church group. You may be able to see the need for change but personally find it hard to deal with. It's important to acknowledge this.

The people on your project team should be the people most open to change and challenge (and do not have to all be PCC members) but it's important that they know they are supported by the majority of the church members even if some of those people will find the consultation difficult.

Who to consult

In many communities, especially those in rural areas, it is very likely that as a group you already know a great many of your local community and are already working to serve them in many different ways in your day to day lives. It's worth taking some time before you begin to plan your consultation to map this out and get a picture of who and how you are already communicating with people.

The following resources can be helpful to expand your knowledge of your parish demographics:

- Your [Parish Dashboard](#) which provides you with an overview of your worshipping community, but also provides you with some basic demographic information about your wider community, including the percentages of people in a range of age groups.
- The National Church's interactive [ArcGIS mapping system](#) which holds deprivation statistics at parish level also shows the legal boundaries for each parish.
- The Church Urban Fund also has a helpful [look up tool](#) which gives additional parish data in an accessible format
- the Government [NOMIS](#) system for labour market and neighbourhood statistics including age, health, religion, ethnicity, employment, education, and poverty profiles.

It's worth exploring this and comparing it with the previous list of people you already know. It can be very interesting to see where the gaps are and which age groups you are most or least in contact with.

It's also helpful to know the breakdown of your community and whose voice is missing from your knowledge as you plan your consultation as each age group may communicate most effectively in a different way.

It will also be important to think about whose voice you need to hear. You might be consulting the whole community about changes to your building or worship. Or you might need to work with a smaller group – if you are considering setting up a toddler group for example.

Feasibility vs project planning

Usually your first consultation will be around the feasibility of starting a project. At this stage you are just trying to gauge whether there is sufficient support in the community to justify you putting your energy into a project. This could just be whether people care that the church building is open, are willing to support with the repair and maintenance of it, or just to give you some indication of what they would like to see happening in the building. Remember at this stage you are not asking if they would be willing to commit to anything or setting up any formal groups as a result.

If your aim is to set up a Friends Group, once you have established that you have support you need to secure the governance of the building. The PCC can then approach people who expressed an interest directly to formally set up the group. Information of setting up a Friends Group can be found on our website using the following link: [Friends Schemes, Lotteries and Raffles \(anglican.org\)](http://anglican.org)

If there is interest in undertaking a bigger project you will need to make sure you consult with the Diocesan Team. The Archdeacon's Office is a good place to start and they can direct you to who would be best placed to support you. It may be helpful to note that bigger projects will involve further consultation with your community and stakeholders along the way.

How does information travel in your community?

Think about the last time you heard about an event that was happening or something new that was starting. Where did you find out about it, what made you notice it and pay attention? Try to think as well of something you missed out on because you didn't know about it, when did you last notice a planning application on a telegraph pole for example? Pay attention to how information naturally passes around your community.

If you are trying to consult an age group you know little about try to talk with someone in that group you know even if they are not local, a grandchild or a friend in full time employment for example, and ask them what communication methods they frequently use.

If you want to get the best results from your consultation, it's important that you try to use the communication tools that THEY are comfortable with not those that YOU are comfortable with necessarily.

Planning your consultation

When you come to plan your consultation, start by defining the overall aim of the process from the PCC's perspective. Try to sum up what you want to find out in no more than three questions. At this stage they will be big, overarching questions such as, 'Should we close the church building?', 'Why don't more people from the village come to services?' or 'What activities are missing in this village?' These are your **RESEARCH** questions to help you as a church focus your thinking first before deciding what specifically may be helpful to consult the community on.

The next step is to identify your 'No Go' areas. It will do more damage to give the community carte blanche to comment on what they would like if you already know that there are areas that you won't be able, or don't want to change. It's worth taking the time to talk this through so you are all absolutely clear about what you mean. For example, you might initially say you don't want to make changes to the Chancel. Does this mean you want to keep it exactly as it is, or do you mean you want to retain the Chancel solely for worship, but that you might be open to minor improvements to enhance the atmosphere?

It is helpful at the planning stage to consider any Mission Action Planning that has taken place recently within the deanery or the parish to see how your thinking fits in to that. If your Mission Action Plan is out of date, you may wish to explore our [Parish Planning tool](#) to help inform your thinking. Our Parish Development Advisors can be contacted to support you through the Parish Planning process. As well as local Mission Action Planning it would be helpful to reflect on our [Diocesan Common Vision](#) as a source of inspiration.

It is also worth looking through some previous faculty applications and re-reading the last Statement of Significance you wrote to see if there are areas the DAC have already flagged up as particularly significant. The DAC also have a helpful resource with guidance on producing a *Statement of Need (SoN)*, which you may need to consider if you identify a use for your building that has support but that might require changes to the building to be considered. As consultation and evidence gathering are also part of the *SoN* process you may find reviewing this [SoN guidance](#) provides you with additional insight whilst at the consultation planning stage.

Ways of consulting – pros and cons

There are lots of different ways of consulting people, each has its own pro's and con's. You will get a different quality of information from each method. Each has its place when it is most appropriate and through the life of a project you will probably use each of these methods at different points.

It will also be important to think about any restrictions currently in place (such as COVID-19 guidance). Numbers able to meet in one place might mean that an open meeting isn't possible. But you will also need to think about people handling paperwork, or items you use for an interactive survey.

None of the regulations should mean that you are unable to consult your community, merely that you should take the safety of your community into account. If you have a good village website or Facebook group, there may be ways of using these. Think about any ways in which the travelling of information has changed while restrictions have been in place.

If, for any reason, restrictions mean that consulting your community doesn't feel possible at the moment, you will need to pause your project and wait until you can.

Surveys

Surveys are the simplest method of consultation. However, it is rare to get returns from more than a fraction of your community so is useful only to give a snapshot indication of what your community might think. Sometimes you learn what you need from the fact that people have not been motivated to complete and return them.

Think about where people frequently go in the village and aim to get collection points at them. This could be a box in the village shop or on the bar of the pub. There may be a point that is more specific to the group you are aiming to consult, for example if you are consulting about the needs of young families you could ask if the local school will have a collection point in their foyer.

You'll also need to consider the cost of printing and posting surveys and balance this with the likely return rate and quality of information.

Another consultation method might take a little more time and input but actually be cheaper and elicit better quality information.

You may find Exeter Diocese's "[How to write a survey](#)" toolkit helpful if you plan to consult in this way (some minor amendments will be needed to adapt it to an Oxford Diocese context, where we have Parish Share, rather than a Common Fund, for example).

Face to Face

Face to face consultation can feel a very daunting prospect. However, if you are able to do this you will get a much higher return rate and far more detailed information.

How you might do this will vary on your capacity and situation. In a small village you may be able to divide the houses between you and knock door to door. If not, then identify where lots of people go and located yourself there, maybe ask the local shop if you can stand outside and ask people if they have a few minutes as they go in.

Face to face consultation can also be very useful if there are already existing community gatherings e.g. a fete. Arranging to set up a gazebo at the event will give you the opportunity to tell people about your project as well as completing surveys with them. This can also be combined with other consultation methods (see consultation events)

Consultation events

Consultation events are a great way to get quality information from the community. They can also be good fun, and funders love to see evidence of them. You can ask a wide variety of questions in a number of interactive ways and set up rolling presentations to tell people about your ideas. Offering refreshments so that the team can sit down over a cup of tea or coffee and talk to people as they call in will also enable people from your community to share creative ideas you may never have thought of and gives you the chance to start building relationships with people in your community.

Open meetings

Open meetings can elicit a different quality of information from the community as there is opportunity for discussion. They can be a very effective way of kick starting a project.

Facilitating an open meeting is a skilled activity. If you don't have anyone in your group who has experience of facilitating this type of consultation then we strongly suggest that you discuss this possibility with the local Archdeacon's Office beforehand and see what support may be available and helpful, or whether an alternative method of consultation might be more appropriate.

Drop in

Drop in consultation often follows on from events where you have used interactive tools. It involves having one or two consultation activities set out somewhere that people can access such as the back of the church and encouraging people to call in and complete them at a time that suits them.

It is low maintenance as the activities can be left un-manned but uptake can vary greatly on where it is situated. For example, activities in a church building generally get very low uptake whereas activities in the foyer of a primary school can get lots of responses.

Interactive consultation

Using something interactive to encourage people to vote or make comment can be a fun and engaging way of involving the community. Interactive consultations don't need to be complicated, or difficult to manage – sticky stars make great voting tools. Exeter Diocese have produced a really helpful video with suggestions on how an [Interactive Consultation](#) can be carried out.

What next?

Any closed questions you have asked will be simple to analyse. Open questions and comments can be trickier (n.b closed and open questions are defined in Exeter Diocese's [How to write a Survey](#) document). One way to get some idea of trends is to read them through in a group or with another person and note down any words or phrases that jump out or are repeated often. You can then use these words as headings and note how many comments fall within each category.

When analysing your data, it's important to keep your aim in mind. What did you want to know from your consultation? How does your data help you answer that question?

When you have done this, you should be able to see if you have the support you need to move forward. If not, the data may help you identify other paths to take. Take time to talk and pray about these as a group. Remember the 'No Go' areas you thought of and make sure any alternatives do not take you into these.

As you move your project forward, make sure you continue to keep in touch with the relevant members of the Church House Oxford Team and your local Archdeaconry Team to ensure you get the support you need.

Church House Oxford Team

- Liz Kitch, Senior Buildings Advisor/ [DAC Secretary](#) –
- Maggie Metaliaj, [Pastoral Secretary](#)
- Josh Townsend, [Generous Giving Advisor](#)

Archdeaconry Teams

Berkshire

- Mr Rhodri Bowen, [Parish Development Advisor \(Berkshire\)](#).
- The Ven. Stephen Pullin, Archdeacon of Berkshire.
- The Revd Liz Jackson, Associate Archdeacon of Berkshire

Buckingham

- The Revd Gill Lovell, [Parish Development Advisor \(Buckingham\)](#)
- The Ven Guy Elsmore, Archdeacon of Buckingham
- The Revd Canon Chris Bull, Associate Archdeacon of Buckingham

Dorchester

- The Revd Canon Charles Chadwick, [Parish Development Advisor \(Dorchester\)](#)
- The Ven Judy French, Archdeacon of Dorchester
- The Revd Canon David Tyler, Associate Archdeacon of Dorchester

Oxford

- Mr Rhodri Bowen, [Parish Development Advisor \(Oxford\)](#)
- The Ven Jonathan Chaffey, Archdeacon of Oxford
- The Revd Canon Dr Peter Groves, Associate Archdeacon of Oxford