Using surveys to gather views

Why use a survey

Surveys can be a powerful tool for gathering community views on a topic. They can be used to understand how people feel about the places in their community, their experience of using facilities and their hopes for the future. This can be valuable insights when deciding where to invest time and money.

This guide introduces the kinds of information you can gather, how to write effective questions, how to use demographic information, options for conducting surveys and how to collate and present the information.

What to ask

A survey can help you to understand different aspects of how your community feels. The questions you ask will decide what you find out. It is worth considering what you want to know before starting out.

It may be useful to know which facilities people know about, which they use, and what they like & dislike about them.

It may also be useful to know what facilities are missing or people travel elsewhere for.

If the Parish Council has ideas for improvements or new projects, it is useful to gauge and evidence support. This will help prioritise and design projects.

How to ask

Open-ended questions allow you to gather ideas and answers you don't expect. For instance, "what would make the park better to use?" This style gives people freedom for their answer to reflect their ideas and feelings.

You might find that you get similar responses that allow you to see themes and priorities. You might also get a wide variety of answers and some unexpected ideas.

Closed-ended questions and multiple-choice questions allow you to gather a general view of people's feelings about a specific or narrow topic. For instance, "Do you think the park needs more seating? Yes/No/No opinion".

If 70% of people say "yes, the park needs more seating", it's a pretty clear that it would be welcome. This style will help you test support for ideas.

A 'Likert' such as this table below can be a good way of assessing support for multiple project ideas.

Project ideas	Strongly disapprove	Disapprove	No preference	Approve	Strongly approve
Add a climbing frame for under 10s to the play equipment at Stoney Road Park.					
Install a bus shelter for the northbound bus stop on Another Street					
Provide new flower planters on the corners of the village green					

Your survey will likely need a mixture of open and closed questions, just make sure the questions prompt people to give the kind of information you need. Consider how these questions prompt people to respond

Does the park need improving?	Prompts a yes/no response that could give an overall view whether people are content with the park.
What, if anything, needs to be better at the park?	Prompts an answer about downsides to the current facilities to fix.

| | Allows people to say they are content.

Prompts a free text answer that probably won't aggregate. |
|---|---|
| What changes or additions, if any, would make the park better? | Prompts an answer about improvements to the current facilities and gives opportunity for suggestions for new facilities.

Prompts a free text answer that probably won't aggregate. |

Consider how the questions you include work together. If you have asked about both how often the person uses a facility and how they feel about it, you can get a feel for why the facility works for the people that use it most and what puts off the people that seldom use it.

Things to remember

Be clear and concise	Use simple language and avoid jargon.
Be specific	Ask about one thing at a time to avoid confusion.
Avoid leading questions	Ensure your questions are neutral and do not suggest a particular answer.

Know who you are asking

It can be useful to know a little about who has given their views. For instance, if you are asking about facilities for young people, it may be helpful to know the age of people answering the survey or whether they are parents.

Collecting personal information must be done carefully and is governed by the General Data Protection Regulation. There is guidance available online on managing personal information. In general terms

- don't collect more than you need,
- don't keep it longer than you need,

- don't pass it on without permission,
- do keep it safely,
- do be clear about how it will be used.

Online, paper or in-person?

There are strengths and weaknesses to each approach and you may choose to combine them.

Online survey tools such as Microsoft Forms, Survey Monkey or Google Forms can be useful to reach more people. The links can be shared through email, websites and social media or through print using a QR code. The great advantages are that they can be completed by respondents at any time and they don't take a lot of time and money to run. The responses are easier to combine and display because the results are already digital. The downsides are that they require some basic internet skill to create and to complete, and there is no one to give extra explanation if it is needed.

Paper forms are accessible to most people but they can be costly to print, labour intensive to deliver and tricky to get returned.

In person surveying gives the most support to respondents and gives the opportunity to collect additional information. It is however the most time consuming to do so needs determined volunteers.

Before you start surveying people, test it on a few people to see how well it works. It's easy to write a question that people read differently to how it's intended. You might find that the test run will prompt people to make suggestions the questions don't cover. Doing a few practice runs will help iron out any confusing questions and highlight if there's any topics missing.

Links
[A guide to the data protection principles | ICO](#)

[Microsoft Forms - Free tool to create online surveys, forms, polls, and quizzes](#)

[Google Forms: Online form builder | Google Workspace](#)

[SurveyMonkey: The World's Most Popular Survey Platform](#)

[QR code generator | Microsoft Edge](#)