

Presenter(s): BRACKERTZ, Nicola

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Phone 61 3 8344 9480
Fax 61 3 9349 4442

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Hard to reach? Engagement, governance and community consultation in Victorian local government

Nicola Brackertz

**Institute for Social Research, Faculty of Life and Social Sciences,
Swinburne University of Technology**

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Introduction

Under the Bracks Labour government in Victoria, the community strengthening agenda has emerged as a vehicle to promote community engagement, joined up government and networked approaches to governance. Its key dimensions challenge conventional relationships between state, federal and local governments and the top-down relationship between government and community; networked models of partnerships between public and private actors are favoured for the development of policy and the delivery of services. Local government is identified as a key player in this agenda through the work it already undertakes with local communities and as the site where localised reforms are likely to have the greatest impact.

Increasing community involvement in local government decision-making through community consultation forms part of this agenda. In addition to its traditional roles of securing procedural legitimation prior to decision-making and enhancing the government's ability to respond to emerging wants and needs of the citizenry, community consultation is now seen as a mechanism that will also connect citizens with each other and with government, thereby enhancing social capital, strengthening community networks and building community capacity. The convergence of local government and community sits at odds with traditional models of representative democracy and raises challenges for management, accountability and citizenship in local government. But to what degree are local governments actually placed and willing to be actors in these new governance arrangements? Of particular interest is the issue of the capacity of local governments to connect widely with multiple publics, in particular groups who may not be inclined to participate. How representative are participatory mechanisms and what is the level of local governments' knowledge, resources and commitment to implementing and sustaining participatory processes as a 'way of doing business'?

Focussing on those consultations that constitute part of councils' regular business (rather than highly publicised 'flagship' projects) three key questions are used to test the democratic legitimacy of direct citizen participation at the local government level: Is it representative? Is it justified by the outcomes? Does it serve to establish new relationships? The research highlights that there is a breadth of practices currently taking place in Victorian local government;

these range from exemplary to questionable – often within the same municipality. Determining factors appear to be the organisations' culture and its attitude towards public participation, along with a willingness to make available the required resources – knowledge, money and time. Here I am more interested those participation exercises that are part of councils' regular business.

The paper draws on a three-year ARC-funded collaborative research project with eight Victorian local councils, the Victorian Local Governance Association (VLGA) and researchers from Swinburne University of Technology. The project is investigating how community consultation is currently practised by Victorian councils, especially in relation to multiple publics and groups that councils can find 'hard to reach'. The eight participating councils comprise inner city as well as city fringe locations, homogenous and highly ethnically and culturally diverse populations, economically advantaged and disadvantaged areas, well established and newly developing areas, municipalities with a long-standing commitment to community consultation as well as those which are still developing their policies and practices. While the councils chosen may not be statistically representative, the range of contexts and socio-demographic characteristics reflect the attitudes and practice of community consultation as it is currently taking place in Victoria. Focus groups, interviews and workshops were conducted with key persons in each council. A series of eight in depth case studies observing consultation in practice is currently under way and form the basis for the research reported here.

Direct citizen participation and democratic legitimacy

A useful way of looking at why local governments consult is along two key dimensions of democratic legitimation. The first, procedural legitimation, denotes the processes, which serve to secure the consent of the governed. Traditionally, in a representative democracy general acceptance of political decisions is predicated on the principle that each vote counts equally when electing representatives and that beyond elections, everybody has the same right to attempt to influence political decision making through lobbying and advocacy prior to a decision being made. The other key dimension of democratic legitimation is the effectiveness of political institutions, which hinges upon the government's ability to deliver outcomes and address emerging issues and needs as they arise (Hanssen, Klausen, and Vabo 2003;

Klausen and Sweeting 2002). These dimensions are analogous to what Scharpf (1999) describes as input-oriented (government by the people) and output-oriented (government for the people) legitimising beliefs.

Historically, public services were provided through the institutions of the state and its bureaucracy to provide standardized, universal services in a top down way. In our increasingly complex society that is characterised by frequent and rapid change, combined with the discourses around the need for efficiency and effectiveness, the centralized institutional model has become seen to be increasingly inadequate to meet our needs. In its place a new system of horizontal partnerships and networks between government and private, not for profit and local actors is now seen as a means to reach 'system capacity'; that is, maximise the ability of the system to provide diversified and responsive services efficiently and effectively. Local government is identified as a key player in this agenda through the work it already undertakes with local communities and as the site where localised reforms are likely to have the greatest impact.

This shift from government to governance has implications for democratic legitimacy as well as the ways in which governments interact with and provide services to their constituencies. Against the perceived benefits of governance arrangements, questions have been raised about the quality and accountability of services provided under networked arrangements. Key concerns relate to the way such arrangements are made and policed and the degree to which they are open to public scrutiny (Mulgan 2006). Concerns have also been raised about the ability of the public to hold accountable service providers, as well as elected representatives. Governance arrangements are said to have reduced accountability because they are regulated through contractual, rather than democratic arrangements, thereby reducing ministerial control and the ability of the public to scrutinise contractual arrangements (Considine 2002). Governance arrangements have also been criticised for their selective and unsystematic inclusion of organised actors, which in combination with increasingly dispersed, fragmented and polycentric systems of decision are eroding the basis of the legitimation of collective institutions (Klausen & Sweeting).

While network governance may strengthen the system's overall capacity to provide and act collectively, governance arrangements are often deficient in

their democratic accountability and representativeness. In other words, the procedural dimensions of representative democracy are traded off in favour of the effectiveness of the system to provide. It is therefore described as having weak democratic legitimacy.

[The dilemma here is]... the ability of the citizens to exercise democratic control over the decisions of the polity versus the capacity of the system to respond satisfactorily to the collective preferences of its citizens. (Dahl 1994: 28)

Direct citizen participation is frequently cited as the remedy for the weak democratic legitimacy and accountability deficits associated with governance arrangements. It also provides a sphere for citizens to take direct action on issues that are important to them and as such is seen as the mechanism, which will contribute to the re-establishment of a sustainable community culture (Cuthill 2003; Cox 2000). Local government is seen to be ideally placed as the locus of direct citizen involvement because of its local knowledge and already existing community ties. As the third tier of government, it is also considered to be closest to the people. As a consequence, local government finds itself in the curious position of being named a key player in establishing governance arrangements through partnerships, while at the same time being singled out as the locus where the democratic deficiencies of these arrangements can be most effectively countered. Rather than drawing attention to this contradiction, the language of local government melds these two sometimes conflicting objectives in the notion of 'community engagement'. In its many guises, community engagement encompasses a range of practices and ideas. The Department of Sustainability and Environment (DSE) offers this definition:

... (engagement is) a generic, inclusive term to describe the broad range of interactions between people. It can include a variety of approaches, such as one-way communication or information delivery, consultation, involvement and collaboration in decision-making, and empowered action in informal groups or formal partnerships.ⁱ

The broad ranging reforms of new public management applied private sector models emphasizing efficiency, effectiveness and competition to the public

sector, and have reshaped our public institutions. In the process citizens were recast as consumers (Brown and Keast 2003; Fountain 2001) and the community base for service delivery was eroded, leading to what is sometimes described as a crisis of community. The 1990s saw a vast program of reforms to reshape the local government sector in Australia. These reforms targeted economic, management and governance aspects. New legislation in all states resulted in the amalgamation of small authorities, the adoption of market practices and the introduction of new management methods, in particular, strategic planning. Greater involvement of citizens was seen as necessary because the new larger municipalities had fewer elected representatives. To this end, statutory requirements prescribed the involvement of citizens in the strategic planning cycle, thereby providing an avenue for public involvement in the management of local affairs.ⁱⁱ

In Victoria, the introduction of the Best Value principles in 1999 and the passing of the Local Government (Democratic Reform) Act in 2003 emphasised increased accountability of local government to the community and the need for consultation with the community. Paired with state government policy shifts towards more decentralised forms of policy and program development (e.g. place management, neighbourhood renewal, community capacity building and community strengthening), in which local government plays a significant role, strategies for citizen participation are now firmly on the agenda. A further dimension is provided by the Victorian state government's community strengthening agenda, which is about involving individuals and institutions in new forms of communication and connectedness. The underlying idea is that communities can be strengthened through better relationships with government and that better governance will result from stronger relationships with community (Considine 2004).

In policy terms engagement is supported by the Victorian Government's *A Fairer Victoria: creating opportunity and addressing disadvantage* (State Government Victoria 2005a) social policy statement at the heart of which lies the Community Building Initiative.ⁱⁱⁱ It aims to bring residents together with government and community agencies to plan for and address local needs, build local leadership and foster community networks. This is backed by the *Growing Victoria Together: a vision for Victoria to 2010 and beyond* (State Government Victoria 2005b) framework, which commits to a vibrant democracy and more accountable government by giving more Victorians

from all backgrounds the opportunity to have a say on issues that matter to them.

Community strengthening is not a new idea, of course. Many of its elements are easily recognizable from the community development initiatives of the 1960s and 1970s. However, unlike their predecessors, today's community strengthening initiatives are premised on the convergence of several seemingly disparate streams of thought (Adams and Hess 2001; Klausen and Sweeting 2002; Chandler 2000). Community strengthening draws on the currently influential idea that social capital and connectedness are linked to improved outcomes in terms of public health and public safety, economic strength and resilience and general community wellbeing (Bullen and Onyx 1999; Baum 1999; Teachman, Paasch, and Carver 1997) and highlights the importance of network relationships between decision-makers, stakeholders and clients (citizens) in the policy process. Some writers are cautious about this policy direction, fearing that it serves to position communities to fill gaps in service provision and social policy left by the shrinking of the state (Adams and Hess 2001). Community involvement in governance is also premised on the idea that participation in the policy process by those who will be affected, will lead to better outcomes and wider acceptance, as well as enhancing the democratic legitimacy of decisions (Klausen and Sweeting 2002). Another odd convergence is that of neo-liberal and communitarian views of citizens' rights and responsibilities. In neo-liberal terms of reference, citizenship is based on ideas of personal freedom as the basis for social stability and security through market-based competition, leading to a decreased reliance on the state. The communitarian view on the other hand identifies trust and cooperation as key elements of social cohesion. The new mantra combines the two: a lessened reliance on the state is achieved *through* social cohesion (Adams and Hess 2001; Klausen and Sweeting 2002).

Competing demands of public participation

So far the terms citizen involvement and community participation have been used very broadly to denote a wide range of practices that all fall within the spectrum of direct government-citizen interaction. It is important to recognize that there are many different types of participation, which have been variously categorized and classified using a range of hierarchical and vertical continuum approaches (Arnstein 1969; Shand and Arnberg 1996; International Association for Public Participation 2005), as well as matrix and discontinuous models (Bishop and Davis 2002; Thomas 1993). Typologies

frequently use a normative approach and are built around the notion that there are degrees of public influence on the decision making process. Participatory mechanisms range from those that entail minimal contact with the public, such as the provision of information, to consultation, which involves a two way exchange of information, but where the government sets the terms of reference and retains the right to make the final decision. More involved forms of participation can take the shape of advisory committees or partnerships, and at the far end of the spectrum control over decision-making is ceded to citizens. For local government the importance of the typologies referred to above is that they influence the way in which councils conceptualize and practice consultation (Brackertz forthcoming). Our research with the eight councils has shown that the majority of direct citizen interactions fall into the range of information provision, information gathering and consultation, where consultation is defined as a two-way exchange of information between council and the community prior to a decision being made (Brackertz et al. 2005). Consequently, the remainder of this discussion will concern itself with participatory practices that fall within this spectrum.

So why do local councils consult? In addition to securing procedural legitimation and enhancing the government's ability to respond to emerging wants and needs of the citizenry, community consultation is now also seen to be one of the mechanisms that will connect citizens with each other and with government, thereby enhancing social capital, strengthening networks and partnerships and building community capacity. This makes community participation in local government a practice where the aspirations of policy are mixed with selective input from political and social theories and are bounded by the limitations of practice. Local councils consult for a variety of reasons. Some are pragmatic, while others stem from conceptions about local government's role in democracy, in community-building, in fostering civil society or in redressing social injustice or exclusion (Catt and Murphy 2003; Holland 2002; Munro-Clark 1992). Councils typically consult on major policies and strategies, policies and targeted strategies that are place or issue based, operational and service planning and development, as well as performance evaluation (Brackertz et al. 2005) and issues of special concern to the community. The rationales behind consultation often combine multiple aims and objectives, which are not always clearly distinguished.

Based on workshops and interviews with partner councils it was found that that they consult for the following reasons (Brackertz et al. 2005):

- Information-gathering and provision

- Statutory requirements/ Best Value/ council strategic plan
- Good governance
- Educating the community
- Community strengthening/ social capital/ community capacity building
- Participation
- Community engagement
- Planning
- Promoting prosperity and inclusion
- Addressing democratic deficit
- Better/ responsive service provision
- Increased connectedness
- Distributed leadership
- New skills
- Local solutions to local needs
- Improved communication/ transparency
- New partnerships/ collaborations between government, businesses and local communities
- Evaluation/ feedback gathering

As can be seen, there are a rich variety of aims that can have multiple designated outcomes. That is, consultation may not just a means to an end but, depending on the desired outcome, may become an end in itself. This illustrates the fact that consultation is a process, not an event (Victorian Local Governance Association 2001; Cook 2002). The variety and spread of these aims and desired outcomes can be explained, in part, by the range of pressures on Victorian local government in the context of the changing role of local authorities and new imperatives in Australian public policy more broadly.

Evaluating public participation

The question of why councils consult has implications for whom and how they consult. Consultation beyond council elections provides further opportunities for citizens to express their preferences and attempt to influence decision making, service provision and policy formation, adding procedural legitimation to council processes and decisions. Consultation also assists to enhance to capacity of councils to be responsive to the emerging needs and

wants of its citizens, and can assist in educating the public and securing public consent. In this sense citizen participation is an extension of the democratic process and consultation can be viewed through the lens of input and output legitimation. The current policy context in Victoria, as well as wider international trends, favour another aspect of consultation: partnerships and connectedness. Three key questions serve to establish how successful direct citizen participation is in fulfilling democratic criteria as well as expectations of community strengthening:

1. Is it representative and therefore does it support procedural legitimation?
2. Is it worthwhile given the outcomes that result?
3. Does it serve to establish relationships?

Councils' ability to successfully conduct citizen participation depends on a variety of factors. Cuthill (2005:71) identifies three elements that contribute to local governments' capacity to implement participatory mechanisms: (i) the collection and provision of relevant empirical data describing the local community; (ii) establishing equitable, accountable and transparent participatory policy and processes; and (iii) the development of a supportive organisational culture.

Our research indicates that Cuthill's first two prerequisites often exist, but that when consultation is assessed using criteria of representativeness, outcomes and relationship building, the key determinants of successful consultation lie with the skills and knowledge of staff, the lines of communication within council, and most importantly, the organisational culture and the attitude of elected representatives.

We found, for example, that all participating councils kept extensive statistics on their communities' demographic characteristics^{iv}. Service areas in particular tended to have excellent knowledge of their communities and often used this knowledge to target participants for consultation. However, when high level plans and documents were consulted upon, this demographic information was not frequently used to tailor a consultation strategy that would be representative of the wider community using a combination of consultation techniques.

The existence of documents outlining participatory policy and processes was also not an indicator of successful practice. Seven of the eight participating councils had policy documents, consultation strategies, manuals and guides relating to consultation, with the eighth providing a consultation checklist but

no policy. The mere existence of these documents was no guarantee of success. We noted that in one of the councils, even though it didn't have an explicit consultation policy or strategy, doing consultation was an entrenched part of the culture and was conducted frequently, using many innovative methods, and reaching out to a wide range of community members. Conversely, in other instances, the availability of documents outlining consultation principles, procedures and techniques was not a guarantee of success.

The use of consultants was wide spread. The advantages to council of this are clear – consultants are experts in community consultation, they conduct the participation, collect and analyse and prepare the data and then feed the findings back to councils. The community may see consultants to be more independent and more impartial than council staff. Consultants are also an easy way to keep tabs on and justify expenditure and resources. The disadvantage of using consultants to conduct the majority of public participation exercises is that council staff do not get the opportunity to develop their own expertise and skills. It also means that any knowledge gathered that is not included in the consultant's report is not retained by council. But the key point here is that the extensive use of consultants does not allow a culture that is conducive to consultation to emerge within council, as knowledge and skills are not built in-house, but are outsourced. The importance of this is backed by the observation that those councils participating in the study who had a strong culture of doing community consultation frequently used their own staff in designing and executing public participation.

Representativeness of consultation

In practice, the majority of council consultations fail to involve a broad cross section of those affected despite the availability of detailed demographic information. While much has been written about the representativeness of participants, a question that is asked less frequently is the degree to which consultations are required to involve a broad and representative range of affected citizens. Two different requirements of representativeness emerge, depending on the issues consulted upon. Klausen and Sweeting (2002) identify that consultations that are carried out to secure procedural legitimisation of democratic processes may require full inclusion but that in reality are often based on selective inclusion. One may argue that in the case of local councils, consultations may not require full inclusion, but should at least aim to involve a representative sample of the municipality's population. Even consultations on major policies and strategies that affect the entire

municipality (e.g. corporate plan or municipal strategic statement) are often carried out involving only a small number of community members who are often not representative of the broader demographic. Consultations that are based on a functional premise, such as a service review or an operational matter are usually aimed at a subset of the municipality's population and don't require full inclusion (though they may benefit from it). However, even in these instances only a small proportion of the affected citizens take part in the consultation process.

When faced with issues that require broad representation, councils often favour traditional approaches to consultation, such as public meetings and forums that are advertised using public notices, leaflets, letter drops and in the local media.^v This was also evident in the analysis of the consultation practices of the councils participating in this study. Public meetings and forums appeal because they can provide a deliberative setting; allow for direct contact between council representatives, councillors and the general public; are relatively easy to organise; and are cost efficient. The problem with this approach is that it favours a certain type of participant, who is usually middle aged or older, male, articulate and relatively well educated. Another drawback is that unless the issue consulted upon is very controversial, participant numbers tend to be low. Councils also find that from consultation to consultation, they don't just attract similar kinds of participants, but often the same participants tend to get involved, further limiting representativeness. While this type of consultation is publicly advertised and is (at least theoretically) open to all citizens of the municipality, it falls down in terms of representativeness when we look at who actually attends. There are many explanations why public meetings and forums don't attract greater public interest. One may argue that it is because of a general disillusionment and lack of interest in public affairs by the wider community, characteristic of the democratic deficit (Hindess 1997, 2002). Or, if using a social capital explanation, one may attribute it to a lack of civic culture and engagement (Putnam 2000; Putnam, Leonardi, and Nanetti 1993). Other explanations include that citizens have many obligations and lack the time to attend, fail to see how their contribution is relevant and will make a difference, or lack to confidence to speak up in a public forum.

A popular means of involving a large number of participants is the use of surveys. These are most often administered by mail or the Internet, though occasionally door knocking, and face to face or phone interviews are used. Surveys may be targeted at a statistically representative sample of the

municipalities' wider population, or they may be aimed more generally. As with public meetings and indeed all forms of public participation, surveys favour a certain demographic over others, and are rarely representative. A further drawback is that while they can manage to reach a large number of persons, the survey format is usually predetermined by council and doesn't facilitate discussion, discursiveness and deliberation.

Councils are aware of the limited representativeness of many consultations. This has led to a proliferation of tools and methods to involve various sections of the community. Among these are citizen panels, charettes, fishbowl techniques, search conferences, and so on (Walsh, Sarkissian, and Hirst 2001). Nonetheless, the majority of council consultations still fail to reach many sections of the community. Hard to reach is a term sometimes used to describe those sections of the community that are difficult to involve in council consultations. The degree to which particular groups are hard to reach is context specific and depends on the issue and the population targeted. Despite these qualifications, the focus groups and surveys conducted for this project support Stone's (2005) assertion that hard to reach populations are typically understood through notions of disadvantage/ difference and barriers to participation. It seems to be almost universally accepted that, for a number of reasons, CALD, indigenous, young, elderly, disabled and homeless people present particular challenges. Other groups identified included drug users, sex workers, those on low incomes, high rise apartment dwellers, faith based communities, single parents, newly arrived residents, gay and lesbian people, problem gamblers and residents of hostels and boarding houses. Other factors mentioned included lifestyle and occupation. Perhaps the most frequently mentioned in this context were the 'time poor': people who are in full-time work and/ or work outside the council area. Renters were also viewed as more difficult to consult with than homeowners. Many businesses (traders) were considered to be time poor or reluctant to participate for other reasons. Some rural populations were considered to be hard to reach, while some groups of people (in particular, those who were asked to regularly respond to service reviews) were becoming 'over-consulted' and increasingly reluctant to participate.

Council documents on public participation routinely recommend consultation of people who will be affected by an issue. This could be bounded locally, be linked to a particular issue, be confined to the users of a service, or could include all citizens of the municipal area. The issue of the degree to which a

consultation is required to be representative for it to be legitimate is not usually taken into account. Despite the availability of an array of techniques to involve various segments of the community, in actuality the choice of consultation mechanism is frequently dictated by the need to stay within budget or fit in with timelines.

Councils are aware of the differing degrees of difficulty of involving certain groups, depending on the issue consulted upon. Focus group participants stressed that some consultation processes are much more difficult than others. Those regarded as most difficult, were processes associated with the development of future-oriented high-level strategic documents, such as Council Plans, Municipal Strategic Statements and Municipal Health Plans. Involving a wide range of community members in such planning exercises involves considerable time and resources. In such cases, it was felt, 'everyone is hard to reach'. People tend to be reluctant to get involved, due to the complexity and multi-faceted nature of some strategy documents. It is difficult to persuade them to see the immediate impact of a policy or strategy, or the relevance to their own lives. It is not difficult, focus groups commented, to elicit negative comments about an existing plan or strategy. It is much harder to get constructive comments, criticism or thoughts about the future. Nevertheless, given that such planning processes and strategies have an impact on all citizens, it was felt important to gain either widespread input or at least nominal representation from the community. This points to another paradox of consultation. It is just those processes that are most requiring representativeness in consultation to legitimate them, that are hardest to achieve. As a consequence it is the very consultations that require representativeness to achieve procedural legitimation that are often put in the 'too hard basket' and hence fall down in terms of democratic legitimacy.

The above illustrates that many consultations fall short on the measure of representativeness, which is a key measure of procedural legitimation. Achieving this aim, presents a challenge to all councils participating in this study.

Outcome legitimation

The outcome of citizen participation is another key criterion of its legitimacy. It concerns the degree to which decision makers take note of the views of the public and act upon them (Pratchett 1999; Needham 2002). Key considerations are whether it is the decision makers or their staff who hear the public; whether the process explicitly indicates how and which public views were included; whether final recommendations are communicated back to the

public; and if action is not taken whether an explanation is provided as to why this is the case. Closing this 'feedback loop' serves to ensure the validity and sustainability of any consultation process and adds to its accountability. In reality consultation processes often lack transparency as to how the information and public opinions gathered from public participation are collated and translated into policy and other outcomes. This can discredit the process in the eyes of the public and lead to disillusionment and the impression that the community wasn't listened to. In these instances community consultation can backfire and rather than having a positive effect on the relationship between council and the community can lead to disillusionment and alienation, further contributing to the democratic deficit.

It is in this context the attitude of councillors can be a crucial factor in setting the scene for successful participation. For example, in one council, councillors were of the opinion that council didn't need to, and shouldn't consult, as they as the elected representatives of the people already knew their preferences. In this council it was understandably difficult for any staff to initiate and conduct successful community consultation. The community was not accustomed to being consulted with, and as a result even when consultation occurred, turnout tended to be low. The outcomes of the consultation and recommendations arising from it were viewed with scepticism by councillors and frequently recommendations were not acted upon or were censored by council staff before being presented at council, to avoid possible conflict. In these circumstances it is clear that outcomes tended to be sub-optimal.

Conversely, in another municipality councillors and the mayor were extensively involved in the consultations for a high level plan. As a result these sessions gained credibility with the community members attending and the findings from the consultation also carried weight when they were tabled at council as councillors had been present at many of the public workshops.

Outcomes may also be limited because of poor communication across council silos. This includes the exchange of knowledge about how to successfully access certain segments of the community, as well as the exchange of information gained from previous consultations. During the case studies undertaken for this research it was observed that frequently some areas within councils had well established relationships with communities that other areas within council found 'hard to reach', but that there was no sharing of access to these groups. Only two of the participating councils had a

centralised database or 'register' to keep track of the consultations that were occurring within different areas across council, with another council conducting a consultation audit. Even where registers existed, they were not used consistently. Consequently it was difficult to get a comprehensive picture of the consultations that were occurring. For council staff this meant that they were not generally able to draw on the findings of other consultations that may have taken place around issues of interest to them, but that were conducted by another area. Sometimes particular areas within council had considerable expertise in doing consultation but this knowledge was not always shared with other units because of a lack of communication. Other councils had a designated staff member responsible for assisting with consultation. Despite this, persons conducting consultations were not always aware of this excellent resource or hesitated to make contact for other reasons.

These examples highlight that the legitimacy public participation is frequently limited in the relation to the outcomes that flow from it because the processes used to gather information and make decisions are not transparent and the reasons for decisions made are not well communicated back to the community.

Establishing relationships

Beyond providing input and output legitimisation, one of the other aims of community consultation is to establish new relationships between council and the community and among community members and groups. Indeed, one of the reasons frequently cited by participants for attending consultation is the desire to meet other community members and establish new relationships. Because of the difficulties of involving a broadly representative cross section of the community, councils often consult with representatives of community organisations, or peak bodies. It is easier to access people who already have established relationships with council. Not only are they generally more active and inclined to participate, but they are also more easily identified and targeted for inclusion. This leads us to the next conundrum of consultation, the trade off that often occurs between the representativeness of a consultation and the ability of participants to form relationships with each other and participating organisations or entities. Surveys, for example, are a popular means to reach a large number of people, however they don't provide the face to face contact or dialogue that is necessary to establish new connections. Citizens may well express their preferences and provide information to council by filling out a survey or commenting on a document or plan, but have little to gain in the way of new networks. Face to face methods of consultation, such as workshops, focus groups, advisory

committees, especially where they entail repeated meetings are more likely to allow partnerships and bonds to emerge. However, because of the smaller number of people participating and the greater time commitment needed, they tend to be less representative. Furthermore, no particular mechanism of participation suits all segments of the population. To balance the desire to partnerships and connections with the requirement of representativeness, a combination of techniques is required. Rather than assuming that consultation will be a positive experience for participants from which the 'good' of greater connectedness will automatically flow, it is necessary to decide in advance which aspects of direct citizen participation are most important in each instance (eg. building partnerships, representativeness or generating outcomes) and tailor the approach to suit. This is, however, not often the way things are done.

Many of the partner councils were initiating community building initiatives, which usually receive extra funds from the state government and other sources and are generally well resourced and highly publicised 'flagship' exercises. At the same councils were conducting those kinds of consultation that could be described as 'regular' business. That is consultations on council and corporate plans, municipal public health statements, service reviews, structure plans and the like. It was, for example possible for a council to be reticent about community consultation and participation in decision making, and yet be involved in a high profile community building project in the same municipality. In this instance the community building initiative becomes a political vehicle rather than a way of establishing participatory practice and ongoing relationships with the community.

Characteristics of councils who 'get it'

Because of the difficulties described above, it is argued that it is important for councils to not merely play a passive role in providing opportunities for citizen involvement. The issue of hard to reach can be seen in this context. To facilitate representative and effective participation, local councils need to reach out to their communities and provide avenues and support to engage them in ways that are suited to them. It is not the community that are hard to reach, but rather hard to reach is symptomatic of councils' failing to reach out to actively solicit involvement from representative community segments. So beyond providing opportunities for involvement, effective participation requires councils to build their own capacity to conduct consultation and reach out to the community (Wallis and Dollery 2002; Cuthill 2005).

The research presented here underlines that the key factor in councils' success as regards community consultation is predicated on the attitude of the organisation towards consultation and whether there is a 'culture' of consultation – skills and knowledge of staff, the lines of communication within council, and most importantly, the organisational culture and the attitude of elected representatives. Preliminary findings from the research with eight Victorian councils indicate that key factors in establishing successful participatory practice include:

- Ability to access, interpret and use relevant demographic data
- Culture of consultation
- History and experience of consultation
- Existence and adherence to policy and processes
- Attitude and involvement of councillors
- Is it staff or decision makers who hear the community?
- Access to information / Communication across 'silos'
- Access to knowledgeable staff
- Staff training
- Retention of knowledge (use of consultants)
- Passing on of knowledge
- Community capacity - Active community
- Allocation of sufficient resources

Conclusion

In the beginning of this paper we asked whether community participation in local government can address the weak democratic legitimacy of network governance by adding procedural legitimation, bringing about better outcomes and facilitating greater connectedness. Despite inherent inconsistencies – local government is to facilitate new partnerships and connections, while at the same time countering weak democratic legitimacy of governance arrangements through more community participation – councils have embraced community participation using the notion of 'engagement'. Still consultation continues to pose significant challenges to local councils. Particularly thorny is the issue of representation, a lack of which can undermine the legitimacy of a participation exercise. Undoubtedly consultation can and does assist councils to be more responsive to public needs and address issues and needs as they emerge. But consultation processes often lack transparency about how the information and public

opinions gathered are collated and translated into policy and outcomes. It cannot, therefore be unequivocally stated that increased citizen participation leads to better outcomes or increases democratic legitimacy. The assumption that direct citizen participation will facilitate greater connectedness, initiate partnerships and build community capacity is another area that has to be viewed with caution. In particular the notion that more is better and that any kind of participation is beneficial needs to be challenged. Even in the best of circumstances direct citizen participation cannot fulfil all expectations attached to it at the same time. If direct citizen participation is to at least partly fulfil its promise, balancing what can and can't be achieved and which aspects are the most desirable are decisions that need to be made prior to involving the community.

The degree to which local governments are willing and able to conduct widespread community participation and be actors in networked governance arrangements, varies greatly between councils. Determining factors are the attitude of the elected public representatives and the organisational culture. For all participating councils this study indicates that significant challenges still lie ahead. There is a need for councils to build their own capacity to conduct successful citizen participation and grow these skills within the organisation. A key element to this is the dissemination of knowledge across various departments and functional units to enable successful consultation to become a 'way of doing business' rather than a one off event. Councils need to develop their capacity – intellectually, organizationally and in terms of resources – to create a culture of citizen engagement, both within the organization and the wider community.

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ⁱⁱ Marshall and Sproats (2000) have, however, questioned the desirability of using complex strategic planning for this purpose.

ⁱⁱⁱ For a useful summary of community building initiatives and policy in Victoria, refer to (Wiseman 2005).

^{iv} In addition to keeping their own statistics, all participating councils subscribed to some version of .id Consulting's demographic statistics (<http://www.id.com.au>).

^v This is confirmed also in the UK context by (Lowndes, Pratchett, and Stoker 2001).