

Community Consultation and the 'Hard to Reach'

Concepts and Practice in Victorian Local Government



Nicola Brackertz, Ivan Zwart,
Denise Meredyth and Liss Ralston

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Nicola Brackertz
Ivan Zwart
Denise Meredyth
Liss Ralston

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Institute for Social Research
Swinburne University of
Technology

16 Wakefield Street Hawthorn
Victoria 3122 Australia

PO Box 218 Hawthorn
Victoria 3122 Australia

Telephone +61 3 9214 8825
Facsimile +61 3 9819 5349
<http://www.sisr.net>

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Executive Summary

This is the second report from the *Community Consultation and the 'Hard to Reach': Local government, social profiling and civic infrastructure* project. This three year project is a collaborative research venture supported by the Australian Research Council, being undertaken by the Institute for Social Research at Swinburne University of Technology in partnership with eight local councils and the Victorian Local Governance Association (VLGA). Partner councils are the Cities of Boroondara, Darebin, Maribyrnong, Melbourne, Moreland, Nillumbik, Port Phillip and Whittlesea.

The research presented here about communities that can be hard to reach for consultation purposes should be useful for Australian local government, the community sector, non-government organisations, tertiary institutions and the state government.

Aims and objectives of research

The *Hard to Reach* project takes place at a time when there is increasing emphasis on good governance and the capacity of local government to strengthen communities. Consultation methods are seen as central to these processes, allowing local government to fulfil its role as a place for civic engagement at the neighbourhood level. In the broadest terms, our research question is: What are the characteristics of successful consultation with hard to reach communities? We aim to identify the conceptual and practical difficulties associated with including hard to reach groups in consultation, investigate effective current practices, and pool resources and strategies for use across partner councils.

Issues

In each municipality there are groups who are hard to reach for particular purposes. It is not always clear whether this disengagement is the result of 'rational apathy' or because citizens face disadvantages or barriers to participation. These hard to reach groups may vary depending on the issue consulted upon and the way in which they are approached. Other issues facing councils include the goal of broad consultation with the whole community and the practice of working closely with established constituencies, advocate bodies and interest groups. The question of whose opinions are representative and who can speak for the community is a perennial problem, especially if many citizens are disinterested or disengaged from local politics.

Outline

This report details the outcomes of the first year of research, drawing on existing literature on local government and consultation; an analysis of policy documents, plans, manuals and other council publications; surveys, interviews and focus groups with council staff; and detailed demographic profiles developed for each partner council.

The report provides:

- An outline of the Victorian policy context
- An overview of concepts and ideas about participation and consultation from the literature
- An analysis of how consultation is currently practised by partner councils
- A discussion of who hard to reach groups are and how partner councils consult with them
- Detailed demographic profiles of partner councils
- A program of further research to achieve the project aims.

Policy context

The policy context for consultation in Victorian councils is established by the Local Government Act 1989 and the Local Government (Democratic Reform) Act 2003 in conjunction with Best Value legislation and the Community Strengthening Agenda, which is a key component of the state government's 2005 social policy statement, 'A Fairer Victoria'.

Issues from the literature

In the public policy literature, discussions of local government's role in consultation, participation and community engagement are preoccupied with how to combine effective political decision-making with responsiveness to service users and citizens, and with efforts to shape citizens through community-building activities.

Some argue that local government can and should embrace more participatory forms of decision-making and more active models of civic culture. Others question the assumption that all forms of consultation should aspire to deliver community participation and engagement as ends in themselves. The method of consultation used and the participants involved should depend on the context, aim and issue.

This section of the report outlines a range of models that are used to conceptualise the relationship between participation and consultation. Key models variously use a ladder metaphor, a continuum model, a matrix or a descriptive approach.

We make the case for a pragmatic and pluralistic model of community consultation that enables local government to choose tools and approaches depending on the context and the aim of the exercise.

Consultation in practice

The next section of the report describes how our partner councils currently define and practise consultation. They share the view that consultation is a **two-way exchange of information between councils and the community prior to a decision being made**. Despite this commonality, two distinct conceptualisations of consultation emerged. Some councils consider consultation to be a subset of participation and engagement, while others see it as a process that involves greater interaction with citizens than information provision, without providing further detail.

Councils' consultation practice was analysed in relation to:

- Major policies and strategies
- Policies and targeted strategies (place or issue based)
- Operational services/ performance.

Consultation on specific policies and strategies proved to be the most frequent, with a broad range of methods used. Among the most popular were surveys and focus groups, with public meetings and submissions also common. The introduction of Best Value has seen increasing consultation about performance reviews, often using surveys. Major policies and strategies, such as the council plan and municipal strategic statement, also require community consultation when they are developed or reviewed.

Hard to reach communities

The term 'hard to reach' is commonly used to describe individuals or groups whom an institution finds difficult to contact or engage for a particular purpose. This section of the report returns to the issue of how to identify and contact such groups who are often characterised by various demographic characteristics that may affect participation, due to

either difference and disadvantage or barriers. These factors may include (but are not limited to) language, age, gender, geographic location, income, ethnicity, education, residential status, health and religion. Other sections of the population may be unwilling to participate because they are time poor or sceptical about the consultation process. However, communities may simply appear to be hard to reach because consulting authorities have not yet sought their involvement in an appropriate manner.

Initial research on our partner councils' consultation practices revealed that a variety of techniques were used, but the most frequent remained the traditional methods of focus groups and surveys, possibly because of limits in the resources or expertise available.

Demographic indicators

Demographic indicators may assist with the identification of hard to reach groups in a council's local area. Such indicators may help to identify factors that are likely to influence uptake of consultation. Each indicator on its own may not be a sufficient measure of hard to reach; however, taken together they build a picture of the hard to reach communities in the area.

Further research

This section of the report outlines the next stage of this continuing research project. Building on the initial analysis of councils' consultation practices and demographic profiles, the study will proceed to a thorough investigation of the issues, drawing on a series of local consultation case studies conducted by each partner council.

These will enable us to investigate the complexity associated with various programs of community consultation within their real life context, allowing for multi-layered analysis of how the problem of the hard to reach appears in each case and how effectively the problem has been addressed by various methods.

On the basis of these studies, we will analyse the broader strategic and methodological lessons about community consultation by local government in Victoria and elsewhere, identifying key attributes for successful consultation with hard to reach communities in the local government context.

The Hard to Reach Project

About this project

This is the second report from the *Community Consultation and the 'Hard to Reach': Local government, social profiling and civic infrastructure* project. The project is a collaborative research venture supported by the Australian Research Council, being undertaken by the Institute for Social Research at Swinburne University of Technology in partnership with eight local councils and the Victorian Local Governance Association (VLGA). Partner councils to the project are the Cities of Boroondara, Darebin, Maribyrnong, Melbourne, Moreland, Nillumbik, Port Phillip and Whittlesea.

This study will analyse the conceptual and practical difficulties that arise from community consultation carried out by local government. It involves integrating existing information about current practice within each partner council, with broader contextual discussion from Australian and international policy debates. On the basis of this, we offer a strategic analysis of shared challenges in conceptualising and implementing effective community consultation at the local level.

The key conceptual issues include the relationship between consultation, participation and engagement, and tensions in conceptions of governance and democracy. These issues can be understood from a liberal perspective. That is, local government needs to make legitimate decisions, based on sound practices of representative democracy and informed choice, keeping the balance between the private interests that groups and individuals pursue and broader understandings of the public good. They can also be seen from a more communitarian perspective. In a fully participatory democracy, local government should engage all groups and individuals in both decision-making and community life, thus building social connection, trust and a healthy civil society.

Both of these perspectives inform local government's community consultation strategies, to varying degrees and in different combinations (Adams and Hess 2001). For local government, the key problem is how to ensure that their processes of democratic decision-making are legitimate (representative and accountable) and that they meet their statutory obligation to engage in wide consultation. Many seek a broader role in building community, civic culture, trust and tolerance. All local government agencies find, however, that there are groups of people who are not represented in council decision-making processes, or who cannot or do not respond to consultation and engagement strategies. Some established interest groups may dominate public forums, while others are difficult to contact.

The hard to reach groups are diverse and difficult to define. They include those who face barriers to participation (e.g. those with restricted mobility or disabilities, the elderly, the young, the culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities or the homeless). But the real problem, for councils, is a combination of disadvantage and disengagement. Healthy, well-resourced people can also be difficult to contact, consult and engage. They may not be civically apathetic, but they may lack either the time or the motivation to respond to information, consultation and engagement processes at the local government level. Nevertheless, they are likely to object if they are not consulted about an issue that affects their personal interests. Can community and service planning become more inclusive of community members not usually inclined to participate?

The collaboration of eight local councils and the VLGA will enable the research team to explore these and other issues, drawing on a combination of policy analysis, comparative research and new empirical case studies. Working closely with industry partners, we will

investigate the social and demographic characteristics of each municipality and the particular challenges involved in consultation efforts that are under way. The result will be a pool of examples, offering instances of best practice and of endemic difficulty. The research will benefit councils and Victorian citizens by providing insights into the rationales and techniques available to councils who face a range of inherently difficult consultation issues. In addition to academic publications, outcomes will include much-needed information and new strategic resources for the industry partners.

About this report

This is the second report from the project detailing the outcomes of the first year of research. It provides:

- An outline of the Victorian policy context
- An overview of concepts and ideas about participation and consultation from the literature
- An analysis of how consultation is currently practised by partner councils
- A discussion of who hard to reach groups are and how partner councils consult with them
- Detailed demographic profiles of partner councils
- A program of further research to achieve the project aims.

The report draws on public policy literature, detailed demographic profiles and material provided by partner councils. The latter comprises policy documents, plans, manuals and other publications, as well as surveys, focus groups and interviews with council staff.

The aim of the report is to provide a summary of work done to date and point towards future research. It is part of an iterative process of information-gathering and analysis between the research team and partner councils and organisations, which will continue throughout the project.

In investigating community consultation and hard to reach groups, it is important that we clarify our standpoint and thinking about the issues. The first section of the report places current debates about local government and community consultation in the context of the statutory and other imperatives affecting local government in Victoria. Drawing on broader public policy debates on consultation, governance and participation, we identify some conceptual and practical difficulties associated with building consultation and engagement into municipal service provision, planning and community-building.

We go on to discuss how partner councils currently define and practise consultation and who they identify as hard to reach groups. Detailed demographic profiles of each council complement these discussions. The report concludes with key questions for further research and a schedule of suggested fieldwork using a case study approach.

Project management structure and timeline

The project is funded under the Australian Research Council's Linkage grant scheme in conjunction with partner councils. As such it is a collaborative effort between councils and university researchers. The project was conceived by Denise Meredyth (Chief Investigator) and Nicola Brackertz (Research Fellow). Ivan Zwart joined the team in July 2005 as a Research Fellow.

In this first year, a number of high calibre researchers have also contributed to the project. Wendy Stone conducted much of the initial work establishing how councils define and practise consultation and her work provided the basis for the *Stage 1*

Consultation Report (Stone 2005). Statistician Liss Ralston contributed her expertise to develop detailed demographic profiles of each partner council, focusing on the statistical and demographic characteristics of hard to reach populations. Liz Dearn contributed contextual policy research and analysis, liaised with partner councils and conducted a survey investigating how councils practise consultation.

The project is guided and coordinated by a Reference Group including at least one representative from each industry partner. The Reference Group oversees the research effort, thereby ensuring its relevance and responsiveness to industry partners needs. It is also a forum in which research outcomes are presented and discussed. Reference Group meetings were held on 29 July 2004 and 13 April 2005.

Research design

In the initial stage of the project, in late 2004 and early 2005, researchers met with all partner councils to identify key stakeholders, collect information on each council's consultative policy and practice, and discuss their impressions of which populations were hard to reach for particular purposes. This formed the basis for the *Stage 1 Consultation Report* (Stone 2005) which was presented at the second Reference Group meeting.

The next stage of research aimed to provide a wider context for councils' consultation policy and practice. All councils were asked to take part in a focus group and complete a questionnaire on consultation practice. This resulted in a total of nine focus groups, with completed questionnaires received from five of the eight councils. Interviews with stakeholders were also conducted, where appropriate, and detailed demographic profiles were developed for each council. Information thus gained, in conjunction with a review of the literature and policy context, forms the basis for this report.

Context and ideas about consultation

Over the last decade, Victorian local governments, like others across Australia, have devoted considerable time and resources to the process of consulting community members about local issues and decisions, while seeking to build a closer relationship between councils, community members and community groups, whether residents, local businesses or other stakeholders.

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 (Munro-Clark 1992; Holland 2002; Catt and Murphy 2003: 525). The rationales behind consultation often combine multiple aims and objectives, which are not always clearly distinguished. Key terms tend to be used interchangeably, with multiple meanings.

Our partner councils state that they consult for the following reasons:

- Information-gathering and provision
- Statutory requirements/ Best Value/ council strategic plan
- Good governance
- Community strengthening/ social capital/ community capacity building
- Participation
- Community engagement
- Planning.

Desired outcomes include:

- Community strengthening/ social capital/ community capacity building
- Promoting prosperity and inclusion
- Addressing democratic deficit
- Good governance
- Community engagement
- 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, aims and desired outcomes sometimes overlap. That is, consultation is 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 Government 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. These issues are reviewed briefly in the following section.

Victorian policy context

Before we begin it is useful to clarify the terms governance, consultation, participation and engagement, since the distinction between these interrelated concepts has been important in clarifying local government's purpose and responsibilities.

Key terms

The VLGA (n.d.) provides some guidance on the difference between consultation, participation and engagement as elements of good governance:

- *Good governance* in the democratic sense exists when a government governs for and on behalf of its community. Good democratic governance occurs when governments govern as a result of being elected by an informed and engaged electorate. Citizens exercise their rights and responsibilities by being informed and engaged.
- *Consultation* is the process of informed communication between the council and the community on an issue prior to the council making a decision or determining a direction on that issue. The VLGA describes it as a process, not an outcome, and stresses that consultation is *not* decision-making. Consultation is about input into decision-making but *not* joint decision-making or decision-making by referendum.
- *Participation* means that the community is involved in governance activities.
- *Engagement* is achieved when the community is and feels part of the overall governance of that community. It is informed, connected and feels it has a role to play. In this sense, engagement is an outcome that may be facilitated through good ongoing information flow, consultation and participation between a council and its community.

In this model, good governance is the guiding principle, with consultation and participation being tools to achieve the desired outcome of engagement. The typology is useful, because it helps to distinguish between 'consultation' and 'participation'.

Participation can be seen as a broad category that encompasses various ways of involving the community in governance, consultation being one form that community participation can take. Consultation is a two-way exchange between council and community members prior to council decisions being made. Council retains the right to make the decision, though community members can influence that decision. Within the broader spectrum of other forms of participation, community members take more responsibility for decision-making. Sometimes, the purpose of the exercise is to promote discussion and exchange, rather than to deliberate on a particular decision.

Both consultation and participation can be elements of 'engagement', though it is usually assumed that where community members have more chance of influencing decisions and taking responsibility, they are likely to be more engaged.

Key to all of these concepts is information. While not always spelled out explicitly, the flow of information to and from councils and citizens, the transparency of the information flow and what is done with the information (i.e. how it is used in decision-making) are basic prerequisites for successful consultation, participation and engagement.¹

¹ The provision of information to the community about council activities does not in itself constitute consultation.

Statutory framework

To better understand the current enthusiasm for consultation, it is worthwhile to briefly look at the recent history of local government in Australia and Victoria.

Local government plays a critical role in providing opportunities for citizens to get involved in processes that affect their lives and their community. As such, local governments have a number of fundamental roles: advocacy on behalf of their constituencies to other levels of government and other relevant parties, setting overall directions for the municipality, developing and implementing policies, ensuring the delivery of quality services, and representation of constituencies by individual councillors or councils on matters of concern to those constituents (Good Governance Advisory Group 2004: 7).

Councils have been the drivers of community consultation at a local level for many years. This is not just because consultation enhances the information flow between council and the community, but also because it can be a way to engage and strengthen local communities. The state government policies outlined below support councils' consultation efforts and provide a more formal rationale. However, the view has also been expressed that some state government policies and processes actually complicate community consultation, as they can be inflexible in terms of providing funding, or have unrealistic timelines and resources.

The trend towards more participatory forms of democracy in local government in Victoria stems primarily from a reduction in representative democracy resulting from council amalgamations in the 1990s. That decade 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. A renewed focus on governance complemented these measures (Marshall and Sproats 2000). 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.²

The legislative framework defining the purposes and functions of local government in Victoria is provided by the Local Government Act 1989 and the Local Government (Democratic Reform) Act 2003. The latter states that the primary objective of a council is 'to endeavour to achieve the best outcomes for the local community having regard to the long-term and cumulative effects of decisions'. Councils must 'ensure that resources are used efficiently and effectively and services are provided in accordance with the Best Value Principles to best meet the needs of the local community' (Local Government Act, S.3C.). The Act also addresses issues of 'good governance' including transparency, probity, democratic representation, accountable financial management and public reporting.

Councils are required to produce a Council Plan (corporate plan) stating the strategic objectives and strategies for a four year period. This guiding document is to be drawn up in consultation with the community after each council election and is to be reviewed annually.

² Marshall and Sproats (2000) have, however, questioned the desirability of using complex strategic planning for this purpose.

The Council Plan sits over the other two main legislative planning requirements of local government, the Municipal Strategic Statement (MSS) and the Municipal Public Health Plan (MPHP). Under these sit a number of other council plans and strategies, required through policy direction or funding by the state.

The Community Plan is an addition to this framework. These emerged out of the context of the Local

Government (Democratic Reform) Act as a tool to enhance community consultation for council planning processes. About half of Victorian local government authorities have a Community Plan and frequently it is the key mechanism to engage and provide feedback to the community, as it articulates strategies to address community needs and aspirations.

The Best Value Principles are:

- all services provided by a Council must meet quality and cost standards
- all services provided by a Council must be responsive to the needs of its community;
- each service provided by a Council must be accessible to those members of the community for whom the service is intended;
- a Council must achieve continuous improvement in the provision of services for its community;
- a Council must develop a program of regular consultation with its community in relation to the services it provides;
- a Council must report regularly to its community on its achievements

Best Value

The introduction of the Best Value principles to replace compulsory competitive tendering in 1999 and the passing of the Local Government (Democratic Reform) Act further shifted the emphasis towards increased accountability of local government to the community and an ever-greater emphasis on 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 have been put firmly on the agenda.

The Best Value legislation has been highly influential in directing the ways in which councils engage with their communities. They are required to report annually on their achievement against the six Best Value Principles, one of which is to 'develop a program of regular consultation with its community in relation to the services it provides'. The Best Value guidelines define community consultation and its key elements as 'the process of informed communication between the council and the community on an issue prior to the council making a decision or determining a direction on that issue' (Good Governance Advisory Group 2004: 5).

The principles and tools for the operationalisation of the Best Value Principles and the Local Government (Democratic Reform) Act by councils are seen in the work of the state's peak local government bodies, the VLGA and the Municipal Association of Victoria. Examples of guiding publications are the Good Governance Guide (Good Governance Advisory Group 2004), the Code of Good Governance (Municipal Association of Victoria 1997), the Community Consultation Resource Guide (Victorian Local Governance Association 2001) and the recent Council Planning and Community Planning work of local councils.

Community strengthening agenda

Another important driver of community consultation in Victorian local government is the Victorian 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 by a better relationship with government, and that better governance will result from a stronger relationship with community (Considine 2004b).

In Victoria, local government is seen as a key player in building stronger communities because of its local and geographical focus. In February 2004, the Department for Victorian Communities initiated discussions on the role local government has to play in Community Strengthening. The concept is seen as having four key dimensions: increased connectedness, new forms of distributive justice, partnerships and joint ventures, and the development of new institutions (Considine 2004b).

The Victorian government's 2005 social policy statement, 'A Fairer Victoria', has a Community Building Initiative as a key component. It builds on the first round of the Community Capacity Building Initiative and aims to bring residents together with government and community agencies to plan for and address local needs, build local leadership and foster community networks (State Government Victoria 2005).

The key dimensions of community strengthening challenge conventional relationships between state, federal and local governments, changing the top-down relationship between government and community. In Victoria, the public sector is increasingly focused on partnerships with a range of stakeholders and citizens for both the development of policy and the delivery of services. It has been suggested that, as a result, new structures and frameworks are needed in order to ensure representative, effective and accountable participation in decision-making (Edwards 2002). Local government is seen as a key player with significant expertise in models of citizen engagement, through the work it already undertakes with local communities (Spokes 2004; Considine 2004a). There is thus a complementary relationship between the emphasis on community consultation enshrined in the Best Value Principles and the Local Government (Democratic Reform) Act, and the role of local government articulated in the Community Strengthening policy direction.

A focus on consultation methods for the eight partner councils in the Hard to Reach project will put them in a strong position to provide input around new methods and processes for expanded community participation at the theoretical and practical level in this developing policy context. We expand on this broader context in the following section of the report.

Public policy debate on community consultation, participation and engagement

By some accounts, consultation is the new panacea, providing a solution to many problems facing local government and communities. Consultation with local communities promises to meet a number of ends at once:

a closer match between needs and aspirations of communities and the services provided to them, better quality more responsive services, greater democratic legitimacy and a new brand of involved and responsible citizenship – in short, a reinvigorated local democracy (Department for Environment, Transport and the Regions, quoted in Needham 2002: 702).

Ideas about the ideal relationship between governments, political communities and citizens are at the heart of expectations about what improvements in local consultation and participation can deliver.

The broader context

The move to increased local consultation in Victoria follows broader international trends in new public sector management. Government agencies at the regional, national, state and local levels have sought to broaden their remit, from 'government' to forms of 'governance' that work by partnership between the public, private and community sectors, reducing the emphasis on elected local officials and emphasising the role of partnership organisations in the provision of social services (Wilson 2003). In part, this reflects a neo-liberal emphasis (illustrated in Victoria by the Kennett government) on opening public services up to choice-making citizens as consumers, in the interests of accountability and responsiveness (Williamson 2002: 5).

Over the last two decades, in the United Kingdom and within the European Union, new forms of governance have featured a combination of centralisation and devolution of authority. Local authorities have been required to show that the services they provide are effective, getting feedback from citizens through service satisfaction surveys and thus empowering service users (Parkinson 2004; Wilson 2003; Pratchett 1999). But they have also been encouraged to play a community leadership role, working with key stakeholders and community partners to promote wellbeing and develop community strategies, using consultation processes to promote participation. As a result the use of service satisfaction surveys and complaints schemes increased rapidly in the late 1990s. Those local authorities that succeed have been rewarded with resources and 'earned autonomy' (Wilson 2003: 342).

More recently, citizens' panels, focus groups and citizens' juries have been added to the range of consultative techniques, as regional and national governments have become more concerned about a decline in civic culture and a growing democratic deficit and as citizens express ever-lower levels of confidence in government and democratic politics. The aim is only partly to involve a broader range of citizens and stakeholders in local decision-making: such forums are also designed as civics lessons, counter-acting cynicism and disengagement from government (Reddel and Woolcock 2004).

Democratic deficit

In Australia, and internationally, the last decade of public policy debate has been dominated by arguments to the effect that the machinery of democratic decision-making needs a 'participatory fix'. Individuals and communities are urged to be more assertive, both as citizens seeking more say in governmental decision-making and as consumers

seeking more responsive provision of services. In turn, governments at all levels have called for ways of making citizens more active, more engaged and more prepared to be self-governing.

Established forms of representative democracy are seen to lack the ability to engage increasingly cynical and apathetic citizens who are far more concerned with their private interests and pursuits than with public life. The term 'democratic deficit' has been used to describe this trend; increased participation is recommended as the remedy, on the assumption that the more people are able to be involved in political decision-making, on issues close to home, the more interested and engaged they will become, both in politics and in governance more broadly.

The broader debate on democracy casts doubt on the idea that we are facing a new crisis of civic apathy and disengagement (Hindess 2002). There is evidence of low levels of trust in politics and government. However, this may not be a new problem (Burchell 2002; Goot 2002; Leigh 2002). Nor is it new to find arguments that the people are not capable of understanding political processes. Some would say that our modern systems of representative democracy were deliberately designed to separate the decision-making processes of elected representatives from both the passions and the indifference of the people. As political theorists point out, democratic political thought has long been preoccupied with the question of the extent to which citizens are capable of understanding and engaging in complex decision-making (Hindess 1997). This has been the basis for arguments that representative democracy, as a political system, depends on protecting the organs of government from the people. As long as the people are capable of electing competent representatives, then democracy can function as a legitimate system of decision-making founded on consent.

Advocates of more participatory models of democracy argue that 'realist' defenders of the machinery of representative democracy underestimate the political will and capacity of citizens. Given the opportunity to participate in public debates and activities, they will build civic skills, dispositions and values, including tolerance, civility and the ability to give higher priority to public good than to private interests. More participation leads to better-informed policy and decision-making and provides citizens with a sense of engagement and a voice in decision-making processes, thereby addressing the democratic deficit. In this sense, participation is not just a means of policy improvement, but also a way of reconnecting citizens to the political process.

Representative and participatory models of democracy

The broader public policy debate on consultation and participation in local government exhibits both optimism and caution. Many political commentators welcome local government's role in fostering community-based decision-making and engagement, seeing it as the basis for a more pluralistic and tolerant society based on participatory democracy and the frank discussion of differences (Wiseman 2003). There are many benefits from involving 'ordinary people' directly in public decision-making, rather than relying on elected representatives or on the 'usual suspects' of lobby groups, community agencies and interest groups. Local government can be seen to be responsive and transparent; decisions can be seen as legitimate and based on consent; services are more likely to be used if people have expressed a preference. More importantly, perhaps, those involved in the process may have had a new experience of positive involvement in government and public decision-making which may have taught them to distinguish between their private interests and concerns and issues of the greater public good.

Sceptics argue that the increased emphasis on consultation and participation distracts from a realistic understanding of politics and the responsibilities of elected officials for decision-making (Kane and Bishop 2002). It may also detract from the effective role that organised and expert interest groups have played within the machinery of representative democracy (Hendriks 2002). More participation is not necessarily the same thing as more democracy, in the sense of either greater representation in the decision-making process or greater say in the decisions that are made. One of the problems is that 'no decision-making process can involve all the people it affects' (Parkinson 2004: 370).

Efforts can be made to ensure that those who are involved represent those who are not, but what constitutes 'representation'? Decision-makers can be faced with a variety of groups all making claims to speak for the people of an area, all consulted through different processes. Which voices should be listened to, and which are silent (Catt and Murphy 2003)?

The question is whether the available consultation techniques are able to adequately *represent* all groups within the community, rather than reinforcing existing patterns of social exclusion or allowing self-interested individuals or groups to dominate (Wilson 2003: 343). Consultation and participation initiatives may attract some groups rather than others, especially where they demand political skills or the ability to articulate interests and demands. Councils using techniques such as citizens' panels, where a sample of community members is invited to comment on particular issues, face the problem of how to ensure that the participants are representative, given the difficulty of attracting representatives from sections of the community that commonly 'decline to participate', with young people being a standard instance. Those who are recruited from 'recalcitrant groups' (Pratchett 1999: 623) may be atypical and thus unrepresentative. Even if this is not the case, the process of participation may alter their attitudes (as it is often expected to do) to the point where their views become even less representative of marginal or disengaged groups.

If participation is to enhance democracy, it has been argued, then it must 'ensure political equality' and make sure that 'levels of representativeness' are met, in relation to the geographic, demographic and political dimensions of the community concerned. First, the participatory process must be open to all territorial areas of a community. Second, no socio-economic group must be disadvantaged in the process or excluded from it (Pratchett 1999: 630). Finally, all political views must be given an opportunity of expression. The demographic dimension is regarded as the most challenging of these. Making the process representative involves not just inviting all ethnic, socio-economic, age-related and other groups to take part, but ensuring that they do so, despite the fact that some are difficult to involve and may be disengaged from political processes.

Applied models of consultation and participation

These debates about the relative importance of representative and participatory forms of democratic decision-making are built into the available models of community consultation, participation and engagement.

Arnstein's ladder of participation

Perhaps the most influential model of participation is the continuum model developed by Arnstein (1969). The model features a 'ladder of participation', ranking instances of interaction between the community and the government according to the levels of influence which citizens have in decision-making. The continuum of consultation activity is understood in hierarchical terms: the ladder's rungs represent increasing involvement

in decision-making or citizen power (Lowndes et al. 2001a; Bishop and Davis 2002; Demos 2004). At the lower rungs, there is no participation. At the middle rungs, citizens are given information and are heard, but there is no guarantee that their views will have any impact. At the top rungs, citizens have some control and decision-making power or are in partnership with government. The aim is to pass the power from the government to the citizen.

In Arnstein's words, 'citizen participation is a categorical term for citizen power' (1969: 216-17). In her hierarchical model, 'consultation' appears in the middle of the ladder.

It is a form of government-citizen interaction that she classifies as exhibiting a 'degree of tokenism' (see Figure 1). In other words, the process is not open to all, since the agenda is usually set by the government agency concerned which often seeks to determine whether or not there is community support for a particular decision.

Arnstein's model makes most sense from the point of view of the community activist concerned to maximise citizens' participation as a means to empower them (Catt and Murphy 2003). It may be immoderate to assert that consultation is necessarily tokenistic. However, it is reasonable to assume that consultation does have limitations as a form of citizen empowerment. It is a means of participation that gives a proportion of citizens the chance to influence policy formation and decision-making by providing information, opinions and alternatives. However, elected officials and officers retain the right to make the decisions and to ignore the information and arguments presented.

Shand and Arnberg's continuum model

The continuum model is one that retains currency and has also been applied to levels of participatory involvement in service delivery, most notably by Shand and Arnberg (1996). Like Arnstein, they take the position that there is a continuum of participation, but write from the perspective of the government official addressing issues of service provision. At one extreme, the people are simply recipients of information, while at the other they have control over the decision through a referendum (the stages in between are consultation, partnership and delegation) (Catt and Murphy 2003).

Shand and Arnberg's continuum differs from Arnstein's model in that it does not move towards a certain goal but rather describes a series of choices to be made by the government officials. These choices may lie anywhere along the continuum without judging one method to be better or worse than another. What matters is how appropriate the choice is for any given context and not where it lies along the continuum (Bishop and Davis 2002: 20). Drawing on information about OECD practice, Bishop and Davis (2002: 21) go on to link participation models to appropriate techniques. Figure 2 combines Shand and Arnberg's continuum model with Bishop and Davis' linking of participation techniques.

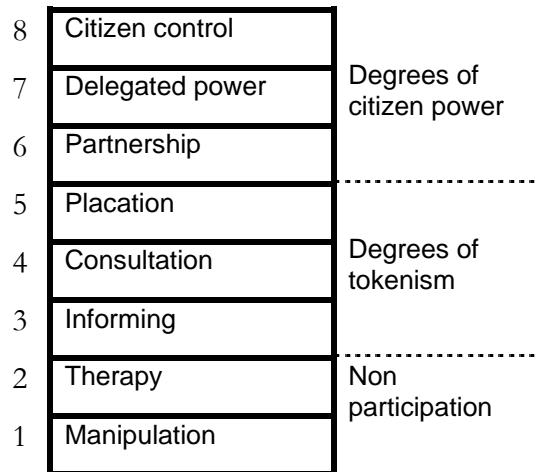


Fig. 1: Arnstein's ladder of participation

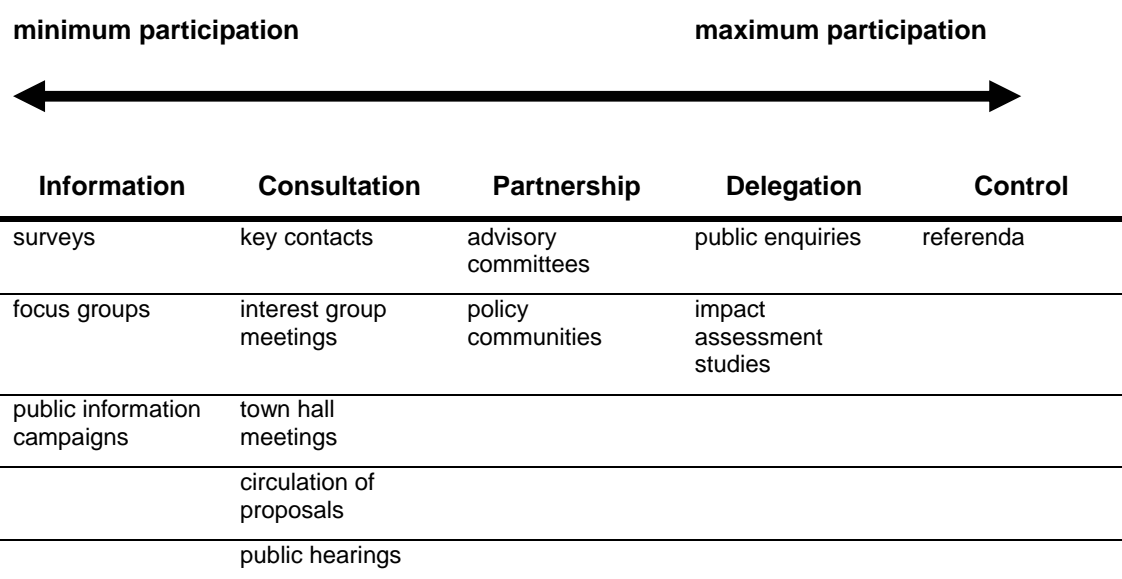


Fig 2: Purpose of consultation and appropriate consultation instruments. Adapted from Bishop and Davis (2002: 21) and Shand and Arnberg (1996: 21).

As can be seen in this model, techniques frequently used by councils to interact with their communities largely fall into the information, consultation and partnership sections of the spectrum. Consultation itself occupies a point that indicates a relatively low level of participation on Shand and Arnberg's continuum. What this highlights is that methods commonly used allow community members only a limited degree of influence on the final decision and outcome.

Citizens as customers

This conceptualisation of participation is consistent with the model of service provision where citizens are treated as customers (or consumers) of council services. This approach came to prominence with market driven approaches to public management and compulsory competitive tendering during the 1990s (Adams and Hess 2001), but it retains currency today. In this view, users of council services should be treated in the same way as consumers in the private market. Here citizens are equated with 'customers' or consumers and have minimal direct input to decisions about services. They may provide feedback through satisfaction surveys and complaints procedures or exercise choice by deciding which service to use (read consume), positioning them clearly at the minimum participation spectrum of the continuum and enabling them to exert only a minimum of influence over service delivery (Lowndes et al. 2001a).

Consultation and policy and planning

Undoubtedly, consultation about policy can lead to better policy decisions and outcomes, and can be a way to educate the public and inform decision-makers. However, there is little agreement about the nature of citizen involvement in the policy process. Numerous models postulate varying levels of citizen participation without providing any clarity on the matter (Adams and Hess 2001).

John Clayton Thomas' matrix model

Thomas (1990, 1993) developed an approach to levels of citizen involvement linking a set of policy problems that are essentially different in character to types of participation that are separate and discontinuous. This avoids the value judgements implicit in

continuum models (i.e. that more is better) and describes participation as serving different purposes, depending on the context and problem at hand: 'here form follows function so that the character of a policy problem decides whether, and through what instrument, participation is possible' (Bishop and Davis 2002: 18). Thomas identifies five possible approaches to decision-making by the government official, ranging from managerial autonomy to public decision-making:

1. *Autonomous managerial decision*: The manager solves the problem or makes the decision alone without public involvement.
2. *Modified autonomous managerial decision*: The manager seek [sic] information from segments of the public, but decides alone in a manner which may or may not reflect group influence.
3. *Segmented public consultation*: The manager shares the problem separately with segments of the public, getting ideas and suggestion, then makes a decision which reflects group influence.
4. *Unitary public consultation*: The manager shares the problem with the public as a single assembled group, getting ideas and suggestion then makes a decision which reflects group influence.
5. *Public decision*: The manager shares the problem with the assembled public, and together the manager and the public attempt to reach agreement on a solution. (Thomas 1990: 437)

These decision-making modes are then correlated with types of participation instruments and types of public (Figure 3). Despite avoiding the value judgements implicit in the continuum approach to participation, Thomas retains a graduated scale of choices from minimum to maximum participation (Bishop and Davis 2002: 21).

Style of Decision-Making	One Organised Group	Multiple Organised Groups	Unorganised Public	Complex Public**
Modified Autonomous Managerial	Key contacts	Key contacts	Citizen survey	Key contacts/ Survey
Segmented Public Consultation	Key contacts	Contacts/ series of meetings	Citizen survey	Citizen survey/ meetings
Unitary Public Consultation	Meeting(s) with group	CAC* or series of meetings	Series of public meetings	CAC * and/or meetings
Public Decision	Negotiate with group	Negotiate with CAC*	Series of public meetings	CAC*/ public meetings

*CAC = Citizens' advisory committee; ** Complex Public = Some combination of organised and unorganised groups

Fig. 3: A matrix guide to public involvement (Thomas 1990: 443)

The key contribution Thomas makes to our discussion is that participation is not treated as an end in itself; rather, it must be shaped by the policy problem at hand. It is the government officials who make the decision to initiate participation for a number of reasons, and the choice of participatory strategy and the available instrument is shaped by the nature of the policy problem.

Bishop and Davis' discontinuous descriptive model

Bishop and Davis (2002) present a model of public participation in policy-making that steers clear of scales or continuums. Their schema is descriptive rather than normative, arguing that there is no single methodology for policy participation and no shared theoretical base. This is a discontinuous model which provides a characterisation of

contemporary participation types and their related policy instruments. Participation types are identified as consultation, partnership, standing, consumer choice and control. Each is mapped against objectives, key instruments and limitations.

Participation Type	Objective	Key Instruments	Limitations
Consultation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> to gauge community reaction to a proposal and invite feedback consultation is only participation when information gathered can influence subsequent policy choices 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> key contacts surveys interest group meetings public meetings discussion papers public hearings 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> delay between consultation and any outcomes communities feel betrayed if they do not like the decision expensive and time consuming for complex decisions
Partnership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> involving citizens and interest groups in aspects of government decision-making 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> advisory boards citizens' advisory committees policy community forum public enquiries 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> issue of who can speak for a community bias towards established interest groups legitimacy issues with those excluded from the process
Standing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> allowing third parties to become involved in the review process 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> review courts and tribunals open and third party standing statutory processes for social and environmental impact assessment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> only relevant for those issues which come to court expensive and time consuming bias towards well funded interests legal approach may be inappropriate for some issues
Consumer Choice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> allowing customer preferences to shape a service through choices of products and providers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> surveys, focus groups purchaser/provider splits competition between suppliers vouchers case management 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> relevant only for service delivery issues
Control	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> to hand control of an issue to the electorate 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> referendum community parliaments electronic voting 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> costly, time consuming and often invasive are issue votes the best way to encourage deliberation?

Fig. 4: Map of Participation Types (Bishop and Davis 2002: 27)

The Bishop and Davis model adds yet another dimension to our thinking about participation. In describing participation as it currently takes place, they avoid value judgements. Their model is not a guide for government officials or the general public on how best to participate, but simply details the advantages and shortcomings of each approach beyond the immediate policy context.

The model, to reiterate, works best from the point of view of local government officials and officers seeking to determine where and how citizens are best involved in local decision-making, in the interests of more effective and responsive governance. However, local government's efforts to contact community members are driven by a number of other imperatives. These encouraging participation and engagement as a way to build civic skills, values and dispositions, reconnecting citizens with one another and fostering tolerance, trust and civility. The term 'social capital' currently encapsulates these aspirations (Wallis and Dollery 2002).

Consultation and social capital

Social capital has captured the interest of policy-makers, social analysts, service providers in the community sector and researchers because of its potential to make a positive contribution to outcomes in areas such as health (House et al. 1988; Baum 1999), wellbeing (World Bank 1998; Bullen and Onyx 1999), education (Coleman 1988; Teachman et al. 1997) and effective governance (Putnam et al. 1993).

In the Victorian policy context, Community Strengthening initiatives and aspects of Best Value are driven by ideas based on social capital. Another example is the Commonwealth Department of Family and Community Services' focus on community-building through its Stronger Families and Communities Strategy, which aims to build family and community capacity to encourage partnerships between all levels of government, the community, individuals and business. Similarly, Growing Victoria Together aims to achieve a fair, sustainable and prosperous Victoria. It recognises the important role of active and inclusive social, cultural and volunteer networks in building cohesive communities, and identifies related priority actions and measures of progress.

Social capital is not, however, a straightforward concept and there are numerous definitions depending on the context.³ Putnam's (2000: 19) definition is a useful starting point:

Whereas physical capital refers to physical objects and human capital refers to the properties of individuals, social capital refers to connections among individuals – social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them. In that sense social capital is closely related to what some have called 'civic virtue'. The difference is that 'social capital' calls attention to the fact that civic virtue is most powerful when embedded in a sense network of reciprocal social relations. A society of many virtuous but isolated individuals is not necessarily rich in social capital.

Types of associations

Healy and Coote (2001) elaborate this argument, defining social capital as 'networks, together with shared norms, values and understandings which facilitate cooperation within or among groups'.⁴ Woolcock and Narayan (2000: 226) prefer a simple and inclusive definition: 'the norms and networks that enable people to act collectively'. Together, these definitions encapsulate important features of social capital: relationships, trust, reciprocity, and action for a common purpose. It is a multi-dimensional concept and operates at several levels (Woolcock and Narayan 2000; Australian Bureau of Statistics 2002: 5; Hopkins 2002). Relationships, networks and ties may consist of:

- Horizontally and vertically integrated networks
- Formal and informal associations
- Strong and weak ties
- Bonding, bridging and linking forms of social capital.

Bonding capital gives communities a sense of identity and common purpose and is used to describe the kinds of relationships people have with those who are like themselves, e.g. their families. It manifests as strong ties between small groups of people. Bridging capital transcends social divides (e.g. religion, industry sectors, ethnicity, socio-economic

³ ABS (2002: 4) provides a summary of common definitions.

⁴ This definition is also used by the ABS (<http://www.abs.gov.au/websitedbs/c311215.nsf/20564c23f3183fdaca25672100813ef1/3af45bbd431a127bca256c22007d75ba!OpenDocument>) accessed 20 Sep 2005.

status), providing relationships between groups. It provides weaker links than bonding capital but with a larger number of persons. Social capital also has a vertical dimension called linkages. Linking capital describes the relationships people have with those in power, enabling individuals and community groups to leverage resources, ideas and information from formal institutions beyond the immediate community radius. The capacity to gain access to resources, ideas and information from such institutions is a key function of linking social capital (Woolcock 1998; Woolcock 2000).

Social capital models

Social capital also has a downside, however, sometimes known as negative social capital. Indicators of this are the exclusion of outsiders, excess claims on group members, restrictions on individual freedoms, and downward levelling norms (Portes and Landolt 1996: 13). Strong bonding capital, for example, can be used to exclude outsiders. Similarly, strongly bonded groups may work to pursue private interests that undermine the common good (e.g. drug cartels, racist groups or terrorist groups). Social capital may also be used to enforce conformity and social division. There are four major theoretical perspectives on social capital:

- The *Communitarian View* locates social capital in local organisations such as clubs, associations and civic groups. With a focus on horizontal associations, communitarians regard social capital as inherently good, with the implication being that more is better. However, this ignores the importance of having vertical as well as horizontal links.
- The *Networks View* of social capital acknowledges the importance of horizontal as well as vertical associations between people, and connections within and between community groups, private and public sector organisations, with different levels of bonding and bridging capital. Hence varying combinations within groups and with other groups account for the range of outcomes associated with social capital (Woolcock and Narayan 2000: 230).
- The *Institutional View* holds that social capital – the vitality of community networks and civil society – depends on the quality of the formal institutions which groups inhabit (Woolcock and Narayan 2000: 234). In other words, active encouragement by the state allows civil society to flourish. This view provides the rationale for an active role for the state based on good governance and long-term strategies.
- The *Synergy View* integrates insights from the Networks and Institutional research on social capital. This view recognises that together the various actors within government and civil society can generate synergies based on complementarity and embeddedness. Here ‘complementarity’ refers to mutually supportive relations between public and private actors. Instances include the legal frameworks protecting rights of association as well as more humble measures, such as chambers of commerce, which facilitate exchanges among community associations and business groups. ‘Embeddedness’ refers to the nature and extent of the ties connecting citizens and public officials (Woolcock and Narayan 2000: 236).

Community-building and local government

The difficulty in applying the concept of social capital to governmental and community practices is that it lacks a broadly agreed definition, context and application (Hopkins

2002: 7). While it may be measured⁵ and while there are numerous policy studies applying the concept,⁶ what is lacking is a clear causal argument about how social capital is created. Social capital may lead to enhanced social and economic wellbeing. However, it appears just as likely that social and economic wellbeing may lead to enhanced social capital (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2002: 9; Mowbray 2005).

Nevertheless, the concept is now central to the argument for investment in community strengthening and neighbourhood renewal programs that encourage and enable citizens to participate in local activities and associations. Local governments have become increasingly involved in social partnerships between public, community, not-for-profit and private sector bodies in which participation by citizens in public forums, cultural events and consultation processes is conceived as a way to achieve a further end, that of building social connectedness, civic responsibility and social capital; in turn, this is expected to increase amenity, social cohesion and prosperity. The Department of Victorian Communities (2005) puts these linked causal arguments in the following way:

Key outcomes of community-building include increased capability and capacity – reflected in measures such as leadership skills, participation in community organisations, volunteering, relationships with governments, local pride and sense of safety and wellbeing – as well as concrete changes to community conditions and achievements in areas such as school retention, employment, transport, family stability and crime prevention (<<http://www.dvc.vic.gov.au/building.htm>>).

Community-building, in this model, is a precursor to and condition of participation in community organisations. In such instances, the state government is providing resources to local government (amongst other agencies) to assist them to involve community members in decision-making. Consultation leads, in this model, to broader forms of participation, to community engagement and thus to social connectedness and social capital, with all its associated social and economic benefits, from employment to crime prevention.

Thus when a council consults community members on policy, planning or service issues, it may be assumed that the benefits will be both short-term and long-term: the council will have better information on and understanding of the community's requirements and preferences, but it will also have invested in social capital and in increased social and economic participation. In turn, local government can draw on social capital as it continues to make decisions in dialogue with more informed and engaged community members.

As we can see, consultation is closely linked to ideas about participation, engagement, community-building and social capital. This means that, in practice, local governments' routine consultation processes are often expected to serve both pragmatic and immediate ends (e.g. meeting statutory requirements, or gauging community reaction to a specific decision) and longer-term governmental objectives and democratic aspirations. For

⁵ There are numerous studies attempting to measure social capital. Recent Australian examples include Tasmanian Department of Health and Human Services (1998), Onyx and Bullen (2000), Salvaris and Wolcott (2002) and Stone and Hughes (2002). The Australian Bureau of Statistics is working towards including social capital related questions in its surveys, such as their Indicators of Community Connection due November 2005 (<http://www.abs.gov.au/websitedbs/c311215.nsf/20564c23f3183fdaca25672100813ef1/6256a9b6352b3b2fca256c22007ef573!OpenDocument#Social%20Capital%20Releases>) (accessed 20 Sep 2005).

⁶ For example, Coleman (1988) and Teachman et al. (1997) do so in the field of education, while Putnam's (1993, 2000) work on the civic involvement of Americans looks at the decreasing associational membership of citizens and correlates it with a decrease in trust in government, voter turnout, religious participation and volunteering.

example, a consultation that is ostensibly for the purposes of service provision may have a community-building and civic engagement agenda attached to it; thus policy consultations have a distinct democratising agenda.

Terms of reference

As we are aiming to highlight and discuss some of the difficult consultation issues faced by councils, we must establish points of reference. As a result, it is important to consider:

- We are coming from the local government point of view where community consultation, participation and engagement are an important part of democratic local governance
- A continuum approach is not suitable as more is not always better and we are not moving towards a single ideal point of practice
- A purely descriptive model is not a useful guide for practice
- Consultation on any given issue may have a range of objectives and desired outcomes
- The context, aims and methods of the consultation will determine who hard to reach groups, for that purpose, will be.

These terms of reference will allow us to position ourselves while we continue to investigate our core research question: What are the characteristics of successful consultation with hard to reach communities? This depends, of course, on how the hard to reach are defined and identified.

Hard to reach communities

The term 'hard to reach' has been used by a wide variety of institutions in a number of contexts, leading to criticism that it is loose and ambiguous (Cook 2002). Nevertheless, a search of the sparse literature on the topic shows that the term is most often used in relation to service delivery. Thus the hard to reach are groups of people who are under-represented in the use of a particular service (such as further education or health) but who may benefit from that service. The term has also been used by marketing companies to highlight groups of consumers considered difficult to reach for sales purposes, and in literature on consultation to describe people 'who are not proportionately, currently or usually engaged in consultation processes' (Cook 2002). Regardless of the context in which it is used, it is a common view that the hard to reach are individuals or groups whom an institution finds difficult to contact or engage for a particular purpose.

Characteristics of hard to reach groups

Identifications of groups regarded as hard to reach vary with the context and the issue. To take one instance, a 2005 report on adult learning in the United Kingdom stated that hard to reach groups included older people both in employment and seeking employment, unskilled and semi-skilled workers, people with literacy and numeracy needs, ex-offenders and probation clients, lone parents, long-term unemployed, some minority ethnic groups, travellers, homeless people, people recovering from mental illness and people recovering from alcohol or drug dependency (Skills and Education Network 2005). A list nearly as long and diverse was articulated in 2001 by the Community Safety Partnerships program in the United Kingdom: it included young men, the homeless, drug users, the gay community, members of ethnic communities and the elderly (Cook 2002).

This approach to identifying particular groups as hard to reach is evident in more general discussions about consultation. For instance, when outlining how local authorities should produce a 'Local Agenda 21' action plan for sustainable development, a United Nations (1992) document recommended that:

All local authorities in each country should be encouraged to implement and monitor programs which aim at ensuring that women and youth are represented in decision-making, planning and implementation processes.

The VLGA shares these concerns, and notes that many local governments struggle to make their consultation approaches go beyond 'the usual suspects' to reach all relevant community groups. It outlines a range of groups such as young and aged people, people from CALD backgrounds and people with disabilities (Victorian Local Governance Association 2001).

The groups of citizens and community members whom local governments find hard to reach, for particular purposes, can include those facing barriers, the disadvantaged and the disengaged; that is, both those who face difficulties that prevent them from participating in community-based consultation and those who are indifferent and disinclined to respond to invitations or requests for information and involvement. The groups often mentioned amongst those who face barriers to local participation include the elderly and the young, indigenous communities, people from CALD backgrounds and people with disabilities. A broader range of groups may be included depending upon the consultation exercise being undertaken. Other barriers to involvement are related to literacy and access to transport or child care. Furthermore, community members who are

in employment, work long hours or have heavy domestic responsibilities, including caring for the elderly, the young or those with disabilities, may find it very difficult to take up opportunities for consultation, participation and engagement at the local level. Such opportunities may be particularly unattractive to those who commute to work, or whose work involves considerable deliberation, discussion and series of meetings. Thus professionals and white-collar workers may fit into the category of the hard to reach for some purposes, even though they are unlikely to be identified as 'disadvantaged' in income, education, mobility or access to information.

Demographic indicators of hard to reach

Central to the issue of how to address the relationship between local government and hard to reach communities, therefore, is the identification of demographic indicators that can help us understand more about the groups that make up the municipality in question. Such demographic profiles may help to identify factors that could affect the extent to which groups and individuals are likely to take up the consultative opportunities offered by local government. Among the many factors are:

- Language
- Age (young/ old)
- Household composition (families)
- Geographic location (rural, metro)
- Gender
- Housing status (public housing, homeless)
- Income
- Ethnicity
- Religion
- Indigeneity
- Employment status
- Residential status (new or established resident)
- Health status (disability, drug dependent)
- Access to transport
- Hours worked
- SEIFA Index of disadvantage

In some cases, hard to reach groups may be identified according to demographic characteristics linked to traditional notions of disadvantage, such as disability or low income. However, the degree to which these create a barrier to participation, such as access to transport or language, clearly depends on individual circumstances.

Consequently, each of these indicators on its own may not be a sufficient measure of hard to reach. However, taken together and used in the local context, they build a picture of who hard to reach communities may be. This will be discussed in greater detail on page 39.

Relationships and consultation methods

Although hard to reach groups are often viewed as having characteristics that reduce the likelihood of participation, it could be argued that what makes some people hard to reach is not their distinctive characteristics, but simply the inability or unwillingness of

consulting authorities to seek involvement in the appropriate manner.⁷ As a result, the 'problem' of the hard to reach rests not so much with the subjects of consultation, but rather with those conducting it (Cook 2002: 523). One British MP sums up this view in relation to regeneration and social inclusion: 'There are no hard to reach people in my view, usually we don't make sufficient effort' (Battle 2005).

To recognise particular groups as hard to reach is to assume that the consultative approach used should extend beyond standard techniques. It should feature greater consideration of who is targeted for consultation, how they are asked to participate, their potential motivations for participating and any barriers to participation. Developing new relationships and identifying innovative ways to engage the target group(s) may also be required, as well as additional effort and resources. Without such efforts, participation may, as Lowndes et al. (2001b: 453) suggest, simply reinforce existing patterns of social exclusion and disadvantage.

Diversifying approaches to community consultation to meet the needs of groups within society is becoming more widely recommended. For instance, community consultation guidelines now accompany academic literature that includes advice on how to contact and consult clearly defined hard to reach groups such as the young, ethnic minorities, drug users or the homeless. Some guidance is far more generic and shares the standard features of good consultation practice. One London local government's '19 ways to reach the hard to reach' includes essential consultation principles such as 'Be clear about who they are', 'Know what you want from them' and 'Establish a relationship'. Other suggestions such as 'Look at levels of literacy' and 'Get the language right' are clearly influenced by consideration of the barriers faced by some common hard to reach groups (Barking-Dagenham n.d.).

Rational ignorance and problems of citizen motivation

Recognising diversity, appreciating the barriers that certain groups face and searching for more appropriate approaches to consultation for those groups are all important to effective community consultation. Approaching consultation in this way assumes, however, that citizens are willing to be consulted and are keen to have a say in matters that affect their daily lives. Thus people become hard to reach either because of their own characteristics or due to a lack of resources or imagination on the part of those wishing to consult with them. This leaves aside the issue of the extent to which people are willing (rather than able) to get involved.

There may be various reasons why people choose not to take part in community consultation. For instance, the costs of becoming engaged in a political activity may outweigh the benefits (Rydin 1999). Where this is the case, it may be quite reasonable for individuals to let others represent them or to 'free ride' on the participation efforts of others. Participation by a single individual is unlikely to have that much impact on the process, perhaps not enough to outweigh the cost of involvement (Rydin 2000). People may not have much interest in political issues generally; they may not like conflict (Mendelberg 2002) or they may not have the time to get involved (Hardin 1999). It has been argued that achieving widespread citizen involvement over issues that affect large numbers of people is particularly difficult, and 'those most interested in a decision will

⁷ Equally it has been suggested that how hard to reach groups are defined is shaped to some extent by who an agency practitioner works for, their past experience with particular groups, and any locally defined priorities (Doherty et al. 2004).

make it' (Mansbridge 1973). This underlying problem of 'rational apathy' is supported by recent research in the United Kingdom which illustrated the prevalence of this problem and the associated importance of self-interest in determining citizen involvements:

It was clear from people's accounts of their own experience that involvement with the council was largely reactive: a personal reaction to a decision or action affecting one's own family...people's real experiences of participation were more likely to relate to protection of their own or their community's immediate interests, rather than to the wider 'issues' that they referred to in the abstract (Lowndes et al. 2001b).

This is a familiar problem cited by local government that leads to claims that the well organised and politically active 'usual suspects' often dominate attempts at community consultation.

Additional difficulties that have been documented in the United Kingdom include negative perceptions of local authorities, which may or may not have been supported by personal experience (Lowndes et al. 2001b). Whether these perceptions are justified or not, the low opinion people held of local bureaucrats and councillors was cited as one reason for non-participation in community consultation. Similarly, while attitudes may well have changed over time, research in 1980 suggested that many Australians considered their local politicians to be, at best, incompetent and, at worst, corrupt (Bowman 1983).

Councils have been further criticised in the United Kingdom for failing to seriously consider citizens' input. This view is backed by a survey which found that only one third of local authorities felt that public participation had a significant outcome on the final result. Similarly, the failure of some councils to link the results of consultation with decision-making processes, and to report findings back to citizens, have created further cynicism (Lowndes et al. 2001b).

While on the one hand local government faces the underlying difficulties of rational apathy, negative perceptions and cynicism towards community consultation, a steady increase in public participation initiatives in the United Kingdom (Birch 2002) has resulted in problems of 'consultation overload'. People have become irritated by constant invitations to participate in consultation exercises (Needham 2002), with the issue being particularly acute where local leaders are consulted on behalf of their communities. This has also led some Australian councils to undertake research regarding their previous practices before undertaking further consultation (Thuringowa City Council 2004).

The issue of the hard to reach is therefore multi-faceted. It involves addressing fundamental problems of motivation in public participation exercises; recognising that there are people who are different or disadvantaged, as well as barriers to participation; and attempting to overcome these through appropriate and effective consultation strategies.

In the following section, we place these debates about community consultation, participation and hard to reach communities in the context of our continuing research on the consultation practices within our eight partner councils. We discuss, first, the general characteristics of the councils' approaches to consultation and, following that, the terms in which they identify those groups that are hard to reach for particular purposes.

Consultation in practice

This section of the report looks at how our partner councils currently practise consultation, by looking at the definitions and methods used.

As indicated in our first report (Stone 2005), it is difficult to obtain a comprehensive overview of consultation practice within each partner council over the past five years. In general, information is frequently not collated, sometimes not recorded or is simply not available. A few councils such as Darebin have created a 'log' to record council consultations, although this tool has not been as widely used by council officers as originally intended. In the absence of comprehensive information, our first report therefore outlined the practice of consultation within partner councils by discussing some case studies.

In an attempt to gain a more comprehensive overview of, councils were subsequently asked to complete a brief survey that addressed consultation practice in the past two years. Focus groups were also held with each council to add to the survey information. Both methods provided a rich source of information and enable a more comprehensive overview than our first report was able to provide.

How do councils define consultation?

As our first report's initial review of annual reports and consultation manuals indicates, there is both commonality and difference in the ways that consultation is defined across partner councils. The shared view is that it is a process involving a **two-way exchange of information between council and the community prior to a decision being made**. Despite this common understanding, consultation can then become either a subset of participation or engagement, or simply a process that involves greater interaction with citizens than information provision. A number of terms related to consultation such as participation and engagement are also used in different contexts and sometimes with different meanings.

Viewing consultation as one element of participation or engagement is illustrative of the approaches outlined in the previous section by writers such as Arnstein (1969), Shand and Arnberg (1996) and more recently Cook (2002: 525), who commented that:

The new and progressive view of user engagement with policy consultation posits a transformation in the process from consultation (for feedback about services), to participation (to develop services) through to empowerment (to manage services).

This sentiment is mirrored in the VLGA approach to good governance, consultation, participation and engagement outlined earlier.

The cities of Darebin and Port Phillip define consultation in this way by indicating that it belongs to a spectrum of activity that includes information provision and participation. Darebin sees information as 'the basic prerequisite for consultation and participation, a view which is shared by other partner councils. Consultation involves a 'genuine, active, two-way exchange' and 'dialogue with citizens so they may inform council debate, decisions and policies', while participation is seen as 'citizen participation in Council committees, programs and services'. Participation appears to involve a more empowering process than consultation. Supporting this view is another statement in the Darebin Consultation Policy and Guidelines which states that citizens have the right and responsibility to participate in both consultation and decision-making (City of Darebin

2002). Port Phillip is particularly clear on this point: participation is ‘to engage the community to participate in decision-making’ (City of Port Phillip 2003).

Maribyrnong also views consultation on a spectrum of activity, with the explicit categorisation of consultation as the third of four key elements of engagement (rather than participation). Thus information-gathering, provision of information, consultation and participation are all elements of engagement (City of Maribyrnong 2000).

Consultation is once again defined as a two-way process of information-sharing that informs decision-making, while participation involves a more empowering process that involves an element of citizen control or shared decision-making. Hence for Maribyrnong, participation is:

A collaborative process in which the stakeholders/ community work in collaboration with Council to define the problem, identify the priorities and develop solutions/ implement plans and strategies (City of Maribyrnong 2000).

While consultation is seen by some councils as belonging to a spectrum of participation or engagement, this approach is not taken by all councils. The consultation documents of Melbourne and Moreland share the common understanding of consultation as a two-way process before decision-making, but do not discuss other processes that may be viewed as enabling greater citizen control (City of Moreland 2000; City of Melbourne 2001).

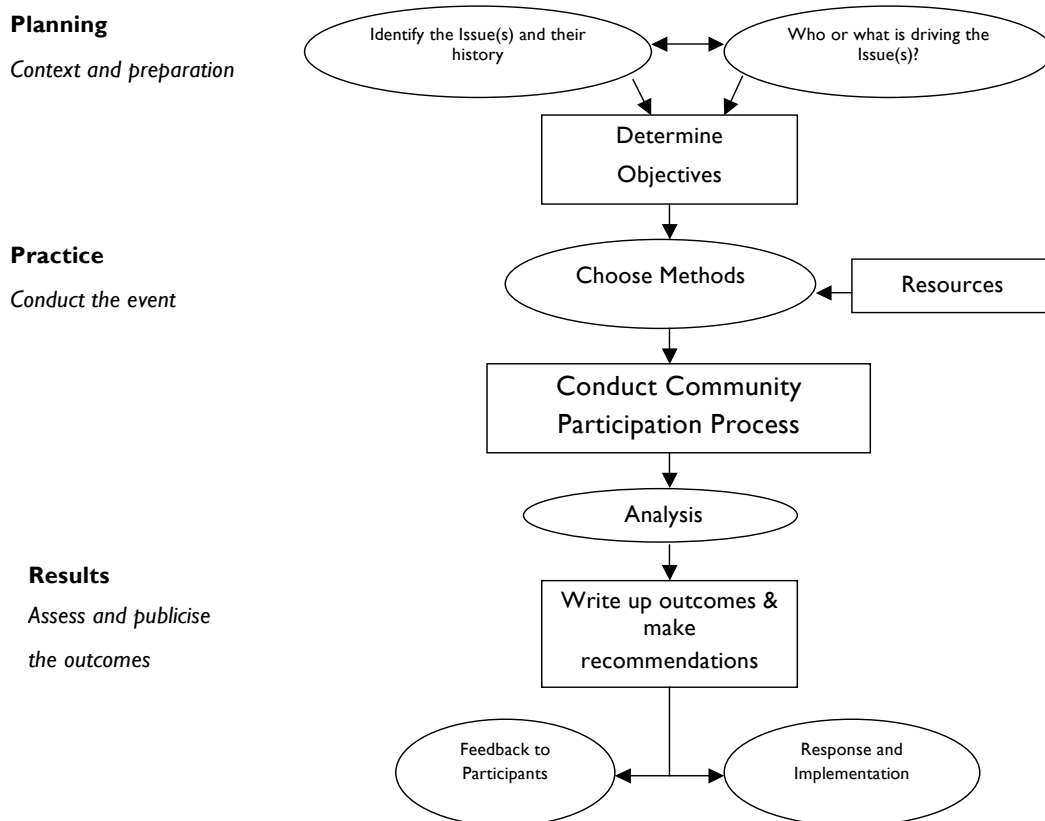
Moreland is reviewing its Consultation and Engagement policy to reflect the fact that, in reality, council practices have been developing beyond formal written policy and have a clear focus on participation and greater citizen control. Nillumbik outlines consultation in a similar manner, but also differentiates it from ‘community information processes’ that involve informing the community of council actions (Shire of Nillumbik 2004).

The definitions and understanding of consultation discussed above represent a brief summary of council consultation policies, manuals and guidelines. These are discussed in greater depth in our initial report which also notes that these understandings are not always shared across the organisation. It is clear, for instance, that while seven of the eight partner councils have a consultation policy, guidelines or manual, there is varying appreciation and use of these resources. This may partly explain why the term ‘consultation’ elicited confusion and debate during some focus groups. Like the policy manuals, there was generally an understanding that consultation is a two-way process of information flow. Nevertheless, in some cases, uncertainty was expressed about whether it was also the appropriate word to describe ‘deeper’ and ongoing processes designed to build relationships and create an ‘engaged’ community. The focus groups also illustrated the confusion that exists in consultation documents about terms such as engagement and participation which can encompass different meanings (from a goal of consultation to an overarching descriptor of any interaction with citizens).

How do councils practise consultation?

In discussing the ‘practice’ of ‘consultation’, it is important to clarify what is meant by both terms. As discussed above, if consultation is considered as a point along a continuum of activity that also includes ‘participation’, ‘partnership’ or even ‘control’, then it is only one aspect of citizen participation with relatively narrowly defined parameters. Alternatively, if it is seen to include more empowering processes and a greater degree of citizen control, this extends the range of practice to be addressed. Given the broad focus of this research, this section will address any form of citizen participation that enables two-way communication.

The second issue to consider is what we mean by ‘practice’. One way to address this is to view consultation as a planned, organised process whereby particular methods are used to address certain issues or problems. An example of this is presented in the diagram below, where consultation is viewed in three stages from planning to results.



A number of the partner councils use a similar approach in their consultation manuals and policies, some of which are being reviewed or updated. If consultation is seen in this way, discussing consultation practice would involve analysis or generalisations about all three stages for the consultations undertaken in the partner councils. This is clearly not a realistic way to document consultation practice. Moreover, in reality, consultation is often reactive and not planned in advance, while methods may be chosen due to political reasons rather than an understanding of the consultation ‘problem’ at hand.

A more limited but manageable approach is to outline the range of issues consulted upon and the methods used. A brief discussion of the key issues about consultation practice arising from the surveys and focus groups is also relevant.

The VLGA (2001) identifies five primary areas on which councils consult:⁸

1. *Major strategies and policies* – municipal wide, involve the whole population and present complex consultation challenges.
2. *Policies and targeted strategies* – includes policy and strategy development on issues which impact on particular groups and/ or areas.

⁸ Most partner councils do not specify or categorise areas of consultation in their consultation policies and manuals, although one exception is Moreland which identifies six areas that closely mirror the VLGA classification (City of Moreland 2000).

3. *Operational/ services* – services and operational issues. Includes all service reviews which will be a key focus of Best Value.
4. *Projects/ site specific* – issues which relate to a specific site or sites. Includes statutory building and planning matters and council developments.
5. *Performance* – council-wide and individual service/ issue assessments of council performance (often known as Council satisfaction surveys)

This classification provides a starting point from which to document the practice of consultation in partner councils. There is, however, considerable overlap between the categories. For instance, if policies and targeted strategies also relate to particular areas, then this category becomes similar to projects/ site specific. For this reason, these two categories have been combined, with issue and place based policies separated for analysis. Another area with some overlap is operational/ services and performance, as both attempt to review and measure the performance of particular services or council responses to issues. Consequently, the categories of operational/ services and performance will also be combined together for the purpose of analysis, leaving three categories for analysis:

1. Major policies and strategies
2. Policies and targeted strategies (place or issue based)
3. Operational/ services/ performance.

It should also be noted, when placing particular issues and consultation techniques in categories such as this, that there is bound to be considerable overlap with some consultations. This is because consultation may simultaneously involve both a review of an existing policy and the creation of a new or modified one.

1. Major policies and strategies

The survey responses showed that a variety of policies and strategies fit within this category, such as consultation about the review of a council plan, budget and public health plan. Planning scheme amendments and the creation of an economic development strategy and municipal strategic statement also fit within this category.

In general, a limited range of broad-based consultation techniques was used for issues such as these, particularly when they relate to the review of a policy or strategy. Calls for submission were used on four occasions, while the public health plan review used public meetings to supplement the call for submissions. A survey was also used for the economic development strategy.

The creation of one Municipal Strategic Statement did, however, utilise a wide variety of consultation techniques. The primary face-to-face methods were paid resident focus groups (which included a number of non-English-speaking background groups) and listening posts at four locations around the municipality. Further opportunities to participate were provided through submissions, the local paper and the council website. Government agencies and representatives from the community and development sectors were also encouraged to become involved.

2. Policies and targeted strategies (place or issue based)

Policies and targeted strategies are undoubtedly the most frequently consulted upon by the partner councils, touching almost every aspect of policies and services. From the surveys alone, the issues (without an area focus) for which there were policies, strategies or plans included:

- Housing
- Arts, writing and music
- Tree planning and removals
- Youth
- Aged
- Health
- Community safety
- Lifelong learning
- Interfaith facilitation
- Poker machines/ gaming
- Multicultural/ CALD
- Leisure/ cycling
- Disability
- Child care and early years
- Libraries
- Safer cities
- Small business
- Indigenous.

Perhaps reflecting the council staff surveyed, these issues are weighted towards community service focused consultations. It is important to note, however, that consultation on structure planning, transport design, environmental planning and other issues that transcend social services programs form the basis for many council consultations.

The survey responses indicated that consultation around a range of place-based issues was also prevalent; this involved street studies, structure plans, lake redevelopment, park planning, traffic and parking studies/ plans and place-based community action plans.

As can be expected from such a diverse list of issues, a large number of information and consultation strategies were used, including multiple methods for many issues. While information strategies were often the first step in any consultation process, strategies identified for information provision only (in order of prevalence) were council website, letter, print media, email, phone, fliers, on-site notices and public information sessions.

The survey revealed numerous face-to-face and written/ electronic consultation methods. The most regular were surveys/ questionnaires, closely followed by focus groups. Public meetings and submissions were also extremely popular. Meetings with specific groups or individuals and interviews were the next most frequent, followed by reference or working groups. Open community forums were used on a number of occasions, while less common methods included 'listening posts', displays, discussion papers and feedback forms.

3. Operational/ services/ performance

The primary areas included in this category are service planning and service or performance reviews. From the survey, the small number of issues that were raised under service planning or development were a place based community development project, multilingual service, youth groups service, maternal and child health service, leisure service, library service and business network. A limited number of methods were generally used for service planning consultation, with surveys being the most common.

Focus groups and workshops were also used on a number of occasions, and interviews in one instance. Where consultation was conducted for service planning alone (without policy development or evaluation elements), often only one method was used to obtain input. Where consultation also occurred to develop policy or conduct evaluation, it seems more likely that other methods will also be used to supplement the primary methods such as surveys. Given the small number of survey responses that fitted into this category, some uncertainty should be expressed about the degree to which this is representative of all consultation about service development.

A much larger number of survey responses related to service or performance reviews, with the majority attributed to Best Value. While nearly all local government services are reviewed from time to time, among the services and programs which were mentioned by survey respondents were:

- Asset management
- Aged services
- Health services
- Maternal and child health
- Youth recreation program
- Permit parking scheme
- Summer events program
- Community bus outings
- Breakfast events accessibility
- Aged and disability services
- Aged residential care service
- Aged housing
- CALD communication project
- Metro access plan
- Libraries
- Community grants program
- Communication methods
- Arts program evaluation.

Undoubtedly the most popular method of consultation for service reviews is the survey, which was often the sole method. Surveys are so prevalent that very few reviews did not use one, resulting in their use being greater than all other methods combined. Focus groups, interviews and forums were the only other multiple methods included in the survey responses. This observation is further supported when we add one officer's observation that 27 Best Value service reviews were conducted by his council, which used 'mostly surveys', whether mailed out, conducted over the phone or web based.

Once again, when service reviews were combined with other goals such as policy development, a broader range of mechanisms was used to consult. One consultation that was a review involving further policy development and service planning used a survey, but chose a stakeholder reference group, community forum and briefing paper to support this method. Another chose to supplement a survey with a public meeting and reference group.

Summary of council consultation

Given differences in councils' size, histories, resources and commitment to consultation, it is not surprising to find that some undertake a more diverse and frequent range of consultation activity than others. Similarly, the review of documents, surveys and focus groups revealed variation in the way consultation is conceived, as it may belong to a spectrum of public participation or engagement, or simply describe a process of two-way communication.

An investigation of the reasons for community consultation demonstrates that consultation regarding specific policies and strategies is the most common form reported, with a broad range of methods used. Among the most popular are surveys and focus groups, with public meetings and submissions also frequently used. The introduction of Best Value has seen consultation about performance reviews increasingly undertaken, with surveys proving to be by far the most commonly used method. Major policies and strategies, such as the Council Plan and Municipal Strategic Statement, also require community consultation when they are developed or reviewed.

This section, dependent as it is on the survey responses, has been able to give an overview of consultation processes in only five of the partner councils. Clearly the responses do not capture all consultation activity undertaken within and across the partner councils. For instance, the focus groups discussed a range of additional mechanisms that are used, particularly when consulting with hard to reach groups. Examples include art projects used to get groups together and facilitate dialogue with council; the use of community volunteers to conduct surveys of focus groups ('action research'); and the introduction of a permanent community reference panel. These and other methods will be discussed further below.

Undoubtedly there are many more examples of new and in some cases innovative consultation mechanisms being tried by partner councils. One factor that appears to have driven innovation in community consultation is concern about hard to reach populations. The following section returns to this issue.

Which populations do partner councils consider hard to reach?

As we found in our initial report, each of our partner councils is aware that some groups within their municipality are more difficult to consult with than others. However, the term hard to reach is not widely used. 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 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 by one or two councils 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 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, as were many businesses (traders) that 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 manuals on public participation routinely recommend consultation of people who will be affected by an issue. However, 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. Achieving either or both of these aims, and working out how much consultation is enough, presents a challenge to all our partner councils.

How do partner councils consult with the hard to reach?

It is clear from our research that partner councils regularly (but not always) make efforts to identify particular segments of the population they want to consult with, and then develop strategies to engage them. Thinking clearly about who should be consulted has

led to significant modifications to more established methods, and the development or trial of an increasing array of new ones.

Publicity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Local newspapers ▪ Local radio ▪ Pamphlets ▪ Newsletters (i.e. faith groups) ▪ Website ▪ Library
Making contact	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Service clubs ▪ Sporting clubs/ associations ▪ Interest based community groups ▪ Faith based groups ▪ Ethnic groups ▪ Local leaders ▪ Hire service providers to contact, consult (e.g. aged care services) ▪ Staff networks
Participation incentives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Paid focus groups, interviews, surveys ▪ Food vouchers, prizes
Formal consultation methods	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Citizen researchers (interviews, surveys, focus groups) ▪ Think tents/ listening posts ▪ Drop-off and pick-up surveys
Informal consultation or community-building methods	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Fishing trip ▪ Street parties ▪ Mural projects ▪ Outdoor movies
New technologies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Text messaging ▪ Online survey ▪ Casual sounding email
Access	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Council transport ▪ Appropriate venues ▪ Child care ▪ Consult out of hours ▪ Help people fill in a questionnaire
Adapting information	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Pamphlets in different languages ▪ Audio tape in different languages ▪ Braille ▪ Translators ▪ Large print

Table I: Techniques for hard to reach

The following table presents a range of techniques that are used by partner councils to contact, inform and consult with hard to reach groups. Events are publicised through a variety of means that are local or targeted in nature, and thus local newspapers, radio stations or newsletters (such as Neighbourhood Watch) are used to contact specific target groups. Similarly, existing networks such as staff, local groups, service providers and community leaders were regularly mentioned as a good way to make contact and consult with target hard to reach populations. Where it is important to have diverse or representative voices, however, this strategy may be only partially successful if an organisation or peak body is not seen as representative of its members. Groups that are newly emerging or that do not have formal organisations can also remain particularly difficult to contact.

The importance of developing and utilising networks for contact and consultation was a key theme throughout the focus groups, with council staff consistently reiterating the importance of taking the time to build good relationships. One way that councils have attempted to do so while consulting is by inviting citizens to conduct interviews, surveys

and focus groups with people in their community. Other less formalised ways of getting people together and learning about citizens' views have included street parties, movies or even fishing trips. As one staff member from Melbourne commented of a fishing trip with his male client group:

I learnt lots, had a good time, and it was a good way to get to know these guys, what they thought about a whole lot of things, you could really get to know where they were coming from. It's all anecdotal, but you can find out what's happening in their lives. In this way we chose the least bureaucratised method we could imagine, it was very social.

This approach fits with a broader emphasis within many consultation strategies on making participation as enjoyable and easy as possible for people, and 'going to them' rather than expecting citizens to visit council at a time that is suitable for staff. On-site consultation methods such as 'think tents' or 'listening posts' employ a similar logic, engaging people at a place that may be more relevant for the issue being discussed, and away from the council chambers. New technologies such as email and text messaging have also created easy ways to engage some citizens. Furthermore, ongoing consultative mechanisms such as Nillumbik's Community Planning ThinkTank and Boroondara's new Community Voice reference panel provide many citizens with opportunities to be consulted in a manner that suits their circumstances.¹⁰

Adapting information to different needs was also mentioned by a number of councils as central to reaching some groups, particularly those from CALD backgrounds and with hearing or visual impairment. Other strategies to reduce the barriers to participation included the use of accessible venues and the provision of child care and council transport. Incentives such as cash or prizes are also used in some cases.

Although the above represents an impressive list of strategies for engaging hard to reach groups, the focus groups and surveys also revealed that often councils do not have the time, resources or, in some cases, expertise to consult as well as they would like to do. Effective community consultation around some issues and with particular groups often proves time consuming and is resource-intensive, meaning the practices are sometimes recognised as second best. As one survey respondent stated:

The main difficulty relates to resources that we can devote to reaching hard to reach groups. There are never enough resources nor time available to do it as well as we would like.

It is perhaps for these reasons that, despite their limitations, more traditional and less complex and resource-intensive methods such as surveys and public meetings will remain an essential feature of local government consultative practice.

¹⁰ Nillumbik's Community Planning ThinkTank is a group of local residents interested in planning and social issues that council consults regularly on these matters. Similarly, Boroondara has recently launched its community reference panel, which will be consulted on a range of issues and comprises over 500 residents who are broadly representative of the city's population.

Demographic indicators of hard to reach

Establishing which groups are hard to reach can be complex and problematic and depends on the demographics of the area as well as existing relationships between council and the community, the historical context, and the ability or willingness of council to seek out and engage these groups. A good understanding of demographic characteristics and the local area can assist in choosing the right consultation process for the right group, thereby improving outcomes. Good local knowledge can also facilitate tapping into existing networks and assist in locating services near the right populations.

This section of the report uses a series of indicators based on demographic data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) Census of Population and Housing (2001) to identify potentially hard to reach populations. It was pointed out earlier that the hard to reach are frequently characterised by disadvantage or barriers to participation. It is these we seek to quantify here.¹¹

All partner councils already have detailed demographic profiles of their populations, in varying formats. Here we seek to establish a consistent approach where, for each council, a number of demographic indicators are considered and compared to Melbourne as a whole. This establishes a benchmark which allows councils' specific attributes to be identified and comparisons to be made.

Some limitations apply to the use of demographic data in this way. The census is based on self-reporting and an assumption is made that the information provided is accurate, but no double-checking is carried out for verification purposes. Nevertheless, it is the best tool available for demographic profiling in this instance. When looking at demographic profiling, it is important to remember that we are looking at groups of people based in geographic areas, while in reality people are individuals who all act and behave in unique ways. Any demographic profiling should therefore only be used as a guide to the population being considered.

How data is mapped

The demographic profiling has many outputs. At times it is appropriate to map data by collector's districts (the smallest unit of geographical analysis within the ABS, usually comprising about 250 dwellings). This provides quite detailed local information, which allows councils to know where people with certain characteristics live to assist targeting of resources and services. For example, it would be inappropriate to place a skate park in where the majority of the residents are older and there are few youths living nearby.

At other times, information has been provided by looking at the local government area as a whole. This approach is appropriate when councils need to be aware of the demographics of the whole area in order to make decisions and know with whom to consult. Comparisons can be made between the area and Melbourne as a whole. This allows specific issues to be addressed and applied to the local government area. For instance, different factors would need to be considered depending upon the size and location of CALD communities.

Demographic indicators of hard to reach groups

In the first stage of the demographic profiling, 14 indicators have been used and are described in the following section. Each indicator alone focuses on certain aspects of

¹¹ Attitudinal barriers to participation are not included in this analysis.

council population and local area. However, it is in conjunction that they build a picture of the issues for consultation and implications for defining and consulting hard to reach communities.

Social and Economic Indexes for areas (SEIFA)

The census is compiled at five year intervals, the most recent having been undertaken in 2001. Approximately 50 questions of social and economic importance were asked. SEIFA (Socio-Economic Indexes For Areas) is a summary measure derived from the census that measures aspects of socio-economic conditions by geographic area. It has four separate indexes:

- Index of Relative Socio-Economic Advantage/Disadvantage
- Index of Relative Socio-Economic Disadvantage
- Index of Economic Resources
- Index of Education and Occupation.

The indexes are established using principle component analysis and have been standardised to give a mean of 1,000 for Australia. As they are based on collector's districts (in the urban incidence, about 220 dwellings in a geographic area), approximately 95% of all index scores fall between 800 and 1,200. The indexes are an ordinal value, so they can only be seen as a rank. It cannot be assumed that a district with an index of 1,200 is proportionately 'better' or 'less disadvantaged' than one district with 800, nor would it be appropriate to suggest that the socio-economic difference between two districts with an index of 1,100 and 1,200 is the same as that between 750 and 850.

The SEIFA indexes should not be used to compare individual collector's districts, as they can be distorted by unusual characteristics of certain households. In this instance, the stability of the indexes will need to be taken into account; however, it is again only intended as an indicative comparison. Another factor to take into consideration is that the indexes are based on the enumerated population, that is, where people were on census night, which may not be where they normally live.

SEIFA 2001 provides a range of measures to rank areas based on their relative social and economic wellbeing.

1. Index of Relative Socio-Economic Advantage/Disadvantage
This index is a continuum of advantage to disadvantage and is available for both urban and rural areas. Low values indicate areas of disadvantage and high values indicate areas of advantage. The index takes into account variables relating to income, education, occupation, wealth and living conditions.
2. Index of Relative Socio-Economic Disadvantage
This index is considered to be the most general. Unlike the previous one, it does not offset households in advantage against those that are disadvantaged. High scores (or high deciles) indicate lack of disadvantage rather than high advantage. It is therefore a better indicator of disadvantage. The index draws on attributes such as income, educational attainment, unemployment and dwellings without motor vehicles, focusing on low income earners, relatively lower educational attainment and high unemployment. A low index value indicates low income, low educational attainment, high unemployment and relatively unskilled jobs. Higher deciles reflect few people (or households) with low income, unskilled jobs and little training.

3. Index of Economic Resources

Variables for this index relate to income and expenditure, including rent paid, mortgage repayments and dwelling size.

Higher values on the index reflect higher household incomes and higher status of tenure, i.e. households would be more likely to be purchasing their own homes, and the homes would have more bedrooms per person and therefore be less overcrowded. The index excludes any information on education and occupation and doesn't include information about assets as this is not covered by the census questionnaire.

4. Index of Education and Occupation

This index includes variables relating to the educational and occupational characteristics of communities, such as the proportion with a higher qualification (or undertaking higher education) or employed in a skilled occupation.

The method used for this report was to obtain the SEIFA indexes for all the collector's districts in the Melbourne Statistical District (MSD) – the ABS' geographical construct of metropolitan Melbourne. This consisted of 5,718 collector's districts and a population of 3,340,575. The indexes were then weighted to the population of that district. The population within each district ranged from 21 to 2,549, with a median of 568. Each of the four indexes was then split into 10 equal groups/deciles, based on their rank. The analysis, therefore, compares the index values of the local government area to the rest of the MSD. For the MSD, the median indicates that half of the population falls below and the other half fall above. Except where otherwise indicated, this method was used to map SEIFA indexes.

In some instances, a comparison of SEIFA scores to Melbourne does not provide sufficient information. Where this was the case, indexes were compiled for the council area only and grouped into quintiles ranging from highest to lowest. This allows for an internal comparison of the indexes so that even in the more uniformly affluent or less well off council areas we can see where there are internal differences.

The four SEIFA indexes are mapped geographically for each council. A table providing summary data is also included, which shows the indexes in real terms. It also shows where the indexes' values fall when deciles are compared to Melbourne.

Housing tenure

This measure looks at levels of home ownership and rental. High levels of home ownership may indicate a stable population with better networks and connectedness, and may provide a greater incentive for residents to become involved with council. Conversely, a high proportion of renters may point towards a greater turnover of residents who have fewer vested interests in the area.

This indicator also shows how many people own their homes outright compared to purchasers (people still paying off their mortgage) and may have implications for community consultation. It is possible, for instance, that those who do not have a large mortgage may have more time for community consultation. Furthermore, areas with high levels of home ownership may want to invest time in council issues for reasons such as maintaining or increasing the value of their property. Renters are less likely to be concerned about or aware of issues that may affect house prices, such as the building of an office block in a predominantly residential area.

Labour force status

This measure applies to persons 15 years and over and gives an indication of how many people are employed, unemployed and outside the labour force. Those outside the labour force include retired people, people on benefits and full-time parents. These people may be targeted for community consultation. Further, it would be expected that people who are employed, especially full-time, would have less time to invest in consultation. The statistics were compiled in 2001 and thus are out of date, but comparisons to Melbourne still hold true.

Hours worked in employment

This measure expands on labour force status data and looks at how many hours those in employment work. For the purposes of this report, direct comparisons have been made with Melbourne as a whole, which allows for inferences to be made about whether people within the local council area work more or less than the average. It could be expected that those working more than 40 hours per week have limited time to invest in consultation. Conversely, those in part-time employment may have more free time to engage in consultation. It has been shown in the United States that working full time reduces the level of community involvement (Putnam 2000: 201).

Educational institution attending

This measure provides information about those who take part in formal education. Data about educational institutions attended can be used as a means of accessing younger people and their families.

Levels of education

Levels of education have been directly linked to levels of participation in public life (Putnam 2000: 186) and may therefore be a predictor of how likely people are to take part in formal consultation exercises – people who are better educated are more likely to participate in consultation. Levels of education are also linked to literacy skills. An assumption can be made that those who have achieved a particular level of education can read and understand information presented by councils, while those who have poor literacy skills may miss out on information being provided through written material.

Country of birth

This measure shows people by country of birth if they make up more than 1% of the population in the area. This is not an indicator of how well they speak English, but points to the cultural diversity of an area.

Language spoken at home / English proficiency/ Birthplace of parents

This is a more sophisticated indicator of cultural diversity. It covers not just first generation migrants, but also second generation migrants (who would appear on the birthplace table as Australian born) who have retained their cultural heritage (Office of Community Building 2004: 63). Proficiency in English may also be an indicator of a person's connectedness to the wider community or to their language group.

In terms of consultation, a diverse community may point to the need to be culturally aware and thus tap into groups through cultural networks, or provide facilitators and make information available in a number of languages.

Household with motor vehicles

This measure gives an indication of potential mobility. This is especially important for those areas with a low level of public transport.

Age groups, with attention to older residents and youth

Age groups give a clear indication of which services and potential services may be required currently and in the future. This can be a double-edged sword at times in terms of communities where there are many older persons. An older age profile may mean that a lot of investment needs to be made in aged care facilities. Alternatively, it could be assumed that natural attrition will mean that younger families may move in where previously there were older people. It also gives an indication of services that need to be supplied in the near future, assuming ageing in place is going to occur. Also, where there is a high demographic in the under ten age group, services will need to be provided for this group when moving beyond primary school age.

Journey to work

This measure gives an indication of where people travel to work. This is important in terms of how and where they commute to, i.e. if many live and work within the council area, it can be assumed that there will be a greater level of connectedness to the community and thus they will be more amenable to consultation. Those who commute long distances may be out of the area for many hours of the day, and therefore be less inclined to invest time within their community and may also be less aware of local issues. Putnam (2000: 213) famously noted that 'each additional ten minutes in daily commuting time cuts involvement in community affairs by 10 percent'.

Transience of residency

Figures on transience show the movements of people in and out of local government areas and also movements within the municipality, but only if they travel outside of their collector's district. A high turnover may mean that communities are less locally connected and extra efforts have to be made to engage them. Information from consultations may also date quickly as new arrivals may not share the same preferences as those consulted with previously. This information is presented in a map format and shows areas of high and low transience. It is expected that areas of low transience would have a much greater investment in their community, although there is a danger they could consider themselves over-consulted if they are a regularly targeted population.

Household income

Household income is benchmarked directly with Melbourne as a whole. It places the economic circumstance of households in Melbourne into four equal groups. This is then applied to the municipal area, giving an indication of its affluence. One of the problems with this measure is that household income is taken from all the income units in a household. Therefore, it would be expected that areas with high levels of lone person households would not fare as well as areas with dual income households, while in real terms, if a household receives \$1,000 per week, a lone person household would be more affluent than a five person household. But as a whole it is an excellent indicator of affluence.

Household structure (family/non-family type)

This measure shows eight types of households. It is different from other measures which look separately at household structure in relation to families with and without dependent

children. Families with no dependent children would be older families where the children have not left home but would be considered adults because they are earning an independent income. Those areas with high levels of families with dependent households would be expected to have a large amount of social investment in the area due to engaging in social activities and sporting activities. Therefore their connectedness would probably be high. Lone person and couple only households could be considered in two ways. One is that they do not have a connectedness to the community because they are isolated. On the other hand, they may have more spare time to engage in the community.

Conclusion

This report has documented the findings of the first year of research for the *Community Consultation and the 'Hard to Reach': Local government, social profiling and civic infrastructure* project. The study addresses conceptual and practical difficulties encountered by local government when conducting community consultation. In particular, it is concerned with efforts to make local government's community and service planning more inclusive of those who are not usually inclined to participate or who face barriers to participation.

The report outlined the circumstances in which an enhanced role for local government in community consultation has arisen. It described the Victorian policy context, before providing a broader discussion of the changing nature of modern government, which is viewed as part of wider governance system involving a range of actors. Concerns about a democratic deficit and an apathetic and cynical public have further encouraged local governments to seek direct participation from their citizens, through an increasing array of methods.

The emergence of a variety of community consultation mechanisms has been accompanied by different ways of categorising them and the purposes they serve. Writing from the position of a community activist, Arnstein developed a continuum model of community participation that made strong judgements about the relative value of certain mechanisms. While retaining some influence, more recent attempts to categorise citizen participation around service issues in particular have steered away from this approach, by simply describing appropriate methods for a given policy problem. One goal that has underpinned both conceptual and practice approaches to public participation has been a desire to enhance social capital.

Following these contextual issues, which impact upon the practice and understanding of consultation and participation within councils, the report moved to the concept of the hard to reach, understood as people whom an institution can find difficult to contact or engage for a particular purpose. On the one hand, the 'problem' may be seen to relate to certain characteristics of individuals or groups. Thus some people with demographic characteristics related to disadvantage or difference (such as ethnicity, disability or age) can be viewed as hard to reach, while others can face barriers to participation such as access to public transport or a lack of time. Alternatively, the manner in which government conducts its consultation may be seen as central to attracting participants, and greater care is needed to shape consultation practices according to particular circumstances of individuals or groups.

While 'hard to reach' is not a term used by all partner councils, there is recognition that successful consultation requires consideration of both the consultation problem and an appreciation of the barriers that potential participants may face. The research has revealed that, in general, traditional mechanisms such as surveys, focus groups and public meetings are favoured. Nevertheless, all councils have shown a desire to move beyond these, collectively providing some excellent examples of practices that have broadened the range of participants and the manner in which they participate.

The next stage of this continuing research project will expand our initial analysis of councils' consultation practices and demographic profiles, drawing on a series of case studies conducted for and with each partner council. A brief outline of this program for further research is presented below.

Further research

Building on the initial analysis of councils' consultation practices and demographic profiles, the study will proceed to a more thorough investigation of the issues, using a series of case studies. Case studies were chosen as a method as they facilitate investigation of complex phenomena within their real life context, allowing for multi-layered analysis.

The overall question guiding the case study investigations is: ***What makes for a successful consultation with hard to reach groups?*** Deceptively simple at the outset, this question has added complexities when one considers that it is not just about consultation methods and issues consulted upon, but also relates to dynamics between council staff and departments, dynamics between council staff and the community, and dynamics within the community.

A minimum of one case study will be chosen from each council, enabling the researchers to follow and document a community consultation as it happens. They will be selected to provide insights about consultations with a range of hard to reach communities and will be structured around key themes from the broader debates surrounding the issue of consultation.

Some interesting issues are (in no particular order):

- Representative versus participatory democracy
- Citizen engagement and empowerment
- Achieving representative consultation on broad and high level issues such as strategic and statutory planning
- Engaging the time poor
- Use of electronic media for consultation
- Issues of inclusive representation versus 'squeaky wheels' or 'usual suspects'
- Established interests versus new residents
- Reaching socially and spatially isolated community members
- Balancing the interests of transient populations, land owners, renters and home owners
- Engaging CALD communities
- Networking and information-sharing within councils.

A guiding framework for the case studies has been developed. Each will be approached in five stages, asking a series of questions about the consultation process and its outcomes. This structured approach will assist researchers in identifying common features across councils that facilitate successful consultations with hard to reach communities.

I. Preparing for consultation: inception, purpose, assumptions, resources

- Why is the consultation being undertaken?
- How does the consultation sit within council's policy/ service framework?
- Is the consultation aimed at a specific hard to reach group or is it a broad consultation that should also include hard to reach groups?
- Who is conducting the consultation? Which department(s)? Are consultants/ experts in consultation/ persons with expert knowledge on hard to reach used?
- Are council staff aware of other consultations that may have taken place in relation to this issue?

- What is the level of organisational support? Is the consultation endorsed by senior management? Is it publicised widely within council?
- What are the budget and resources available?
- How is the consultation planned? What are the timelines and anticipated difficulties?
- What is the rationale for choice of method?
- At what stage are citizens invited to participate?
- How are hard to reach groups identified?
- How is demographic information used?
- To what degree are existing connections with hard to reach/ subgroups utilised?
- On what criteria is someone considered representative?

2. Conducting consultation

- How is the consultation publicised?
- How are citizens/ stakeholders/ representatives recruited?
- How are citizens/ stakeholders/ representatives informed about their role in the consultation process?
- How does the consultation actually happen?
- How do citizens/ stakeholders/ representatives perceive the consultation process?
- Do the anticipated problems occur? What other problems arise? How are they addressed?
- How well are hard to reach groups represented?
- What is the response from hard to reach groups?

3. Using information from consultation

- How does the consultation inform the decision-making process?
- How far does decision-making reflect citizen input?
- How is decision-making communicated back to citizens/ stakeholders?
- Are citizens/ stakeholders able to comment before a final decision is made/ implemented?

4. Evaluation

- Is an evaluation of the consultation conducted by council?
- What is the outcome of this evaluation?
- Is this communicated to the community?
- What is community acceptance of the decision like?
- What are the implications for hard to reach groups?

5. Implications for practice

- What are the lessons from the case study?
- How will these be disseminated across councils?

It is anticipated that the structured analysis of case studies along these lines will allow key attributes for successful consultation with hard to reach communities in local government to be identified. In this way, the project will develop a coherent analysis of both the endemic difficulties that partner councils face in consulting hard to reach

groups, and the means they have used to clarify their aims, the context, and the methods available to them. The result will be a rich study directly relevant to strategic and public policy debates on local government and governance more broadly, both in Australia and internationally.

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