MERTON CONSULTATION DATABASE

An Interactive Qualifying Project
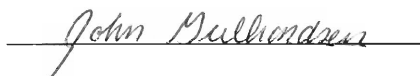
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1. **consultation**
2. **database**
3. **surveys**

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Abstract

Merton Council is the local government of the London Borough of Merton. The purpose of this project was to create a database using Microsoft Access and Active Server Pages to include data collected during public consultation performed by the Council, and to write a report on the consultation carried out by Merton Council. We completed the project by using techniques outlined in literature for interviewing, understanding consultation, and creating a database. The results of the project were a working database and a thorough consultation report.

Executive Summary

The city of London is divided into boroughs, each of which performs the local government function of a city. According to national law, all boroughs are required to consult with the public--that is, to obtain public opinion on government services, proposals, and workings. In May 2000, new legislation from the central government will come into effect requiring that all boroughs work to achieve Best Value, a mechanism for quality assurance in public service. Best Value legislation contains provisions for effective and efficient consultation. One of these provisions requires that each borough demonstrate that it is undertaking its consultation duties, while other provisions recommend that consultations be available to all council departments and that persons performing consultations conduct adequate research before beginning consultation exercises.

To meet these new Best Value laws, the London Borough of Merton requested that we create a database to include a thorough audit of all consultations conducted in the borough since January 1999, along with a few conducted earlier. This database will act as proof that Merton is conducting consultation, while serving as a central repository for all of the Council's consultation information.

Until recently, each of Merton Council's five departments (Chief Executive's; Housing and Social Services; Education, Leisure, and Libraries; Financial Services; and Environmental Services) generally conducted consultations independently of each other. As a result, there was little sharing of resources between departments in regard to consultation information. Teresa Payne, an employee in the Policy and Quality Division

of the Chief Executive's Department, commissioned this project to address the issue of scattered consultation information.

In order to properly execute Ms. Payne's project, we conducted background research on consultation, Best Value, and database design and development. Consultation can take many forms, including questionnaires, interviews, public meetings, forums, and citizens' juries. We conducted research on each of these forms of consultation before beginning the project, using literature found in libraries and housed at the Merton Civic Centre.

We also researched literature on Best Value legislation and practise. During this research, we learned the practises necessary for organisations to abide by Best Value. Using this information, we determined that a consultation database would indeed assist the Council in its Best Value preparations, and took note of what qualities would be necessary in our database to ensure maximum effectiveness.

We simultaneously conducted research on database design and development to facilitate the creation of the consultation database. We learned Access database construction, Structured Query Language (SQL), and Active Server Pages (ASP), the languages necessary to create a database and user interface.

Once we completed our background research, we determined what steps would be necessary to complete the entire project. Our first task was to conduct interviews of 16 department heads and other upper-level council employees involved with consultation. Through these interviews, we gained a further understanding of the consultation process, while simultaneously increasing employees' awareness of our project and encouraging cooperation. Using this method, we were able to convince these 16 employees to fill out

consultation data forms and to distribute them to their co-workers and other employees under their supervision. We constructed these surveys to solicit the consultation information that we determined, through our background research, to be necessary to our database.

Immediately upon completing our staff interviews, we developed design criteria for the database using information from our background research and our interviews. We first wrote the criteria out on paper, then implemented them using Microsoft Access. We then designed the user interface for the database, using the consultation data form as a model; keeping the form and interface the same allowed us to avoid misinterpretation of the information given to us in the forms. We created the user interface to include viewing, adding, editing, searching, and deleting capabilities for the database.

Once we completed the database and entered a few data sets, we tested the database for errors. When we completed this task, we published the database and interface on the Council's Intranet. We then asked our original 16 interviewees to test the database using set testing procedures. Then we held a discussion group of several of these employees, and asked for suggestions to improve the database and interface. Once we finished the corrections, we entered the remaining data sets to complete the database.

Using the information we collected from the interviews and questionnaires, we completed a report on the Council's consultation practises. We discovered that the Chief Executive's Department conducts evaluations of existing projects and does some consultation on poverty and drug control. The Education, Leisure, and Libraries Department conducts consultations on issues involving schools, libraries, learning centres, information services, parks, arts, and culture. The Finance Department does

public consultation in taxation and housing benefits. The Housing and Social Services Department has a written plan for consultation, which requires that they conduct consultation during the planning stages of all housing and social service proposals. The Environmental Services Department has a similar written proposal for consultations dealing with traffic control and street management, amenity services, planning and public protection, and service development.

In completing this project, we determined that Merton Council has a great desire to conduct effective consultation. The consultation database will allow the Council members to have easier access to consultation information, thus making the consultation process more efficient. The Council's department heads were all very enthusiastic about keeping the database updated, so it should remain useful indefinitely. The increased accuracy and efficiency provided by the database will greatly aid the Council as it strives to achieve Best Value.

Acknowledgments

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1.0 Introduction

Because the city of London is so large, it is divided into boroughs, which perform the local government functions of a city. These functions can include municipal planning, sanitation, law enforcement, and water supply. Merton Council is part of the governmental structure of the London Borough of Merton. According to British law, each borough is required to consult with the public—to survey the people within the borough as to their feelings, attitudes, and opinions of the borough's functions.

The objectives of this project included conducting a report of the consultations performed by the Merton Council in the recent past, and creating a database to make the consultation information readily available to employees of the council. Before we began our project, the consultation information on record at Merton Council was kept in different departments with different Council employees. Thus, consultation information was relatively inaccessible. Over the course of our project, we collated existing information in a database, along with information on current and future consultation practises, thus making all consultation information readily available for reference for all Council employees. We also created an interface on the organisation's Intranet so employees will be able to view old consultation information and input new information as it becomes available. Throughout the project, we periodically tested the database and interface to ensure that each was user-friendly and useful. In addition to acting as a resource for Merton Council personnel, the database will also act as a demonstration that the Council is "undertaking its statutory duty to consult" (Payne, 18 January 2000).

The methods used in this project were organised to meet these objectives, as described below. The first task was to conduct research on the consultation processes of the Merton Council using literature housed in the Council library. We also interviewed selected employees of the council to gain an understanding of consultation practises, to obtain consultation information from them, and to determine their needs from the new database. Using this information, along with information found in the Literature Review, we prepared a thorough report of the consultation processes in Merton. We designed the database, inputted the required information, and tested the database for usefulness.

There were two major results of the project: a report of the consultation practises of the Merton Council, and a database that holds all consultation information for the Council in a format easily accessible to potential users. The database embodies the data sets formerly housed in various departments throughout the Council. We also summarised these data sets to form a report on consultations being done within each department in the Council. Once the database was comprehensive, included data from the consultation performed by the Council in the past year and that planned for the future, and was determined to be useful to the Merton Council, we considered the project to be complete.

2.0 Literature Review
2.1 Consultation Report

Consultations, which are surveys of public opinion, can take many forms. Questionnaires tend to be the most popular form of consultation, but other forms may include citizens' juries, focus groups, interactive websites, referenda, committees, question and answer sessions, public meetings, forums, telephone interviews, face-to-face interviews, visioning exercises, observation, or panel surveys (UK DETR, 2000). British local law requires boroughs of London to conduct consultation with the public. Consultation is one step in the process toward achieving a better calibre of government. The Merton Council is in the process of consolidating its present consultation information, and has thus requested that we complete a thorough report of consultation completed in the recent past, those currently ongoing, and those planned for the future.

2.1.1 General Guidelines for Consultation

As stated above, Merton carries out the consultation process using various methods. The Council may leave questionnaires at certain central locations (libraries, clubs, etc.), hand them out individually, or mail them to certain selections of people. The respondents then self-administer the surveys and return them to the Council (Merton UDP, 1999). The Council uses various other methods to select respondents for interviews, focus groups, and other consultation activities. Participation in consultation is purely voluntary. The literature we reviewed offers many guidelines for proper survey technique. These principles work to ensure that surveys are reliable, accurate, unbiased, repeatable, and representative of the opinions of respondents. A thorough understanding of the background literature on proper survey technique and use is necessary for a

comprehension of consultation data. This background knowledge will also allow us to make a more useful database.

The first of the issues to be discussed is the concept of open- and closed-ended questions. Closed-ended questions have a list of answers that the respondents must choose from; in contrast, open-ended questions allow for free answers from respondents. According to Bradburn and Sudman (1988), neither form of question is superior to the other. Fink and Kosecoff (1985) support this view. Converse and Presser (1986) argue that, because of the format of a closed-ended question, it is actually more likely to communicate the same frame of reference to all respondents (as opposed to an open-ended question, which leaves more room for individual interpretation). In order to be effective, closed-ended questions must be concrete in their meaning, unbiased, and impersonal (Fink & Kosecoff, 1985). These factors will help assure an accurate representation of the true feelings and opinions of respondents.

The order in which questions are asked can significantly affect the results of a survey. Survey questions should be ordered so as not to skew their meaning (Converse & Presser, 1986). If it is unclear whether a question directly relates to the one preceding it, the respondent's answers may not reflect his or her true opinions. In addition, if a general question directly precedes or follows a more specific one, the results tend to be unreliable (Schuman & Presser, 1981). Long lists of similar items should also be avoided. Such lists tend to tire respondents, so that more favorable responses appear at the beginning of the list, and items in the middle tend to receive less favorable responses (Bradburn & Sudman, 1988). These answers do not provide an accurate representation of respondent opinion either. According to Fink and Kosecoff (1985), most problems of question order

can be avoided by clearly stating the survey's purpose in the first question, placing objective questions before subjective questions, moving from most familiar to least familiar, and placing sensitive questions at the end. Following these guidelines should increase the validity of responses.

Several different views exist in our reviewed literature on the subject of asking several similar questions in a survey. According to Converse and Presser (1986), asking multiple questions on the same topic allows the respondent and the surveyor to look at several different angles of the idea presented. Bradburn and Sudman (1988) disagree with this view. According to these authors, asking questions with logical implications between them may create a consistency in survey response, when there exists no such consistency in the respondents' actual attitudes. Schuman and Presser (1981) agree with this view. Fink and Kosecoff (1985) also state that such similar items should be avoided. Although opposing views exist, an abundance of experts agree with the stance of using dissimilar questions.

The experts we reviewed also agree that survey questions should be specific in their meaning. Converse and Presser (1986, p. 18) warn against using "shared definitions." For example, the words "neighborhood" and "family" mean different things to different people, and may be interpreted by different respondents in different ways (Converse & Presser, 1986, p. 19). These authors also iterate that, overall, specific questions are better than general ones. For example, a question that asks, "Taken altogether, how would you say things are these days?" would be inferior to, "Taking all things together, how would you describe your marriage?" (Converse & Presser, 1986, p. 32). In this case, the word "things" in the first question is ambiguous, and may be

interpreted differently by various respondents. The second question is much clearer in its meaning. Surveys must be carried out in such a way that all respondents can understand them.

Surveys may be biased in their wording, leading respondents to a particular response when their actual views may be very different. Bradburn and Sudman (1988) state that surveys are often loaded with bias to alter results. Some surveys make a particular response more attractive through a sort of consciousness-raising process; this idea is known as the salience hypothesis (Schuman & Presser, 1981). In such surveys, bias is created by asking questions about a particular topic to trigger awareness and thought in the respondent. Then, a specific attitude question, pertaining to the topic, is asked. The respondent may have had no opinion on this topic prior to taking the survey, but the salience process causes him/her to form hasty, biased opinion (Schuman & Presser, 1981). The wording of questions can also create bias. Some questions may give the reader the impression that they should have certain traits that they may not actually have. For example, the question, "How often do you cheat on your taxes?" may imply that the respondent cheats. However, in truth, this may not be the case (Sterngold, Warland, & Herrmann, 1994, p. 256). To avoid such bias, the survey should should make it clear to respondents that a negative response is equally as legitimate as a positive one (Schuman & Presser, 1981).

Surveys must be reviewed to determine if any of the questions contained within them will appear threatening to respondents. Converse and Presser (1986) warn that even random-response, self-administered surveys are not safe from threatening questions. Respondents are still hesitant to answer questions they feel are intrusive or dangerous,

and results of these surveys are still over- and under-reported (Converse & Presser, 1986). To avoid these problems, researchers should pay close attention to their survey questions, and ask themselves and their pretesting respondents if any of their questions may be seen as threatening (Bradburn & Sudman, 1979).

Surveys should deal with current, real issues. According to Converse and Presser (1986, p. 20), if surveys are to yield valid, descriptive data, they must deal with "the current, the specific, the real." Asking respondents to recall how they felt in the past generally leads to inaccurate results.

An option of "I don't know" or "no opinion" should be offered in all survey questions where it is appropriate (Converse & Presser, 1986). This can be accomplished through a process called filtering. Filter questions ask if a respondent is concerned about a certain topic. The subsequent question, which asks about the degree of concern, applies only to respondents who actually are concerned about that topic (Sterngold et al, 1994). Alternately, the "no opinion" answer can be included in the list of possible responses. Schuman and Presser (1981) stress the importance of offering this response. They argue that, if a respondent truly has no opinion on the question topic, the lack of a possible response to represent that feeling will force him or her to choose an inaccurate answer. Thus, the survey question will result in a faulty representation of true public concern (Schuman & Presser, 1981).

Clarity is an extremely important element of survey questions. The use of simple language is essential, especially when the survey is given to a large, diverse group of people (as is the case in Merton) (Converse & Presser, 1986). For example, the word "main" may be used in place of "principal," "clear" or "understandable" instead of

"intelligible," etc. (Converse & Presser, 1986, p. 10). Similarly, Converse and Presser (1986) warn not to assume any knowledge to be widespread. This can lead to guessing if respondents are not familiar with this assumed knowledge. Berg (1998) also agrees with this idea; he states that, before a survey can be put to use, the researcher must be certain that the language is meaningful to all potential respondents. Imprecise quantifying words such as "how much," "how often," and "how strongly" can also lead to inaccurate results via respondent confusion (Bradburn & Sudman, 1979, p. 152). Many of these confusing questions can be eliminated in pretesting; the surveyor must pay attention to the relationship between the questions asked and the conclusions being drawn from them by pretesting respondents (Bradburn & Sudman, 1988).

Certain types of questions should always be avoided in surveys. Hypothetical questions are one example. Converse and Presser (1986) explain that hypothetical questions are difficult for respondents to answer and require much thought; due to the nature of surveys, most respondents will not give the question the consideration necessary for an accurate answer. Double-negative questions should likewise be avoided. They are generally confusing to respondents, and their answers may not reveal their true opinions (Converse & Presser, 1986). For example, the question "Please tell me whether you agree or disagree with the following statement about teachers in public schools: Teachers should not be required to supervise students in the halls, the lunchroom, and school parking lots" (Converse & Presser, 1986, p. 13). The "disagree" answer to this question means, "I do not think that teachers should not be required to supervise students outside of their classrooms" (Converse & Presser, 1986, p. 13). This is obviously confusing. The above example also demonstrates another type of question that should be avoided,

namely, the double-barreled question. Double-barreled questions combine several questions into one, making it necessary for the respondent to give the same answer for each section (Bradburn & Sudman, 1988). For instance, perhaps the respondent feels teachers should be required to supervise students in the halls and the lunchroom, but not in school parking lots. The above question does not allow for such a response.

As has been stated many times thus far, most of these problems can be avoided through pretesting. Bradburn and Sudman (1988) emphasise that extensive pretesting is absolutely essential for a well-developed questionnaire. Fink and Kosecoff (1985) also stress this point. For a survey to be truly well executed, it must have been pretested.

The previously stated information applies to all forms of surveys, but one must make other considerations when dealing with focus groups, forums, and other group forms of consultation. Participants for such groups must be selected based on the objectives of the consultation. There must be a balance of variety and similarity among participants. For example, a forum on the rights of Irish women should certainly include Irish women participants, but selecting participants exclusively from a single Irish women's club would be unsuccessful. If all the participants know each other, discussion will most likely not be meaningful. However, care must be taken that enough similarity exists among participants that none feel inhibited (Hamilton et al, 1998).

Time and venue are also of great importance in group consultations. Attending a forum or focus group must be affordable and available to all participants. For example, parents may find it difficult to attend due to childcare responsibilities. Working men and women may have to miss job-related activities if the consultation activity is poorly planned. Those organising the consultation must take these factors into consideration.

2.1.2   Types of Consultation

The method of consultation used can have a significant impact on its success (London Borough of Merton, 1998). Thus, a thorough knowledge of the advantages and disadvantages of the methods used by the Council will be helpful in understanding the consultation process.

Questionnaires are useful when a wide range of issues must be covered or a large random sample is necessary. However, they can be difficult to use for more complex issues, and the variability of response may make it difficult to ensure a representative sample (London Borough of Merton, 1998).

Visioning exercises consist of structured meetings where consultees imagine what they want. These exercises are useful in that they foster a sense of involvement with the public. The knowledge of the people is used directly. However, visioning exercises are often time-consuming and difficult to maintain, resulting in an over-heightened sense of expectation from the participants. This form of consultation is most useful for "starting the public thinking through consequences of change or impact of no-change" (London Borough of Merton, 1998, p. 13).

Observation is a unique method of consultation in which the researcher merely observes a situation or service. This form of consultation enables the researcher to experience the situation and to make quick, informed decisions. The drawback to this form of consultation is that it is subject to the researcher's bias. This form of consultation is most suitable when a situation must be viewed as it actually happens (London Borough of Merton, 1998).

Public meetings are a traditional form of consultation involving a panel of Councillors and officers and an audience of the public. This method of consultation allows the Council to provide information to the public, with subsequent dialogue and exchange of views. While the population present at a public meeting may not be representative of the entire population of the borough, such meetings are still useful for sharing information, testing ideas, and assessing public response to proposals (London Borough of Merton, 1998).

Citizens' juries consist of a small sample of members paid to spend several days debating an issue in a judicial setting with witnesses. Although this type of consultation consists of a very small sample not necessarily representative of the entire population, it is generally useful for complex subjects where many members of the public have pre-formed, generally uninformed opinions. This type of consultation is time-consuming, expensive, and resource intensive (London Borough of Merton, 1998).

A referendum is a consultation consisting of a formal poll on a single issue. Thus, this type of consultation can only be used for single issues that require on yes/no answers and little or no explanation. However, referenda are useful for assessing the views of a large number of people quickly and inexpensively (London Borough of Merton, 1998).

A forum usually consists of a structured, regular, local meeting to consult about issues of local importance. Forums can be used regularly once they are established, and are useful to address issues that affect a particular community. However, as with public meetings, it can be difficult to get people to attend (London Borough of Merton, 1998).

Interactive websites, or virtual consultation, consist of using an authority website to consult. This form of consultation is inexpensive, quick, and conducive to a good

response rate. However, lack of internet access poses a problem for this type of

consultation (London Borough of Merton, 1998).

Consultation is performed with the goal of achieving Best Value. According to

Page (1998), those authorities that share consultation information will succeed at

consultation. Full, accurate information about how public services are run, what they

cost, how well they perform, and who is in charge must be readily available to all persons

conducting consultation (CIPFA, 1998). Best Value will not be delivered unless such

resources are readily available (Clark, 1998).

2.1.3   Best Value

According to the London Borough of Merton (1998, p.1), "Any organisation

committed to Best Value must believe that a service is only of any real value if it is

meeting the needs of those for whom it is provided. User consultation lets service

providers tune into the real world of their users. It encourages providers to gain an

awareness of service users' needs, preferences and also to get some understanding of

some of the difficulties users experience in trying to access or use services." The purpose

of the consultation report and database is to demonstrate that Merton is following Best

Value procedures. It is a requirement for local authorities not only to consult, but also

respond on the consultation. Since Merton conducts many different types of

consultations, it is likely to be left up to each department to decide when and how to carry

out consultation. The Government recognises that different approaches to consultation

will be appropriate for different stages in the review process.

Consultation offers many benefits.

- It encourages greater understanding of and confidence in what the council is trying to do
- It can improve the quality of decision-making because more people, including the people affected by the Council's decisions, are involved in the process
- It can ensure that the process of implementing a policy or a decision is easier because people understand what is being done and why
- Good public involvement procedures can be linked to the Council desire to be responsive to the needs of local people, to provide quality services and to ensure that all people have equal access to what is available
- Effective public involvement supports the Council's Equal Opportunity policies by ensuring that the views and needs of particular groups who have experienced discrimination and disadvantage are raised and addressed
- Public consultation can also be cost effective because it opens channels of communication and should ensure that services are delivered in a relevant way to those who need them. Limited resources are thus well used and Council will get value for money (London Borough of Merton, 1999).

Across Merton Council, there exists much consultation experience and expertise.

Some of this expertise is shared in the Council's Research and Consultation Network,

more is shared through the Council's Consultation Audit, and much has yet to be shared.

Below is a common checklist of fundamental considerations for the Best Value review

teams prior to undertaking the consultation process. The issues that are to be considered

for Best Value reviews are clarity of aims, selection of respondents, timescale, skills,

resources, techniques, evaluation, results, and lessons learned (London Borough of

Merton, 1999). The Government has created an explicit number of principles that it

expects the Councils to incorporate within their consultation arrangements.

- Consultation has to make a difference. It has to have an impact on the decision-making of the authority and on the way it delivers services and meets community needs.
- Consultation needs to be linked into political processes. Consultation can improve and support councillors in the various executive, scrutiny, and representative roles they undertake.

- Consultation exercises must ensure maximum effort is made to consider the voices and choices of all communities, including groups that may be hard to involve or otherwise disadvantaged.
- Consultation should become integrated into the everyday management processes of the authority.
- There must be a strategic approach to consultation. The expectation is that local authorities will have a council-wide sense of what is going on and what needs to be improved. Government also emphasises the need for a coordinated approach to consultation.
- Consultation must be economic, efficient, and effective (London Borough of Merton, 1999).

One should also consider process and obstacles before beginning a consultation. Time spent preparing for the consultation will definitely pay off throughout the consultation process. The researcher should be clear about what he or she is trying to achieve from the process. Too many consultations begin with a wish list rather than clear aims and objectives (London Borough of Merton, 1999).

Clear objectives as to the respondent base and the reasons for the selection of such a base are necessary before beginning a consultation. Government says that authorities must consult with the following for Best Value reviews:

- Representatives of persons liable to pay any tax, precept or levy to or in respect of the authority.
- Representatives of persons liable to pay non-domestic rates in respect of any area within which the authority carries out functions.
- Representatives of persons who use or are likely to use services provided by the authority.
- Representatives of persons appearing to the authority to have an interest in any area within which the authority carries out functions (London Borough of Merton, 1999).

Often it will be a case of needing to consult a number of these potential respondents. If this is the case, then identifying the key respondents is essential. There must be a rationale for why these groups have been chosen (London Borough of Merton, 1999).

Research suggests that many local authorities considerably underestimate the time required to undertake thorough and effective consultation. Uncompromising assessment of consultation time scales must take place, and the consultation process must be designed to incorporate possible time delays. As a rule of thumb, groups and individuals ought to be given a least one month to respond to written documents, invitations for group discussions, meetings, and visits. Different consultation techniques will take varying times to complete. This also must be taken into consideration (London Borough of Merton, 1999).

When selecting a candidate to be in charge of the consultation, it must be clear that he or she has the skills, authority, knowledge, and support to be able to do so. Good consultation is often a product of how much time and energy the consulter puts into it in the early stages. Before a consultation process begins, one needs to make sure he or she makes known as much data and knowledge as possible to those undertaking it. This may prevent information duplication (London Borough of Merton, 1999).

Before embarking on any new consultation exercise, one must ask if the information he or she is looking for is available from current activity in the Council. Merton already undertakes a variety of consultation exercises, and this will grow as Best Value is instituted. Consultation Officers in the Departments and the Research and Community Engagement Officer are good first ports of call. There is ambivalence amongst some sections of the community to the idea of being consulted at all. It is therefore recommended that the consulter investigate all possibilities of using existing projects, combining consultation exercises, or piggybacking. In addition, ensuring a consultation process can is affordable, and ensuring the budget and resources also allow

for things such as analysis, evaluation, and feedback, are necessary considerations. These stages are as critical as the consultation process itself, and are often not fully considered (London Borough of Merton, 1999).

Consultation techniques must be suitable for the intended purpose. When selecting a technique, the following questions should be asked: is the approach suitable in terms of target audience, sample size, sample selection, representatives, and quantitative research? Has an appropriate range of techniques been used? And, finally, will the results and findings be reliable and valid (London Borough of Merton, 1999)?

If possible, the number of people who have been given an opportunity to be consulted, response rates, and costs of consultation per person consulted should be quantified. The researcher should consider whether consultation has value for money in terms of depth of analysis provided and quality of results. It is expected that every response to consultation is recorded accurately and stored. These results may be audited. Every response should be used to produce an accurate, balanced, and unbiased summary. The records of responses should include key demographic data on who made the responses, and whether it was a group or an individual. If it was a group, the researcher should record how many members of the group were consulted, the geographical location of respondents, an age profile, an ethnicity profile, a gender profile, and a disability profile (London Borough of Merton, 1999).

The Council should establish a strategy for reporting the results. Copies of findings should be sent to all departmental officers working on the Best Value review including:

- The Best Value steering group

- The line manager
- Members of committee
- Trade unions
- Council partners
- People/groups consulted
- The Research and Community Engagement Officer

The researcher should follow through on whether the decisions made by officers or members reflect the consultation recommendations. If they did not, it would be appropriate to explain to respondents why the conclusions reached were different (London Borough of Merton, 1999).

Finally, lessons on findings or the consultation process should be shared with other colleagues across the Council. The researcher should speak to the Research and Consultation Officer to incorporate lessons learned in Consultation Audit or feedback at Council's Research and Consultation network (London Borough of Merton, 1999).

A report to fit with Best Value would consist of a gathering of consultation data and a consolidation of that information. According to Teresa Payne (18 January 2000), such a report would be most beneficial to a council conducting consultations to reach Best Value. Such a report would not be prescriptive; it would be purely informational.

2.2   Database Design and Development

As computers are used more and more in corporate, government, and other organisational settings, the dependence on information has exploded as well. Information systems have evolved tremendously since the first computer. One particular advance that has propelled the growth of these systems is the database.

A database, according to Atre (1980), is "a collection of related data about an enterprise with multiple uses." The data are independent of the program they are being used for, which means that the same set of data can be used for multiple purposes, and can be displayed in different views depending on the needs of the user. It is important to know the evolution of databases in order to understand how and why they are used.

IBM developed the first database in the 1970s as a response to requests from many of its customers. Large corporations had been repeatedly asking for the same sorts of things: the ability to view data in new ways and to interact and search through that data. Before databases, reports could only show information from one file. So, in order to make decisions, the data had to be compared by hand with information from other files (Borok, 1995). With the invention of different types of databases, it became possible for enterprises to make decisions with the help of the computer.

There are threedifferent types of databases: object-oriented, relational, and object-relational. In an object-oriented design, "the world to be modeled is thought of as composed of objects, which are observable entities of some sort" (Ullman, 1997, p. 27). For example, one might think of a car as an object. When driving this car, the driver knows that he/she can turn it left and right, accelerate, and use the brakes, but he doesn't need to know how it works. An IBM researcher named E. F. Codd developed the relational database model. The idea behind the relational model is that a database consists of a series of unordered tables (also called relations) each of which contains different information. These tables can be manipulated by the use of operations that generate sub-tables containing the desired information. This limits redundancy of data and enables the use of a high level language called SQL (Structured Query Language).

An object-relational database is a hybrid of the object and relational data models. While all are discussed in the literature to some degree, the relational model is the most widely used and documented. It is also the data model used by Microsoft Access, the DBMS (Database Management System) that is used in this project due to its availability and compatibility with the organisation's current information systems. Also, members of the organisation already have a degree of understanding about the product. Access is easy to use and integrate into other applications.

The relational database offers several advantages to an organisation over other databases. According to Roman (1997) the relational database offers solutions to the following problems that might plague other data models (explained below): redundancy of data, multiple value problems, update anomalies, insertion anomalies, and deletion anomalies. Roman (1997) also says that database designers must take care when designing the relational database to avoid data loss, to maintain relational integrity, and to ensure the ability to create new views of the data, such as through the dynamic use of queries and reports.

Redundancy of data refers to unnecessary repetition of data. There will always be some redundancy, but it can be minimised by the use of multiple tables. For example, consider a table that lists several books, each with the name and phone number of their publishers. There is a good chance that there would be some repetition of publishers and phone numbers. Instead, a separate table of publishers could be used so that each publisher's phone number would only be included once.

The multiple-value problem refers to a situation where an item has more than one value. For example, in a table that listed books there might be a field titled "Author".

There might exist a case where a record for a book has more than one author. There are several ways to accommodate for this in a flat (only one table) database, through the use of multiple rows or columns. However, neither of these options is very attractive. The multiple value problem can be eliminated through the use of multiple tables.

Another problem that occurs in a flat database is the update anomaly, which is related to the redundancy problem. Using the same example as above, if we were to have a table which had several books, and some of those books had the same publisher, then each instance would have the same phone number for the publisher. If we then changed the phone number in every row but we missed one, then we would have an update anomaly.

Similar problems can arise from an insertion anomaly, i.e. inserting a new publisher into a flat database without having a book to go along with that publisher. Conversely, if all entries of books that referred to a particular publisher were deleted, then all information about that publisher would be lost.

Unfortunately, using multiple tables makes it difficult to avoid data loss. When designing the database one must be careful to include appropriate tables that collectively enable users to store all the data needed. One must also be careful to maintain relational integrity throughout the tables, so that all the information can be accessed.

Another issue that must be addressed is that, as the number of tables increases, it also becomes more difficult to create different views of the data. When trying to get all the information about a book, one would have to look at the book table, the author table, and the publisher table, in order to piece together something meaningful. Fortunately, there exists a great tool to assist with the development of the database.

The primary tool that we had at our disposal was Microsoft Access. As stated above, Access is an extremely flexible and powerful Database Management System and development environment in which it is easy to design and implement comprehensive and effective databases. Through Access, one can design tables, queries, forms, macros, and reports, amongst others. A table, as stated before, is a collection of data about a specific topic, such as products or suppliers. Queries are used to view, analyse, or manipulate data in different ways. Forms can be used to create data-entry interfaces, display data, call up reports, or perform several other tasks. A macro is an action or set of actions that perform a specific task; it can be used to automate common tasks. A report is a way to display data in a printed format (Microsoft Access Help, 2000). Integrated into Access is Visual Basic for Applications (VBA), a programming language that can be used to create graphical user interfaces (GUIs). It can also be used to integrate other Microsoft products into Access. VBA is extremely powerful and is used by many organisations for Rapid Prototype Development (RPD). This makes Access highly customisable (Litwin et al., 1997).

Access uses SQL as its database manipulation language. While VBA is used to create the user interface, SQL is used to interact with the tables. SQL statements can be dynamically built using VBA at run-time if desired, making Access much more flexible. The core of SQL uses relational algebra to build queries, although there are many additional features to the language (Ullman, 1997). Keywords, such as "SELECT", "FROM", and "WHERE" are combined with field and relation names to find the data that the user is looking for. Access lets the database developer build queries at design-time, so that the user isn't required to know SQL.

In addition to being able to collect information from the tables, SQL can be used to insert, delete, and update the database. These features, when used in conjunction with VBA, allow forms to be built which completely hide the database from the user. Because the users are not likely to be familiar with how databases work, it is important to build a comprehensive, robust front-end to the database.

Often, a web interface will be required for a database, both for viewing the existing data and for data entry. Though there are several different technologies available to allow web pages to interact with databases, the most commonly used is Active Server Pages (ASP). ASP allows short scripts to be run on the web server, which, in turn, dynamically build HTML (Hyper-Text Markup Language, the language used by Internet browsers to display web-sites) documents to be displayed by the client machine (O'Brien et al, 1997). In the process of building the HTML documents, SQL statements can be executed to query the database as described in previous sections. The results of the queries can then be displayed on the web page. ASP also allows the web-developer to use standard programming techniques, such as "if-then-else" statements, looping, and so on. These techniques make it possible to design much more comprehensive and powerful web sites and interfaces. Since SQL can also be used to add records to a database, ASP allows the developer to create entry forms to deposit information into the database as needed.

3.0 <u>Methodology</u>

This project consists of two basic elements: a report of the consultation performed by Merton Council, and the creation of a consultation database that will act as a central repository for this consultation information. The following methodology describes the systematic procedure we used to complete our project.

3.1 Consultation Report

The Merton Council has many employees involved with the consultation process. We conducted interviews with employees of Merton Council who are involved with consultation. These employees' knowledge was extremely valuable to us in understanding how consultations are conducted in Merton. They also informed us about the location of consultation results.

Before the interviews began, we conducted research on the consultation data and processes of the Merton Council. We examined the data sets from previous consultation exercises available within Merton's Chief Executive's Department, along with written information on consultation housed at the Council. Once we understood this background information, the knowledge of Merton's employees concerning the consultation process was much more meaningful to us in performing our consultation report.

During the first week, our liaison, Ms. Teresa Payne, provided us with a list of 16 persons involved with consultation. We contacted each of these 16 employees to schedule interviews. We transmitted an entree letter via electronic mail briefly describing the project and asking for times that each employee was available to be interviewed. We followed up on this letter with telephone calls to facilitate scheduling. We conducted

interviews with ten of these 16 employees. During these interviews, we asked our interviewees for the names of other Council employees who would be helpful to our project. Thus, in addition to our ten initial contacts, we gained 15 other potential interviewees. We contacted each of these people, and conducted six interviews during the second week.

The interviews we conducted were informational. There was little risk to any of the respondents involved in this interview process. Thus, all the questions asked were straightforward in nature.

We conducted interviews with one Merton employee at a time. In this manner, we were able to understand the role of each individual in the consultation process apart from outside influence (which would occur in a group interview). Over the course of the interview, we learned the role of the individual in the consultation process, the duties each performs, and the methods each uses. We also inquired as to any future consultation planned by the interviewee or his or her department. One of our project team members acted as the interviewer, and one team member took notes and, with the permission of the respondent, recorded the replies of the respondent on a tape recorder. We also gave each interviewee a form to fill in describing the title of a consultation, the methodology, main findings, and other such information. This form allowed us to gain more detailed information on individual consultation exercises. A copy of the interview questions and the interview form are in Appendices B and D, respectively.

We obeyed the "Ten Commandments of Interviewing" outlined by Berg (1998, pp. 87-88) during the interviews. We established rapport with the subjects before asking any questions. We did not deviate from the purpose of the interview, but were still as

natural as possible. We listened carefully to all responses and showed understanding of

them and their responses; however, we did not accept monosyllabic answers. To avoid

such answers, we used open-ended questions during our interviews. We were dressed in

business attire for a proper appearance. The locations of the interviews were in the

Merton Civic Centre in the interviewee's office or at his or her desk, a comfortable

location for the respondent. We practiced the interview questions in the United States, so

we were completely prepared for our actual interviews in Merton. These methods

provided for very successful interviews.

Questionnaires alone would also have been an acceptable method of gaining the

information we needed. However, since each consultation is performed in a unique way,

interviews allowed us to customise our questions to individual respondents using semi-

standardised methods. The questionnaire accompanying the interview provided the

standardisation necessary for a uniform report and database.

At the conclusion of these interviews, we had an accurate understanding of the

consultation process, along with some concrete information from past, current, and future

consultation exercises. Once we acquired information on consultation from our

interviews with Merton Council employees, including how they were performed and with

what methods, we began our report on these practises.

To complete a thorough and accurate report, one needs to understand the

information and subject matter he or she is reporting on. Thus, we researched Best Value

and consultation practises outlined in literature housed at Merton Council, including

newsletters such as Quality Watch (1998).

In our first week at Merton, we gathered as much information as we could to get an accurate understanding of how consultation operates. Using the techniques described above, we began to collect data (the role of the individual in the consultation process, the duties each performs, and the methods each uses) from the Merton Council staff on what public consultation they have undertaken since January 1999, what consultation they are currently working on, and what consultation they plan to conduct in the future. In addition, we reviewed literature that deals with the new Best Value duty and consultation expectations, which was developed by Merton Council and the Government (Merton UDP, 1999). Specifically, we reviewed literature that describes the consultation component of Best Value reviews.

Merton has recently developed a web site that will allow everyone in the company to learn about Best Value and how to achieve it. One of the front pages of this site includes a link to our database and report, which will allow Council employees to browse through the planned, current, and past consultations. From there, they will be able to see if someone had already done a similar consultation, which employee or department carried it out, and the results. This database will help the Council come closer to achieving Best Value.

The Government has provided Merton Council with literature on how to use Best Value methods for consultation. From this information, as stated in the Literature Review, Merton Council has made a list of nine fundamental consultation considerations they feel should be taken into account when reviewing the consultation approach for Best Value. These include clarity of aims, selection of consultees, timescale, skills, resources, techniques, evaluation, results, and lessons learned (London Borough of Merton, 1999).

Within each of these nine topics, there are numerous questions that deal with Best Value reviews. If Council members wish to review the consultation, they will be able to access the consultation information contained within our database and ask these questions to conclude whether or not that particular part of the consultation abides by the Best Value principles.

3.2 Database Design and Development

Teresa Payne asked us to create a database in Microsoft Access to hold consultation information. There are several steps involved in creating and publishing an Access database for use in an organisation like Merton. They are, in order of completion: develop design criteria; design and create the database in Access; test the database and ensure user acceptance; design, develop and test the interface or "front-end" of the database; and, finally, input the data sets into the database for use in the organisation.

The design criteria are the goals and requirements for the database, such as what information needs to be included, how it will be used, and how robust it must be. The first step was to examine the data sets that Teresa Payne, our liaison, already had, and to identify the different sorts of data and information that were contained therein. We completed this task prior to our arrival in London.

Next we interviewed Ms. Payne to discover her goals for the database as well as to identify some people who will be the end-users of the database. From this interview, we gained a better understanding of how the database will be used, who will use it, and what information should be included that is not already identified from the data sets. It

also gave us a chance to ensure that there were no subtle miscommunications about Merton's goals for the project, specifically for the database.

Shortly after our arrival in Merton, we spoke with John Butler, head of the Information Technology (IT) department to obtain information on the organisation's network, intranet, and publication standards. This gave us an understanding of how the database was to be published on the Intranet once it was completed.

The next step was to show a rough prototype of the database and web interface to our interviewees. By having an actual representation of the database, the interviewees were easily able to understand the idea behind the database and offer suggestions for its further design and development. The goal for this section of the interview was to discover any unidentified needs and to harvest additional ideas for content and functionality in the database and the web interface.

Once we completed these three steps, we compiled all of the information, data, and ideas into a comprehensive set of criteria for the design of the database. Once we completed this job, the next task was to design the database.

The design phase of the database creation consisted of designing the database on paper. We did this by examining the design criteria and then designing tables to hold the required information in such a way to minimise the redundancy of data, avoid the issues described in literature (such as insertion and deletion anomalies), and meet all the design criteria.

The next task was to create the database in Access. As discussed in the literature review, Microsoft Access is a Database Management System. Access utilises Visual Basic for Applications (VBA), a powerful programming language that makes it easy to

customise Access to meet an organisation's needs. Using Access's built in design dialog boxes (and Wizards, where applicable), we created tables, as specified in the previous phase of the database development. We resolved technical difficulties by consulting literature and the on-line help tools included with Access.

After we created the database we undertook complete testing to ensure that it was complete, as well as to be sure that it was bug-free and robust. We did testing through the use of sample data to ensure that all aspects of the database operated correctly. We entered the data into the database, manipulated it, and used it in every way the database was designed to operate. After thorough testing of the database, we built the interface for publication.

The interface is now a web page on the organisation's internal web site, or Intranet. Through the use of Active Server Pages (ASP) we constructed the web page to allow the user to view and search the database as needed. Certain users are also be able to enter, edit, or remove information in the database when updates are necessary.

Once we designed and created the web interface, we undertook complete testing to ensure that it functions as expected. We did the testing using several techniques. The first technique consisted of using written test plans to check the functionality of the interface and Access application. A test plan is a written set of steps that are carried out. We wrote our test plans during the design and implementation phases of the application development, and designed them to cover all the functionality of the application. These test plans appear in Appendix G of this report. The second technique we used is known as ad-hoc testing, and simply consists of using the application as one would expect it to be used. Ad-hoc testing helps eliminate any biases written into the test plans.

After we implemented all the test plans and made and verified sufficient ad-hoc testing procedures and corrections, the next step was to allow our initial interviewees to test the web interface. We sent each employee who agreed to test the database a copy of the test plan, instructed them to go through each test on his or her own, and asked them to take detailed notes on any problems encountered. Five of these employees agreed to attend a meeting about the database and interface and to discuss any comments, questions, or suggestions they had. Once we corrected these problems and verified the solutions, we considered the interface to be complete.

Next, we entered the data sets that were not already entered into the database during the testing phase. After all the data were entered, we proofread the database for any errors. Also, we wrote a detailed manual to help any users resolve problems that they may encounter. This manual, which appears in Appendix H of this report, includes sections instructing the users on how to view and search the database; add, delete, modify, or edit records; and confront any other issues related to the use and maintenance of the application.

Finally, we presented the database and manual to Ms. Payne. Some department heads required basic training with the database; we undertook the training at this time as well.

4.0   Findings and Discussion

We collected data for this project using interviews and forms, as outlined in the Methodology. Although the primary purpose of the interviews was to familiarise ourselves with basic consultation procedures and introduce our consultation information form, we also learned the employees' initial impressions and concerns about the database during our interview sessions. We took this information into consideration during the database design and development phase of the project.

The forms we handed out during our interview sessions were our primary source of data. The completed forms contained detailed information on procedures and methods used in specific consultations. Thus, our consultation report was drawn from these forms.

We organised our report by Council department. Most departments conduct consultation independently of other departments. Therefore, we could categorise each consultation described in our questionnaires under a single department. Some similarities and differences exist between these categories; we address these aspects in the Discussion section of this report.

4.1   Consultation Findings

4.1.1   Chief Executive's Department

The Chief Executive's Department evaluates some existing projects. The department carried out a consultation in April 1996 entitled "Going for Green in Mitcham Evaluation Project." This consultation used face-to-face interviews, telephone interviews, focus groups, and postal questionnaires to evaluate a sustainable communities project in Mitcham, a section of Merton.

The Chief Executive's Department also does some consultation on poverty and drug control. A consultation completed in December 1997 and revised in February 1999 used information gathered from various sources inside and outside the Council to identify priority areas for poverty assistance. Between July and September 1998, the Chief Executive's Department conducted a postal survey of voluntary organisations to assess the level of current work being done to address poverty in Merton. These consultations allowed the Chief Executive's Department to develop new initiatives and lobby to address poverty (Payne, 1999).

In terms of drug control, the department conducted several consultations in 1998 and 1999 that surveyed the public's understanding of Merton's drug education services. Very little information was available on these consultations at the time of this report.

4.1.2   Education, Leisure, and Libraries Department

The Education, Leisure, and Libraries Department conducts consultation on issues involving schools, libraries, learning centres, information services, parks, arts, and culture. The department is divided into sections, each of which conducts varied consultation exercises. The Education, School Effectiveness, Child Policy, and Pupil Services Sections of the department consult on many issues involving education, the Arts Development Section consults on art issues, and the Library and Heritage section consults on issues concerning library users.

Education Section

The Education Section conducted an extensive, five-stage consultation regarding schools' ages of transfer. The first stage involved market research into the views of parents. The second stage took place in June and July of 1998, when they held a citizen's jury to discuss the topic. The 13-member jury made a recommendation by majority decision to move to a two-tier system of primary schools and secondary schools. The department conducted further consultation on the topic from September 1998 to July 1999. This third stage was much more widespread than the first two; it involved consultation documents sent to parents and other citizens, public meetings, and meetings with governors, teachers, school staff, trade unions, and other groups. Stages four and five consisted of leaflets and public meetings to discuss revised proposals (Cairns, 2000). Rosemary Doyle (2000), an employee in the department, stated that further consultation will be necessary to deal with the effects of this change.

Child Policy and Pupil Services Sections

The Child Policy and Pupil Services Sections have conducted other consultation in the public school domain. They performed one such exercise in May and June of 1999, in which they consulted 126 governors of schools and head teachers on the issue of admissions to reception classes. As a result of this consultation, admissions to reception classes changed from three terms per year to two terms per year (Yerbury, 2000).

School Effectiveness Section

From September to December of 1999, the School Effectiveness Section

consulted with approximately 150 school governors, heads of schools, and standing

committees to determine performance targets for head teachers. The department

published the results of the consultation on 6 December 1999, and sent letters to the

consultees describing the outcome. The department also conducted several training

sessions as a result of the consultation (Greenbaugh, 2000).

Community Education Section

The Community Education Section has recently conducted several consultations

in the area of community education programmes. The section conducted one such

consultation to determine if there were any children whose needs were not met by

community programmes offered during school holidays (Parsloe, 1999). In September

and October of 1998, the section performed a consultation to determine if more out-of-

school childcare was necessary for parents taking training courses. The persons

conducting the consultation made recommendations to the school board, and the board

implemented the recommendations (Spenser, 2000). From January 1999 to March 1999,

the Community Education Section consulted with local residents about a proposal to open

a new community-learning centre in Phipps Bridge. Based on the results of the

consultation, the Council chose to proceed with the project (Spittle, 2000).

The Education, Leisure, and Libraries Department consults on several other

community issues as well. In the summer of 1998, the department conducted face-to-face

interviews with children under eight years of age about their experience at a local

playscheme (Parsloe, 1999). The department also conducted a consultation of community

members earlier in the same year on the issue of piloting voluntary organisations to

supply youth work to the borough. As a result of this consultation, the pilot began in

March 1998, and continues at present (Spittle, 1999).

Arts Development Section

The Arts Development Section of the department conducts consultation with the

public on issues involving art and culture. In 1997 and 1998, the section conducted

postal surveys to inform the public about placing and content of a visual arts project and a

media arts project for the Merton Arts Festival and SRB III (Single Regeneration Budget

III), respectively. While no changes were made to the visual arts project, the media arts

project was modified as a result of the consultation (Hawley, 2000). In June 1998, the

section sent out another postal questionnaire to assess the effectiveness of an artwork

publication. There was a high rate of satisfaction with the publication, so no changes

were made as a result of this consultation (Hawley, 1999). From June to December 1999,

the section consulted with the arts community to review its arts policy. They determined

that an imbalance existed in the arts policy in terms of music, dance, drama, literature,

and new technologies. The section developed a new arts policy document and cultural

strategy as a result of the consultation (Homer, 2000).

Library and Heritage Section

The Library and Heritage Section consults extensively on topics concerning public

library service users. In October and November 1998, the Libraries Section hired external

consultants to conduct focus groups with 502 local residents to identify users' needs and inform a service review team. This consultation resulted in a comprehensive report on the views of residents on the direction of library services for the future (Pateman, 2000).

From July to September of the following year, the section sent 90,000 questionnaires to households within the borough to determine the public's preferred library service options. The survey included questions about "opening hours, books and other materials, mobile services, services to ethnic communities, and computers" (Pateman, 2000). Only 2.6% of the households surveyed offered a response, thus representing only 1.25% of the population of the borough. Ethnic minority groups were particularly underrepresented. Another consultation was conducted in September 1999 on the same topic, this time in the form of a public meeting with community groups and ethnic minority groups. This consultation exercise boasted a 33% attendance rate with "good feedback on review proposals and other issues" (Pateman, 2000).

In February 1999 the Library and Heritage Section consulted with library users to determine which periodicals they would like to have in the libraries. The consultation consisted of written surveys, complaint forms, and "forms attached to… periodicals to monitor [their] use" (Rew, 2000). As a result of this consultation exercise additional periodicals were purchased and some were canceled. The Library and Heritage Section plans to repeat this consultation annually once the department implements a new library review policy (Rew, 2000).

On 7 February 2000, the Library and Heritage Section completed a consultation dealing with the Morden Park and Wimbledon Park libraries. Employees of the Education, Leisure, and Libraries Department worked with librarians at the Morden Park

and Wimbledon Park libraries to make telephone calls and distribute questionnaires to supermarkets, petrol stations, schools, community halls, and other public places. The results of this consultation were not yet available at the completion of our project (Pateman, 2000).

The section is also currently conducting a Public Library User Survey (PLUS). This consultation is simply a "statistically representative user survey of Merton Library users" (Dieakin, 2000). Very little information was available on the PLUS survey at the completion of this report; results should be available in March 2000.

4.1.3   Finance Department

In general, the Finance Department communicates with current and former Council employees more than it consults with the public. This department is in charge of the collection of the local taxes, housing benefits, salaries and pensions, and is obligated to provide the Council employees, Council ex-employees, and school employees with financial help and advice. The two main areas where the Finance Department does public consultation are in taxation and housing benefits.

The Taxation Services Section of the Finance Department conducts ongoing consultation about their services. The Taxation Department has a service on the ground floor of the Civic Centre where the public comes to pay taxes, parking tickets, and other fees. At times, the queues can become fairly long. In an effort to make sure the citizens are given proper reception, the employees will occasionally hand out surveys for the customers to complete. From these surveys, the Taxation Services Section can determine if the public is receiving satisfactory service (Teasdale, 2000).

The Finance Department is tentatively planning a future public consultation that deals with taxes. The Council is interested in how the citizens will feel about paying more taxes if they receive better services and know exactly what services they are entitled to (Parsons, 2000).

The Service Review Section consults with new housing benefits claimants. This type of consultation deals with poor residents and the elderly. The Council is constrained on how much aid they can give. Since the Finance Department is heavily involved with performance indicators and Best Value, they carry out much consultation to ensure that each person is satisfied with the service. The methods of consultation they use are interviews, quarterly telephone calls, and questionnaires. The Finance Department is also under a charter that the central government gives to operations that are providing above-normal standards for service. This is evaluated every three years, and if the department is above set standards, then it gets the charter mark. Thus, the department is constantly striving to maintain high standards in its consultation practices and other client services (Teasdale, 2000).

4.1.4   Housing and Social Services Department

The Housing and Social Services Department has a written strategy to achieve Best Value. This strategy, outlined in Merton's Housing Plans 2000/2003: Strategy, Housing Annual Plan, Operation Information (1999), includes detailed guidelines for consultation practices. According to this document, a consultation programme must include four stages. These are:

- Identification of needs and issues

- Actions required
- Appraisal of options
- Plans, programmes, and priorities (London Borough of Merton, 1999, p.1).

In keeping with these standards, the department has established three-year directives for

its consultation practises. These directives include, but are not limited to consulting with

tenants and service users on the development and delivery of housing services, ensuring

that the Council is held responsible to its tenants and service users on its standards of

service, ensuring that users and tenants are fully consulted on the assessment and

fulfillment of housing needs in the Borough, and consulting with users and representative

organisations about the ways in which the needs of people requiring supported housing

can best be met (London Borough of Merton, 1999). The Housing Section thus strives to

conduct consultation that will meet with these directives.

Merton's Housing Plans 2000/2003: Strategy, Housing Annual Plan, Operational

Information (1999) describes a consultation completed in February 1999 that aimed to

determine housing needs, problems, and solutions in the London Borough of Merton.

The survey showed that a substantial number of Merton residents live in unsuitable

housing, and that only a portion of need is registered with the Council. The results of this

consultation are currently being used to "inform the review of the Unitary Development

Plan and the Housing Strategy and Community Care Plan" (London Borough of Merton,

1999, p.15).

Tenants participate in housing management through several different forms of

consultation arranged by the Housing and Social Services Department. District Housing

Panels work to encourage tenant participation. Representatives from these panels, along

with representatives from Merton's Tenants' and Residents' Group, form a Tenant

Consultation Working Party, which works to ensure tenants and residents are properly

consulted. A Housing Consultative Forum meets three times per year to discuss housing

strategy, budgeting, and general policy--issues of importance to the entire Borough. The

Rent Setting Working Party also works with budget issues.

Apart from these forum-style consultations, tenants are also consulted on matters

of rents, environmental improvements, and renovation programmes. In 1999, tenants

proposed to change the rent year from 52 weeks to 50 weeks; the change was

implemented following the consultation exercise. Consultation with tenants' and

residents' groups has led to several improvements including:

- Provision of ball games area on the Eastfield estate
- Young children's play facilities on West Barnes Lane Estate
- Office facilities to assist in the provision of services on the West Barnes Lanes
  Estate, and improved offices at Ravensbury and Phipps Bridge estates
- Improved landscaped area at Spencer Road (London Borough of Merton,
  1999, p.30).

The department consulted all tenants' and residents' groups on a proposed improvement

plan developed by the Council for 1998 and 1999. Through this consultation, the tenants

and residents chose a window renewal scheme to be adopted over a heating scheme, made

suggestions for allocations of capital funding, and gave opinions on a proposed external

redecoration programme (London Borough of Merton, 1999).

In November and December of 1998, the Housing Section hired an external

research company to conduct an extensive housing needs consultation. This consultation

consisted of 1250 face-to-face interviews and subsequent analysis. The department used

the resulting information to provide support for bids for funding, planning, and housing

policy (Bucknill, 1999).

The Children's Division of the department conducts consultation on the needs of children of all ages. Between February and May 1998, the section conducted a consultation to determine if the Council was meeting the needs of children under the age of eight. They held meetings with parents, users of family support centres, and staff. From this consultation exercise, the department gained a better picture of changing needs and trends for this age group (Wright, 1999). The department also receives information from a regular forum headed by the Children's Division. This forum acts as a "useful standing focus group for relevant issues such as health improvement programmes, Children's Services Plan, and Early Years Development Plan" (Wright, 1999).

In December 1999, the department conducted a consultation using questionnaires to seek the views of parents of children under four years of age on support systems offered by the Council. As a result of the survey, the department determined that there existed a need for more accessible information about services and an informal advice provision.

The Children's Division is conducting several consultation exercises between January and March of 2000. One of these consultations consisted of a questionnaire given to 100 "looked-after children" dealing with educational issues. The Division requested the services of a voluntary organisation to conduct another consultation with disabled children. This exercise consists of group interviews about communication mechanisms available to these children. The department is also conducting a consultation of 11-15 year olds on citizenship and health services issues. This consultation is being conducted via one-on-one interviews in foster care centres. The results of these surveys were not yet available at the completion of this report (Wright, 2000).

The Children's Division also conducts a regular forum to inform and consult on local and national issues of importance to children and families. This forum, which meets twice monthly, has an average attendance of 20 people. Its members have discussed issues such as the Children's Services Plan, the CAMHS Strategy, and the MSW Proposal (all major Council issues). This forum has proven to be a good mechanism for effective consultation with residents of the Borough concerned with the needs of children and families (Wright, 2000).

4.1.5   Environmental Services Department

The Environmental Services Department performs a wide variety of services. The department is divided into four sections: Street Management, Planning and Public Protection, Service Development, and Amenity Services. Several of these sections perform consultations within the Borough.

The department implemented a Service Plan for the 1999/2000 year. This plan includes a section on Quality and Customer Focus. According to this plan, over the next three years the department will:

- Improve the accessibility of services to users, including clear information, improved communications, and an enhanced public reception service
- Monitor service delivery by regular surveys of user satisfaction, including questions on gender, ethnic origin and disability, to ensure that services are responsive to specific needs
- Develop the processes through which residents, businesses and user groups can be involved in the prioritisation and development of services and respond to external development proposals (London Borough of Merton, 1999, p.6).

The plan also contains several provisions for 1999/2000 specifically. These include implementing "surveys of service quality and accessibility, including full consideration of equality issues," and building "results into service planning," as well as implementing

"the outcome of the Best Value pilot on trading standards" and preparing "selected services for the forthcoming corporate Best Value programme" (London Borough of Merton, 1999, p.6). Thus, the Environmental Services Department is actively working to ensure that they consult the public, use the results of consultations in their policy planning, and work towards Best Value.

The Street Management Section reviewed and revised its consultation practises in June 1997 (Street Management Subcommittee, 1997). Their report states that the department should consult with the public during the "formative stage, as well as when proposals have been developed" (Street Management Subcommittee, 1997, p.2), thus allowing the public to take a more active role in the planning process. The report also states that more groups need to be consulted rather than people most directly affected by changes (Street Management Subcommittee, 1999, p.3). The Subcommittee recognised the need for feedback to the public on the outcome of consultation, and how the consultation data were used in implementing new schemes. They acknowledge the fact that, while not everyone will be satisfied with new schemes produced as a result of consultation, at least "the public can be satisfied that the process that the Council has used to reach its conclusion on whether or not to implement a scheme and the content of the scheme is acceptable" (Street Management Subcommittee, 1997, p.7).

The Transport Planning Division of the Street Management Section has worked with the Education Department to arrange a safer route for children to travel to Pollards Hill Schools. The departments supervised a general survey, conducted by WPI students, of approximately 1500 school staff, children, and parents. Through this consultation exercise, the departments were able to identify danger points on school routes. The

Transport Section then developed proposals for improvement, which are currently being

consulted on (Taylor, 2000).

In 1997 and 1998, the Planning and Public Protection Section carried out a

consultation "to assess customer satisfaction with house renovation grants service"

(Barrett, 1998). Using this survey, the department hoped to identify and address any

issues or concerns the users of the service had, and make any necessary changes. Because

97% of the users were satisfied with the service, few changes were made. The

department is currently conducting another such customer satisfaction survey, this time of

building owners. The department recently completed some work on a building and is

now conducting a survey to assess the owners' level of satisfaction. Should it prove to be

necessary, the section may adjust its service provisions.

As part of Best Value preparations, the Trading Standards Division of the

Planning and Public Protection Section of the department conducted a consultation

October and November of 1998 to determine the preferences of trade workers regarding

routine inspections of trade premises. Seventy-five percent of the workers surveyed

preferred an "in-house consumer advice service and lower routine inspection of trade

premises" (Martin, 2000). As a result, the section set up an advice service in August

1999 (Martin, 2000).

The Planning and Public Protection Section completes a consultation in February

and March of each year via consultation documents, postal surveys, area forums, and

focus groups to gain feedback from the public on the department's Economic

Development Strategy. Each year the document is amended to fit with suggestions from

these consultees.

The Planning and Public Protection Section of the Environmental Services Department also does extensive consultation work involved with Merton's Unitary Development Plan (UDP). In September and October of 1998, the section used a postal questionnaire, posters, the Internet, local press, and focus groups "to obtain the views of the main interested organisations involved in planning in Merton on a review of Merton Council's planning policies" (Cardis, 1999). The UDP review published in 1999 reflected the views set forth in this consultation exercise (Cardis, 1999). In February 1999, the section hired an external consultant to conduct face-to-face interviews to review the present and future uses of town centres. The data gathered from this consultation was also used to inform the UDP process. From September to November 1999, the section conducted yet another consultation on the UDP. During this exercise, the department consulted with over 1000 businesses, organisations, and residents on all UDP policies and proposals. Again, the Council took the information obtained during this consultation into consideration in the UDP document (Cardis, 2000).

The department has conducted many other non-UDP related consultations in the past few years. Since 1996, the department has used WPI students to carry out various consultation projects. The reports from these projects are available in the Environmental Services Department (Cardis, 1999). In 1997, the Planning Section undertook a consultation of public opinion of proposals for the redesign of the Wimbledon Station. The Council used the information they gathered during this consultation to select an artist for the redesign project.

4.2   Consultation Discussion

Several similarities exist between consultations conducted in different departments. Every department uses face-to-face interviews and postal surveys in their consultation exercises. Nearly all departments (Financial Services being the only exception) use focus groups, and most use telephone interviews. Public meetings and written surveys are also used in several departments (namely, Education, Leisure, and Libraries, Financial Services, and Housing and Social Services). Education, Leisure and Libraries was the only department to report using citizens' juries for consultation.

By comparing the cost of consultations to the type used, we determined that focus groups and face-to-face interviews are the most expensive forms of consultation. The Council usually hires external consultants to conduct these exercises, most likely because they are extremely time and labour-intensive. Postal surveys report the lowest response rate out of all the forms of consultation.

Several of the departments within the Council have written standards for consultation. Housing and Social Services and Environmental Services each provided us with their written criteria and goals for consultations. Financial Services also has a set goal that it attempts to reach through effective consultation in its charter marks. Each of these written benchmarks represents a unique set of criteria for the department that uses them. The charter that the Financial Services Department is under requires that the department meet government standards for quality of service. In contrast, the Housing and Social Services criteria ensure that the department fully considers the opinions and needs of tenants in the borough. The Environmental Services Department's standards are

the most extensive, ensuring Best Value, effective consultations, and implementation of consultation results.

In reviewing the consultation information provided by Council members, we discovered several instances where consultations conducted in different departments were somewhat similar. Such similarities were particularly evident in the Education, Leisure, and Libraries and Housing and Social Services Departments. The consultation conducted by the Education Leisure, and Libraries Department entitled "Early years partnership audit," and the "Surestart needs survey" conducted by the Housing and Social Services Department were remarkably similar in some of their target consultees and consultation methods; both used a written questionnaire to determine the views of parents on community support systems. The Council could have saved valuable resources if these two consultations had been merged into one.

The "Equal Chances" consultation conducted by the Education, Leisure, and Libraries Department bears an even more remarkable similarity to the "Looked-After Children" consultation conducted by the Housing and Social Services Department. Both consultations began in January 2000, and both interviewed a sample of "looked-after children." The "Equal chances" consultation sought views on educational issues, and the "Looked-After Children" consultation solicited views on citizenship and health services. These two consultations could have easily been combined to defer some of the £7,800 cost incurred for the "Looked-After Children" consultation, and the £900 cost for "Equal Chances."

As previously stated in this report, the UK Department of the Environment, Transport, and the Regions has a glossary of consultation schemes outlined on its website.

While the Council as a whole uses many of these methods to conduct consultations, there are several methods recommended in the glossary that the Council does not use. These include interactive websites, co-option committees (Council member committees that the public are invited to participate in), visioning exercises, and user management of services (arrangements in which citizens are given direct control over the management of local service and resources). While it is possible that some departments in the Council actually use these methods and simply did not report them, these alternatives to more traditional consultation methods could provide the Council with a broader perspective on the public's views.

Our consultation report is decidedly incomplete. Due to lack of adequate time to directly approach every member of the Council, we were forced to rely on department heads and other upper-level employees to distribute our consultation questionnaires. Thus, it is possible that, through a lack of time, interest, or communication between upper- and lower-level employees, the forms did not reach all relevant parties. There were also several instances where employees refused to fill out the forms, usually citing insufficient time as their reason. Thus, our consultation report and database are not fully complete.

If we had more time available to carry out this project, we would have approached all employees in the Council involved in consultation. This would have allowed us the opportunity to explain our project in more detail, and to more actively encourage Council members to fill out the consultation questionnaires. We would also be able to advertise our database to more Council members, thus further ensuring its future use. Because of our limited time, however, we must rely on our liaison to properly inform Council

members of the existence and usefulness of the database and report. However, the

information we were able to include seems to provide a broad spectrum of information on

consultation done throughout the Council. Thus, it serves as an excellent starting point

for future additions.

5.0 Database Design and Development Discussion

5.1 Purpose of the Database

The purpose of the consultation database is to act as a central repository for summary information on consultation that Merton Council has done or will do. Within the Best Value framework, the database shows that Merton is fulfilling its statutory duty to consult. The database will allow for more coordination between departments with respect to consultation, and will help employees conduct better consultation. Some specific examples cited by interviewees for the use of the database include reducing the over-consultation of certain groups of people in the borough and giving access to consultation information to all members of Merton Council. Several department heads think that it will be useful for several reasons, including the ability to electronically browse consultation being conducted by each of their departments and to view planned consultations for similar target groups.

5.2 Design and Specifications

We developed a comprehensive set of design criteria using several methods. As discussed in the literature review and methodology, design criteria are a set of specifications used by the developer to design the application. They act as a set of rules for the development project. The methods we used to develop our design criteria are fourfold: analysis of the initial project description, analysis of sample data, interviews with Merton employees, and personal judgment.

The project description given to us by Teresa Payne called for an Access database to be developed and placed on the London Borough of Merton (LBM) intranet. It was to

include information on past and current consultation, and show that Merton Council is performing its statutory duty to consult.

Next, we analysed several sample data sets given to us by Teresa Payne. The sheets all had the same fields: Title, Date undertaken, Aims of project, Methodology, Who carried out research, Main findings, Impact of research, Availability, Costs, Access restrictions, Advantages and disadvantages, and Contact information. These fields are included in the design criteria because this is the information our sponsor thought would be most useful.

The third method used to develop the design criteria was interviews with Merton employees. There were three different categories of employees that were interviewed: administrators, support, and users. The administrators are the people in charge of maintenance and upkeep of the application. In this case, the administrator is Teresa Payne. She cited several requirements for the database: the ability to browse and search consultation records using key words, and the ability for certain users to add, delete, and edit consultation records. She also required that it be easy to use.

The support category consists of the IT Services department. The two IT representatives we spoke with outlined some technical requirements: that the database and interface run on a Microsoft Windows NT server; that since nearly every computer in the organisation uses Microsoft Internet Explorer, the interface be optimised for Internet Explorer; and that the code be easy to maintain.

Our interviewees made suggestions about the content of the database as well as the functionality. After several interviews, we revised the initial list of data fields to be

more comprehensive and useful to the users. Users wanted the ability to search by date,

methods used in the consultation, feedback type, and contact name.

The fourth method used to develop the design criteria was personal judgment.

This included ease of use, aesthetic decisions, and choice of technologies. Also, we used

a simple design due to the severe time constraint.

After using these methods, we compiled the following criteria:

- Must include information on past, present, and future consultation
- Should include the fields: Title, Date undertaken, Aims of project, Methodology, Who carried out research, Main findings, Impact of research, Availability, Costs, Access restrictions, Advantages and disadvantages, and Contact
- Must be able to browse, search, add, delete, and edit records
- Must be easy to use
- Must link in with other consultation resources
- Must run on a Windows NT server
- Must run on and be optimised for Microsoft Internet Explorer
- Additional search methods: Search by date, methods used in consultation, feedback type, and contact name

5.3 Implementation Detail: Database

This section details the implementation of the database portion of the project.

While it covers some material that is discussed in the Methodology, it explains the

process by which we solved problems encountered in the course of implementing the

database.

The first step in the implementation of the database was to learn how to use

Microsoft Access. We completed this task using a guess and check approach on smaller

practise projects. For example, we designed and implemented an address database so we

could learn how to build tables, queries, and forms. We used similar practise projects to

learn about the different data types available in Access, to understand how to use the various wizards, and to comprehend other facets of the software with which we were unfamiliar.

Upon our arrival in Merton, we developed a set of design criteria using the methods described in the Design and Specifications section of this document. The initial structure of the database utilised two tables. After the scope of the project changed to include publishing the database on the Intranet using ASP, we altered the structure to be a flat (one table) database, to avoid technical difficulties that would have arisen due to our lack of experience with ASP. The flat database, although somewhat less efficient, is much easier to search and manipulate.

After several interviews with Merton employees, we changed the structure and format of the database in accordance with appropriate revisions to the design criteria. We added several fields, changed many field names, and changed the types of data that some fields held to better fit the information they would be holding better. We continued to make small revisions to the database as required throughout the development of the web interface.

5.4 Implementation Detail: Intranet Interface

Due to our limited experience and knowledge about database design and creation, it was necessary to conduct extensive research about the subject before our arrival at Merton. The results of this research can be found in the Literature Review portion of this document. We focused our research on database design and creation, and gave little attention to interface design.

Upon our arrival at Merton, the scope of the database design was increased to include publishing on the organisation's Intranet. This change in the project required a great deal of additional research and design time, but also gave us the opportunity to create a better product for Merton Council.

After meeting with a representative from the IT department and researching different solutions available to us, we decided to use a technology called Active Server Pages to publish the database. Other solutions we examined included using Access's Web-Publishing Wizard to create the data access pages. We decided against this option for several reasons. The first reason is that the technology that Access uses, XML, is new and is not supported by all versions of Internet Explorer used at Merton Council. Secondly, it is a difficult technology to use and one of the design criteria we developed required us to make sure the application was easy to maintain. In addition, because the language is difficult to learn, it would have been very difficult for our team to customise the interface to Merton's requirements.

Conversely, Active Server Pages is a language that is supported by all browsers (see the Literature Review for more information on ASP). ASP allowed us to create the interface to our specifications, and to keep the code maintainable.

In order to learn ASP, we used several resources to build a knowledge base, and implemented several small sub-sets of the project to practise. Our primary sources were the Visual Basic 6 Developer's Handbook, borrowed from the IT Services department, several web sites that offered examples on how to complete specific tasks, and the Microsoft Developers Network (MSDN) Library CD-ROM. For example, one web site showed how to add, delete, and edit records in a database (Miller, 1999). Another site

showed how to do a simple search of a database (Miller, 1999). While these examples

would not work with our specific project, they did offer a starting point. The MSDN

Library CD-ROM (1998) has technical documents on Visual Basic, Active Server Pages,

HTML, and Visual Interdev (the development suite we used to develop the application),

as well as sample code and tips. These were extremely useful when we needed to know

how to use features of ASP that were not covered in our other resources.

After learning the basics of ASP, we built our knowledge base further by

implementing small parts of the project. One such part was the page that shows the

details of individual records. This section required us to learn how to:

- Open a connection to the database
- Execute SQL queries
- Navigate within a recordset
- Access the information held in each individual field
- Display information on the web page, and
- Use control structures in the code to make decisions dynamically based on the database.

We also had to set up ODBC drivers for the database. ODBC is "a programming

interface that enables applications to access data in database management systems that

use Structured Query Language (SQL) as a data access standard" (Microsoft Windows

98). Practically, this means that we set up our database as an ODBC data source, which

enabled us to refer to the database from our code without citing a specific location within

the directory structure of the operating system. This is important because once our

application was moved to the organisation's Intranet a large number of code changes

would have been required. By using ODBC, only one setting on the server needed to be

changed.

We built the web interface by creating each functional area first. This enabled us to test each section independently of the others, and made debugging a much less daunting task. It also allowed us to do the more straightforward parts of the project first, while we were simultaneously building our knowledge base. Once we got to the more problematic sections, we knew enough ASP to solve the problems we encountered.

During our focus group the Merton Council employees who tested the interface made several suggestions for its improvement. One suggestion was to have the list of consultations on the interface be organised by department, rather than alphabetically by title. Upon further discussion we decided to sort the list alphabetically by title and by department. This will be useful since most people will be primarily interested in the consultation being done by their own departments. Another suggestion was to change the title of one field from "Access Restrictions" to "Data Restrictions" to avoid confusion. The change was made to the field labels to reflect the suggestion. A third suggestion was to have an extra text field for miscellaneous information to be entered into. After additional discussion we decided against this recommendation. A fourth suggestion was concerned with keeping the database updated. Specifically, it was suggested that coordinating officers within each department be nominated to update the database with information from their sections. All testers agreed that this was a good idea.

The rest of the suggestions made by the testers were long-term ideas beyond the scope of our project. One employee suggested using the consultation database as a gateway to the actual reports. For example, to view the main findings of a consultation one would click on a link which would open the actual report from that consultation. Another employee inquired about whether the database would be available to the public.

After some discussion the testers agreed that this would be a good idea for the future,

after the council has used the database for some time. Finally, a third employee suggested

that in the future other agencies (the Health Authority, for example) could be included in

the database to make it even more useful.

5.5 Content

The database includes summary information from consultation done in every

department in Merton Council. The record kept for each consultation, in compliance with

the design criteria, includes the following information:

- Title: the title of the consultation.
- Type: the type of consultation undertaken (Best Value, Statutory, other).
- Status: the status of the consultation (completed, current, planned, on-going)
- Date undertaken: start and end month and year (i.e. January 1999 – February 1999).
- Methodology: how the consultation was carried out (who was consulted, how many were consulted, and what methods were used).
- Who carried out the consultation: department, section, and lead officer.
- Main findings: the results of the consultation.
- Council's response to findings: how Merton Council reacted to the findings, including any feedback to the consultees.
- Availability of data: is the data available? If so, how?
- Costs: financial, staff, resources, and other costs of undertaking the consultation.
- Access restrictions: are there any restrictions to who can review the consultation findings (confidentiality, etc)?
- Advantages and disadvantages of the methods used
- Contact details (name, phone, and e-mail)

Currently, there are approximately 50 consultations entered into the database.

These records represent consultation from all five departments of Merton Council.

5.6 Future Considerations

There are few future considerations with the database and interface. The staff's biggest concern with the database is that it will not be updated regularly, and thus will lose its usefulness over time. Merton's Consultation Statement resolves this by addressing the problem in stating "this dataset is updated quarterly" (London Borough of Merton, 2000). Also, there may be employees who are not familiar with the concept or use of a database of this nature. To assist in this, we developed a manual for the database and indexed it from the consultation homepage. This manual, contained in Appendix H of this report, contains explicit directions on how to use every tool the database has to offer.

6.0 Conclusions

Merton Council conducts a wide variety of consultation. The "statutory duty to consult" demanded by the government is performed by various methods. The separate departments throughout the Council each have their own criteria, both formal and informal, for conducting consultation. This separation contributes to the variance in consultation methods and records. However, each department conducts consultation with the common goal of meeting Best Value standards.

The consultation database and written report we created over the course of this project will greatly help the Council in its quest to achieve Best Value standards through consultation. The database will allow all Council employees to access Council-wide information on consultation. The ready availability of this information will assist Council members in conducting more efficient and more effective consultations. We hope that it will prevent certain groups of residents from being over-consulted by unknowing Council members, and thus becoming discouraged and tired of participating. The database will allow sharing of information between departments--an essential tool for people working towards a common goal. Thus, the database will help ensure that the Council is working towards Best Value standards.

The consultation database has many other benefits as well. The presence of the database on the Council's Intranet will act as proof to government authorities that the Council is undertaking its statutory duty to consult. It gives some organisational structure to consultation information that, before, was scattered in different departments and sections throughout the Council. It allows department heads to assess the amount of

consultation being performed by their departments. These advantages also indirectly relate to the goal of Best Value; the more efficient the quality assurance that exists in consultation procedures, the closer those procedures are to meeting Best Value requirements.

The main drawback of the consultation database is its need to be constantly updated. At present, most Council employees are unaccustomed to any structure in recording consultation data. Thus, because we are introducing a new method for organising data, it may take some time before the database is fully effective. Our liaison, Teresa Payne, will bear responsibility for training staff to perform quarterly updates of the database following our departure.

Merton Council has shown great concern for performing effective consultation; the fact that they commissioned a consultation database is evidence of this concern. If the Council employees extend this concern to active upkeep of the database, it should prove a useful tool for achieving Best Value through consultation. The database we created will provide Merton Council with an excellent mechanism for reaching their goals for Best Value and effective consultation.

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Petroutsos, E., & Hough, K. (1999). <u>Visual Basic 6 developer's handbook</u>. Alameda: SYBEX, Inc.

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Appendix A—Glossary of Terms

Access: A Relational Database Management System created by Microsoft
                 Corporation. The most current version is Microsoft Access 2000.

Active Server Pages (ASP): A scripting language that allows the dynamic creation of web
                 pages and the manipulation of databases through SQL.

Best Value: A way of ensuring the delivery of more efficient, effective, and
                 economical council services with the public's involvement.

Borough: Basic unit of local government in London. The city is divided to facilitate
                 and individualize local government function.

Consultation: Practise of surveying the public with the goal of achieving best value.
                 Required of British local governments.

Database: A collection of related data about an enterprise with multiple uses

Database Management System: A software system that allows users to create new
                 databases, query those databases, support the storage of large amounts of
                 data, and control access to the database.

Double-barrelled question: Requires a respondent to respond simultaneously to two
                 issues in a single question (Berg, 1998).

Double-negative question: Offers both a positive and a negative response to a negative
                 question. Can be extremely confusing for respondents.

Filter question: Asks if a respondent actually has concern for a topic before asking how
                 concerned they are.

Flat database: A database with only one table.

Focus group: Method of interviewing with a group of seven or eight respondents.
                 Allows for communication and queuing between interviewees.

Form: A window that can be used to create data-entry interfaces, display data,
                 call up reports, or any of a number of things.

Interview: A conversation with a purpose of gathering information or anecdotes.

Intranet: An organisation's internal website.

Pretesting: Practising an interview or focus group with sample respondents before the actual interview. Allows for the identification and correction of weaknesses in questions or techniques.

Query: An action or set of actions that perform a specific task; it can be used to automate common tasks.

Questionnaire: A printed form containing a set of questions, especially one addressed to a statistically significant number of subjects as a way of gathering information for a survey.

Report: A way to display data in a printed format. This data can be from several different tables, can be manipulated, etc.

Respondent: Anyone responding to a survey.

Salience hypothesis: Idea that a particular response is made more available or more attractive through a consciousness process created by preceding questions (Converse and Presser, 1981, p. 44).

Structured Query Language (SQL): A high level language used to query and modify databases.

Survey: Any method of gathering consultation data, including interviews, questionnaires, etc.

Table: A collection of data about a specific topic. Access represents a table in the form of a spreadsheet, with each field being a column and each record being a row.

Visual Basic for Applications (VBA): A powerful programming language developed by Microsoft that makes it possible to customize applications quickly and easily.

Appendix B-- Interview Questions

[(Introduce ourselves). Thank you for your time. We are working to design a database for your council containing information from past consultations. This database will serve as a central repository for all past and future consultation information. We are looking for information on past, present and planned consultations.]

What is your role here at Merton Council?

How much consultation do you personally do?

Can you give details of consultation you've undertaken in the last year?
<<try and take this in heading of consultation form>>

Can you give details of consultation you have planned (or are currently undertaking) this year?
<<again try and take this in heading of consultation form>>

<<Give out forms to encourage them to fill out forms in detail and send them back to you>>

How regularly does your department conduct consultation?

Do you think an audit of council consultation on the intranet will be helpful (If so why, if not why not)?

Do you think the format for data entry is okay?
<<show paper form - If not why not>>

Would you be prepared to pilot the audit when it is complete?

Do you know of any other individuals in your department or elsewhere in the Council, whom we may speak to about consultation?
<<Get names and department contacts>>

[Thanks for your time.]

Appendix C—Cover Letter for Consultation Information Form

We are working on a database for Merton Council that will contain information from past consultation and consultation that will be conducted in the future. This database will be available on the Council's Intranet for use by members of Merton Council. We request your assistance in completing this database. Please fill out the attached form with information from consultation that have been performed by you or your department since January 1999, as well as consultations that are currently being conducted or are planned for the future. You are not required to fill in every single field, but as much information as possible would be most helpful. We will return to collect your completed forms on Tuesday, 8 February.

If you have any questions, or need more copies of this form, please feel free to phone us at extension 4678.

Thank you for your time,

Brenton Chamberland

John Gulbrandsen

Amanda Kight

Appendix D—Consultation Information Form

Title of Consultation:	
Consultation Type:	Please Circle All That Apply: Best Value Preparations Statutory Other (Please Describe):
Status of Consultation	Please Circle One: Completed Current Planned
Date Undertaken/Planned:	Started/Planned: Completed/Expected Completion:

Methodology:	Who was Consulted? How Many Consultees? What Methods were used? (Please Circle All That Apply)

	General Survey Consultation Visioning
	                             Document Exercises
	
	Surveys of Observation Area Forums
	Service Users
	
	Public Meetings Postal Survey
	
	                                   Panel Survey
	
	Citizen's Juries Action Planning Focus Groups
	
	Complaints & Other (Please Describe):
	Suggestions

Who Carried Out Consultation:	Department: Section: Lead Officer: Other (Please Describe):
Main Findings: (Results of Data Assessment)	

<u>Council's Response to Consultation:</u>	<u>Response:</u>

	<u>Feedback to Consultees?</u>
	<u>(Please Circle One)</u>
	
	    Yes No
	
	(Please Circle All That Apply)
	
	    Letter
	
	                                    Merton Messenger
	
	    Local Press Poster
	
	    Other (Please Describe):

Availability of Data on
 	
Responses:
	Please Circle All That Apply:
	
	    Access Excel
	
	    Committee Report Other Report
	
	    Not Available Other (Please Describe):

<u>Costs:</u>	<u>Financial:</u> <u>Staff</u>: <u>Resources</u>: <u>Other (Please Describe)</u>:

Access Restrictions: (Confidentiality, etc.)	
Advantages and Disadvantages of Methods: (Please Include Any Suggestions for Future Consultations)	
Contact:	Name: Phone: Email: Address:

Appendix E--Monitoring Framework for Consultation[1]

	CONSULTATION APPROACH - ISSUES TO BE CONSIDERED	REVIEW TEAM	QUALITY DIVISION
1	**Clarity of aims**		.
1.1	Are the aims and the objectives of consultation clear		
1.2	Will the objectives or outcomes be clear to consultees		
1.3	Does the whole review team know what they can expect from the consultation process		
1.4	Is the consultation being undertaken at an appropriate time in the review cycle		
2	**Consultees**		
2.1	How did you identify the stakeholders to be consulted		
2.2	Do the stakeholders identified include the following non-joining or socially disadvantaged groups: Ethnic minorities Young People Single parents If the consultees exclude these groups what measures are being used to widen the group		
2.3	Have staff been included in the consultation processes - if not, why not		
3	**Timescale**		
3.1	Has a realistic timescale been set for the consultation exercise		
3.2	Has a realistic timescale been set for responses		
3.3	Have timetables been kept to		
4	**Skills**		
4.1	Do the staff have sufficient skills, knowledge, support and authority to carry out the consultation proposed		
4.2	If there are insufficient skills is support being sought from the quality division or an external consultant		

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[1] Taken from personal communication with Teresa Payne via electronic mail, 1 December, 1999.

4.3	Has all existing data and research been made available to those undertaking consultation		
4.4	Are the consultees in a position to be consulted in the way that has been chosen		
4.5	Have relevant contact names been made know to the consultants and consultees		
5	**Resources**		
5.1	Is the information you require already available somewhere else		
5.2	Can your consultation exercise be co-ordinated with another		
5.3	Can you afford to see the whole consultation process through including analysis, evaluation and feedback		
6	**Techniques**		
6.1	Is the choice appropriate for the objectives		
6.2	Is the choice appropriate in terms of: • target audience • sample size • sample selection • quantitative research • qualitative research		
6.3	Has the appropriate balance of techniques been used		
6.4	Are review team members aware of the potential and pitfalls of their chosen methods		
7	**Evaluation**		
7.1	What are the total numbers of people who have been given an opportunity to be consulted		
7.2	What was the response rate		
7.3	What was the cost per person consulted		
7.4	Does this reflect value for money in terms of depth of analysis and quality of results		
7.5	Does the costs include: • staff costs • postage and printing • brought in goods and services		
7.6	Did the team consider sharing costs with another review team		
7.7	Has an response recording system been set up. Does it include information on key demographic variables - location, age, gender, ethnicity, disability?		
8	**Results**		

8.1	What changes have occurred as a result of the consultation, were the changes in: • policy • procedure • service delivery • efficiency • influencing other agencies • reprioritisation of resources		
8.2	How many people will be affected by the change		
8.3	Can the financial value of the change be estimated		
8.4	Over what time period will the change impact		
8.5	Does the service now reflect the users' need more accurately		
8.6	Has there been any test following consultation and change to see if satisfaction levels have been increased		
8.7	Have the results been fed back to • all departmental officers working on the review team • the best value steering group • line managers • members • trade unions • people/groups consulted • the research and community engagement officers • Council partners		
8.8	Was the decision made the same as the conclusion reached by consultees - if not would it be appropriate to explain to the consultees why this was the case		
9	**Lessons Learned**		
9.1	Did the process highlight any lessons that can be shared with other colleagues.		

Appendix F—Consultation Contacts

The following Merton Council employees have provided information for use in the

consultation database and consultation report. Their names may be cited in the text of

this report.

Name	Department
Peter Nash	Chief Executive's
Sue Tanton	Chief Executive's
Teresa Payne	Chief Executive's
Adam Spenser	Education, Leisure, and Libraries
Angela St. John	Education, Leisure, and Libraries
Barbara Spittle	Education, Leisure, and Libraries
Chris Parsloe	Education, Leisure, and Libraries
Diane Hyde	Education, Leisure, and Libraries
Eddie Taylor	Education, Leisure, and Libraries
Janet Yerbury	Education, Leisure, and Libraries
Jenny Cairns	Education, Leisure, and Libraries
JoAnne Hawley	Education, Leisure, and Libraries
John Pateman	Education, Leisure, and Libraries
Mark Homer	Education, Leisure, and Libraries
Pamela Rew	Education, Leisure, and Libraries
Paul Greenbaugh	Education, Leisure, and Libraries
Penny Collins	Education, Leisure, and Libraries
Robert Hobbs	Education, Leisure, and Libraries
Shiraz Durrani	Education, Leisure, and Libraries
Simon Deakin	Education, Leisure, and Libraries
Vee Child	Education, Leisure, and Libraries
Alison Broom	Environmental Services
Geoff Warren	Environmental Services
Irfan Malik	Environmental Services
John Stuchbury	Environmental Services
Mike Barrett	Environmental Services
Pete Thomas	Environmental Services
Richard Rawes	Environmental Services
Rob Moran	Environmental Services
Steve Cardis	Environmental Services
Steve Clark	Environmental Services
T.J. McIntosh	Environmental Services

Wendy Martin	Environmental Services
Mike Moulds	Financial Services
Mike Parsons	Financial Services
Mike Teasdale	Financial Services
Sean Meacham	Financial Services
Carmel Harrington	Housing and Social Services
David Wright	Housing and Social Services
Kathy Bucknill	Housing and Social Services
Peter Walters	Housing and Social Services
Rosemary Doyle	Housing and Social Services
Dave Kiddall	IT Services
Gurmel Bansal	IT Services

Appendix G—Database Test Plan and Discussion Group Questions

Instructions:

Please take a few minutes to perform the following tasks prior to the discussion group. Take notes on any problems you find so they can be fixed quickly and effectively. Thank you for your help!

Test 1: Browse

From the database home page, click on the browse link. From the list that is displayed, please review several records. Is the information presented useful? Is it easy to read? Is there any information that you would like to see that is not already shown? Are there any other changes you would like to be made?

Note: To go back to the list, use either the browser's 'back' button or the "back to consultation" link from the bottom of the page.

Test 2: Simple Search

Go back to the home page. Use the search field to search the database. Are the results as you expected?

Note: You must use the mouse to click on the search button. Simply hitting enter will not work.

Test 3: Advanced Search

Go to the home page and click on the "Advanced Search" link. Try searching several different fields. Are the results as you expected?

Note: Again, you must use the mouse to click on the appropriate search button.

Test 4: Add a Record

Go to the home page and click on the "Enable Edit Rights" link. Enter the password "shazamm". The home page should now have an additional link labeled "Add". Click on this link to go to the record entry page. Enter a record with your first name as the title. Use any other fields that you wish. Is the form easy to use? Are there any changes that should be made?

Test 5: Edit a Record

Go to the home page and use the browse or search mechanisms to find the record you entered. Is the information the same as you entered it? After reviewing the displayed information, go to the bottom of the page and click on the edit button. The data entry form should come up with the fields populated with the information from the consultation record. Review the data to be sure it is correct. Change several fields, including the title. Go to the bottom of the page and click the Save button to save the changes. Review your record. Are all the changes you made shown?

Test 6: Delete a Record

Find and view your record. Go to the bottom of the page and click on the delete button. A confirmation page should come up. Click no, and verify that your record still exists. Click the delete button again. This time click on the yes button. Use the browse link to verify that your record has been deleted. Does the delete button function as expected?

Test 7: Ad-hoc Test

Please take a few minutes to experiment with the database. Is there anything that doesn't work as you expected it to? Are there any misspelled words, grammatical errors, or colors that you don't like? Is the layout effective? Take note of any changes you would like to see.

And Finally...

During the interviews we conducted, several people stated concerns that the database will lose value quickly if it is not updated regularly. Do you have any ideas about how to overcome this obstacle?

Appendix H—Database Manual

Introduction

The Merton Council Consultation Database contains data from consultation conducted since 1997. It collates data from consultation conducted in every department across the Council to provide easy reference to all employees and other authorised users.

When the Database Homepage is loaded by the web browser, Internet Explorer, the page shown below will appear (see Fig. 1). A database is a like a filing cabinet. It has the ability to hold many records that can be sorted numerous ways. Just as you can look through the folders in a filing cabinet, you can look through the records of a database. All you have to do is click a button.

This manual provides reference for use of the database and its functions. Each function has its own section in the manual, beginning with the Browse function. Each section contains a brief description of the function, followed by a list of the steps needed to execute that function and a picture of the screen that should appear.
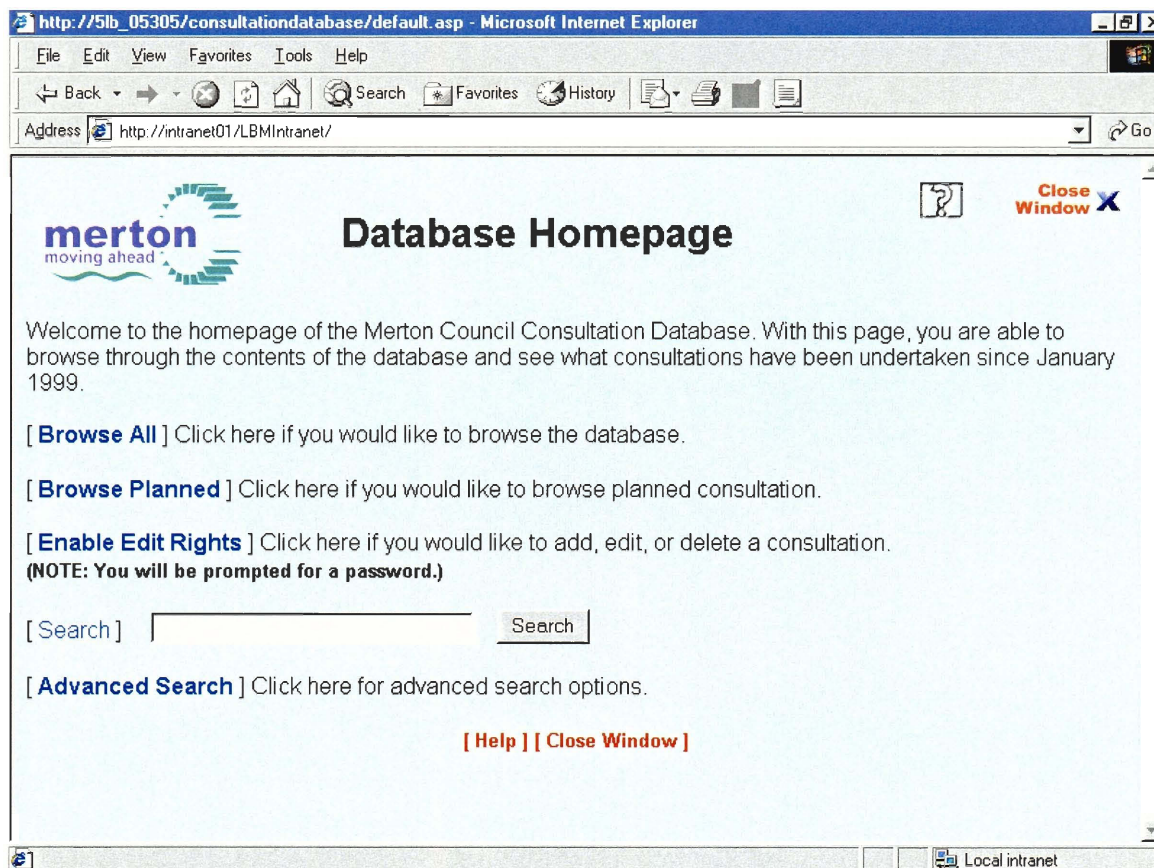
Figure 1 - Database Homepage

Browse

The Browse function allows users to browse through all the contents of the database.

1. Go to the Database Homepage
2. Click the '**Browse**' link (see Fig. 2)
3. A page with all the consultations will appear
4. Find the desired consultation and click on the title to view it

The page is broken down into two sections (see Fig. 3). The left side of the screen shows the list of all the consultations that are present in the database. On the right side of the screen is the department where the consultation was undertaken. Since there are numerous consultations in the database, they may not all be present on the screen. To see more consultations, you can use the mouse and click the down arrow of the scroll bar on the right hand side of the screen. When you see a consultation that seems of interest, you can click on the title. This will automatically bring up a page of a summary of the consultation.
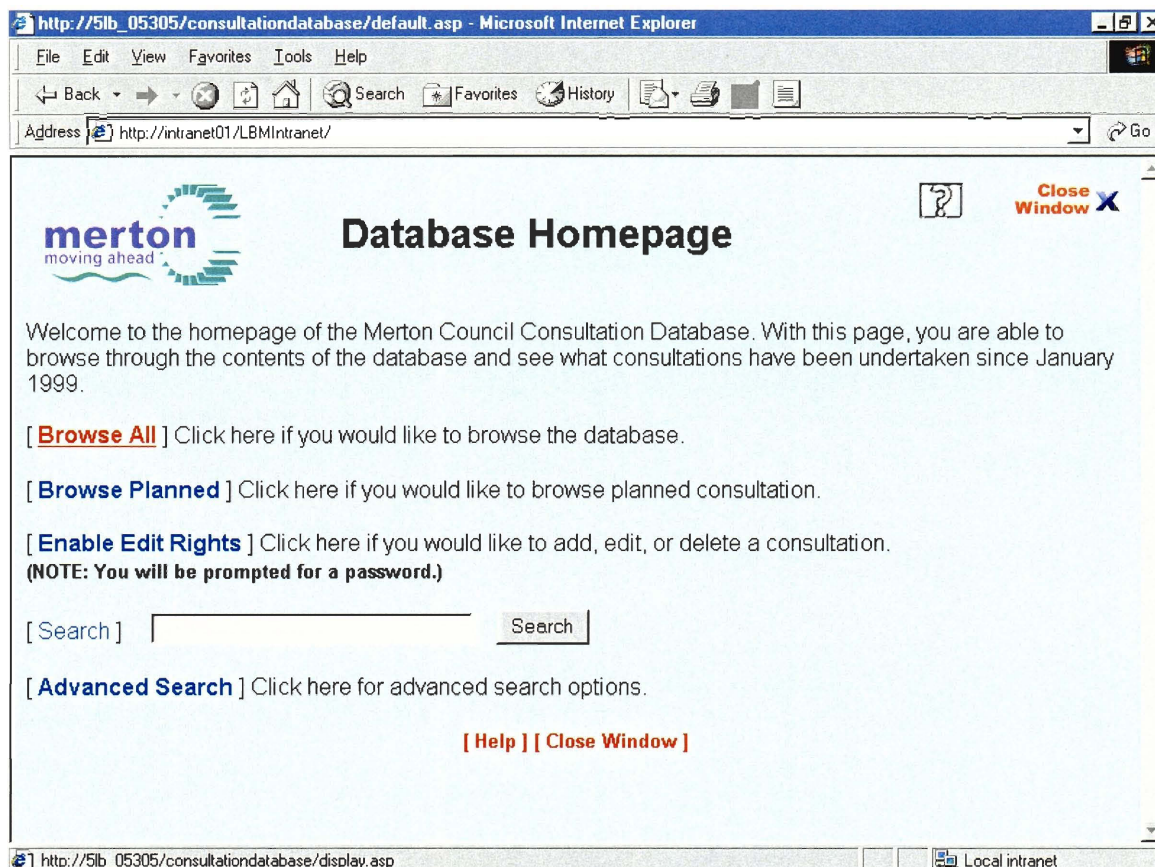
Figure 2 - Browse
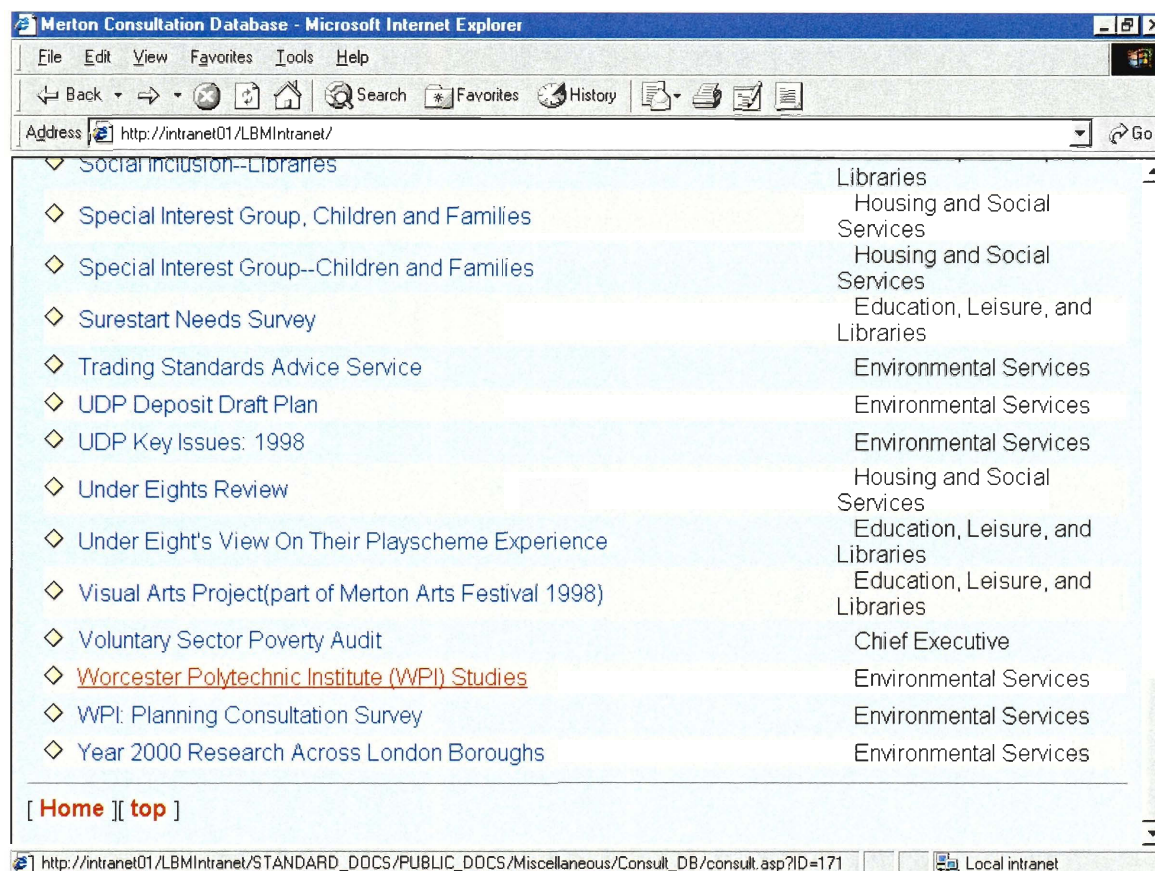
Figure 3 - Browse Sample

Creating a New Record/Entry

The Add function allows an authorized user to add a consultation entry to the database.

1. Go to the Database Homepage
2. Click on '**Enable Edit Rights**'
3. Type in the password and click the '**Login**' button (<u>**DO NOT PRESS ENTER**</u>) (see Fig. 11)
    Note: If this is done correctly, the phrase 'You are logged on with Edit rights' will appear under the Merton logo at the top of the page.
4. Click on '**Add**' (see Fig. 4)
5. Fill in the appropriate forms and click '**Save**'
6. Click '**Disable Edit Rights**' or exit Internet Explorer when finished
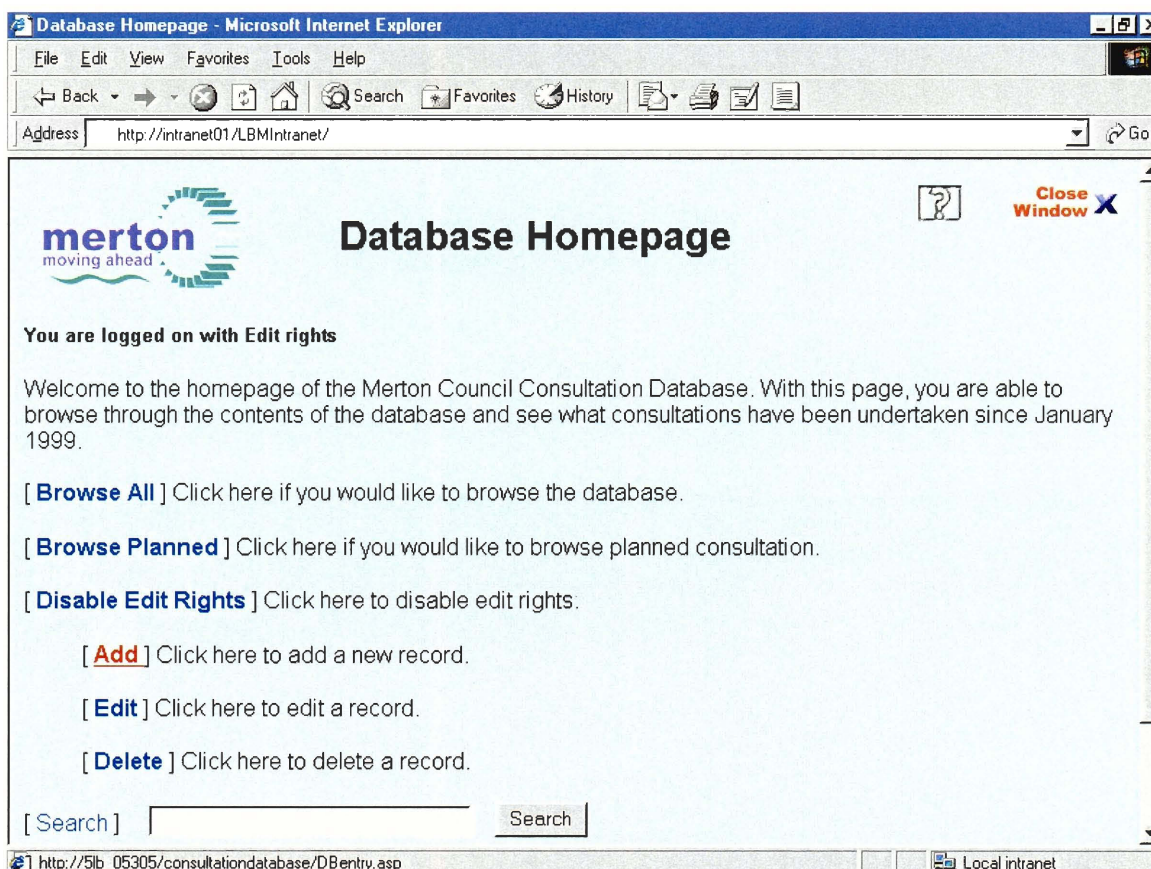
Figure 4 - Add

Deleting a Record/Entry

The Delete function allows an authorized user to delete a consultation entry from the database.

1. Go to the Database Homepage
2. Click on '**Enable Edit Rights**'
3. Type in the password and click the '**Login**' button (<u>**DO NOT PRESS ENTER**</u>) (see Fig. 11)

   > *Note: If this is done correctly, 'You are logged on with Edit rights' will appear under the Merton logo at the top of the page.*

4. Click on '**Delete**'
5. Find the consultation entry that is to be deleted
6. Click on the title
7. Go to the bottom of the page and click the '**Delete**' button (see Fig. 5)
8. A confirmation page will appear (see Fig. 6)
9. Click the appropriate choice

   > ***NOTE***: *Once you click 'Yes,' there is no way of getting the consultation entry back.*

10. Click '**Disable Edit Rights**' or exit Internet Explorer when finished

Figure 5 – Delete

Figure 6 - Delete Confirmation

Editing a Record/Entry

The Edit function allows an authorized user to change a consultation entry within the database.

1. Go to the Database Homepage
2. Click on '**Enable Edit Rights**'
3. Type in the password and click the '**Submit**' button (<u>**DO NOT PRESS ENTER**</u>) (see Fig. 11)
   Note: If this is done correctly, 'You are logged on with Edit rights' will appear under the Merton logo at the top of the page.
4. Click on '**Edit**'
5. Find the consultation entry that is to be edited
6. Click on the title
7. Go to the bottom of the page and click the '**Edit**' button (see Fig. 7)
8. A page, which is similar to the 'Add' page, will appear with the values of the consultation populating each field
9. Go to the appropriate field that has to be edited, and change it
10. Go to the bottom of the page and click 'Save'
11. Click '**Disable Edit Rights**' or exit Internet Explorer when finished

Figure 7 - Edit

Simple Search

The Simple Search function allows any user to search all the fields of the consultation entries of the database.

1. Go to the Database Homepage
2. Type in the word which is to be searched (see Fig. 8)
3. Click the '**Search**' button
4. A page with the results of the search will appear
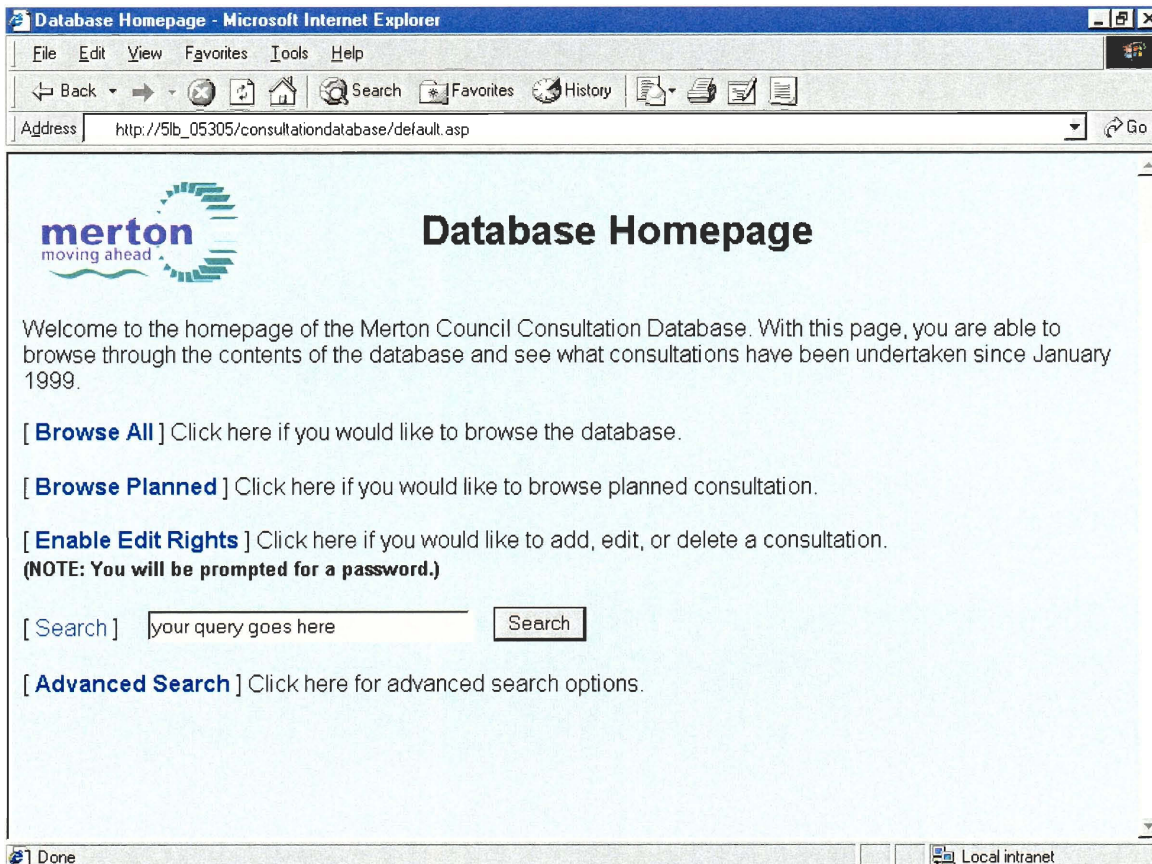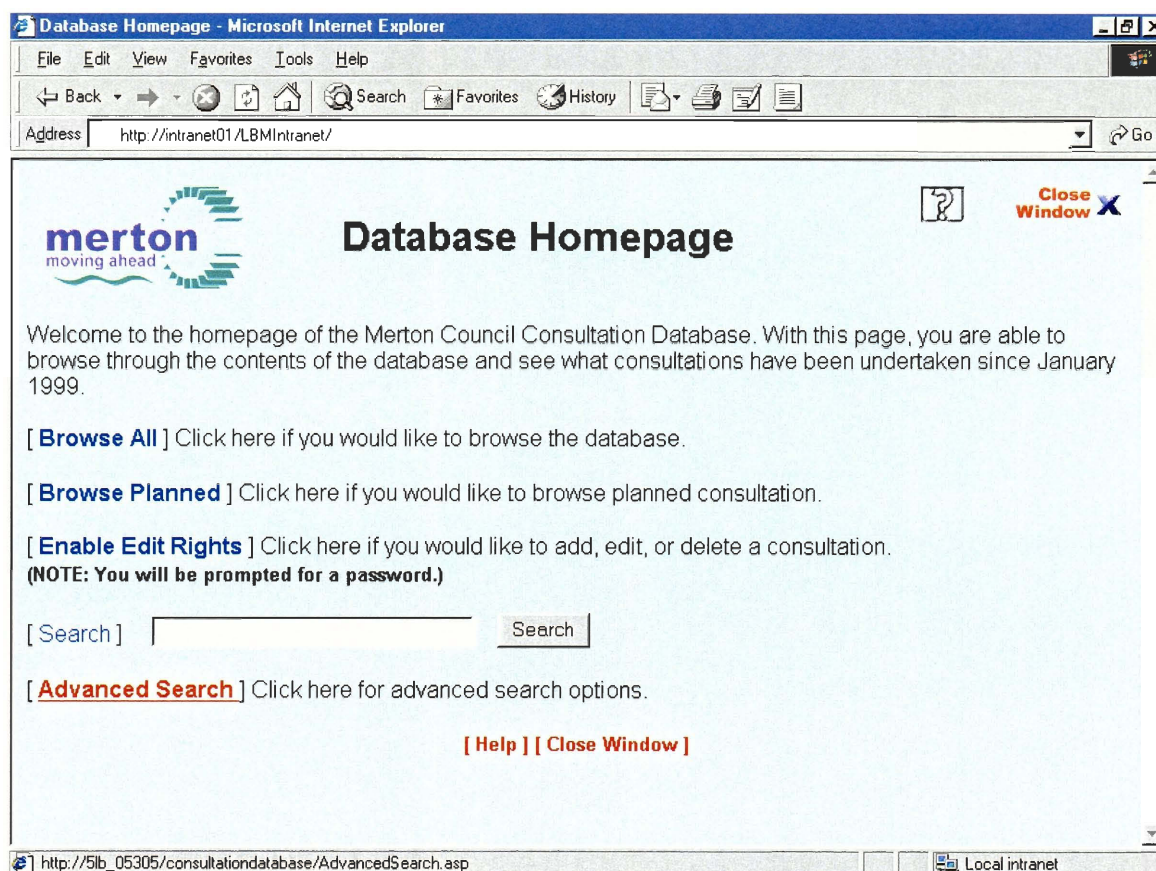5. Click on the desired consultation

Figure 8 - Simple Search

Advanced Search

The Advanced Search function allows any user to search a specific field of the consultation entries of the database.

1. Go to the Database Homepage
2. Click '**Advanced Search**' at the bottom of the page (see Fig. 9)
3. Locate the field you want to search (see Fig. 10)
4. Either type in your query or select an option from the drop-down menu.
5. Click the '**Search**' button
6. A page with the results of the search will appear
7. Click on the desired consultation

Figure 9 - Advanced Search

Figure 10 - Advanced Search II

Password Protection

The database contains built-in security features that restrict access to its Add, Edit, and Delete functions. If you try to access these functions, you will be asked for a password (see Fig. 11). This password is known only to certain authorised users to prevent intentional and accidental misuse of the database. Such security precautions help keep the database useful for everyone.
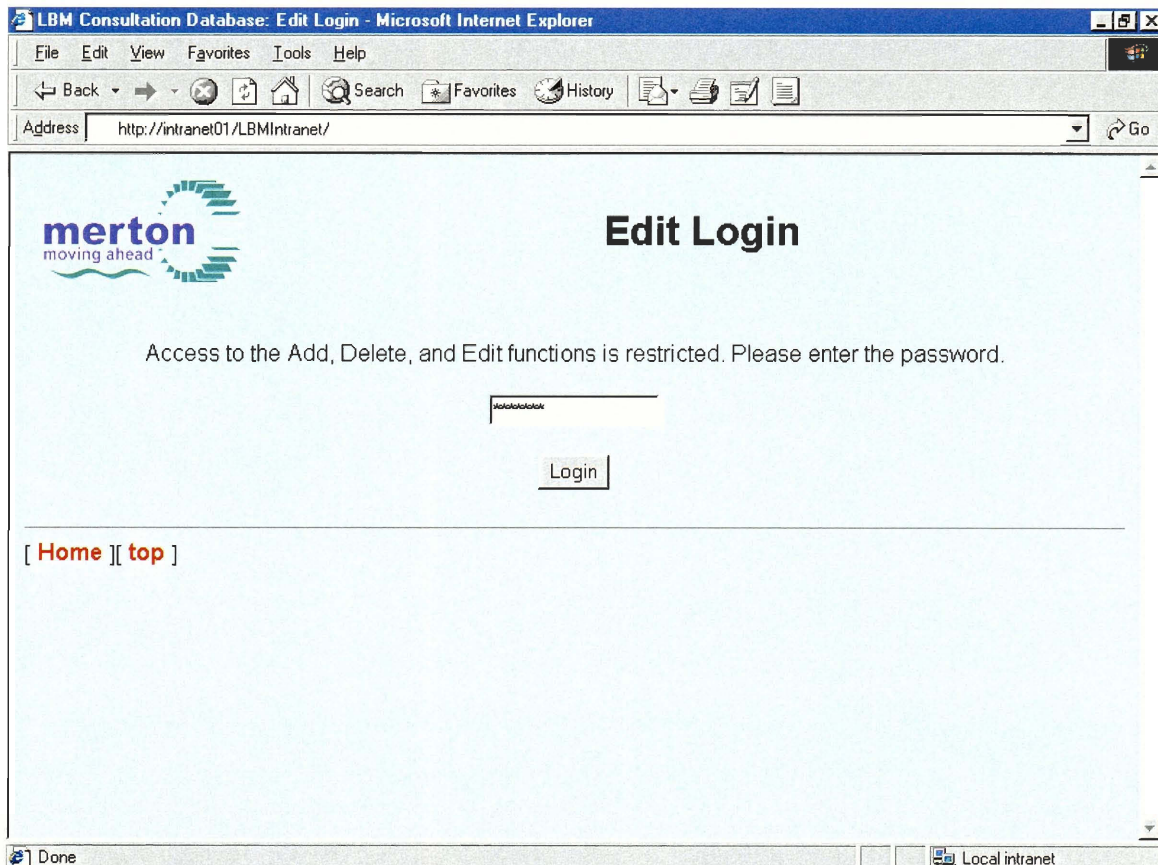

Figure 11 - Login

Navigation Bar

At the bottom of every page, a navigation bar is present. This bar has been included to assist you during your navigation. Each navigation bar is different, depending on what page you are on, but each bar will allow you to go back to the homepage or to the top of the page.