5. Improving consultation practice

In this chapter, I consider problematic applications of consultation. These are the instances in which consultation seems to create more difficulties than it resolves or in which it is politically difficult to undertake consultation in the first place. The emphasis throughout is on practical remedies. The first section of the chapter discusses consultation from the viewpoint of community groups, drawing on practical examples of the kinds of behaviours that, while perfectly reasonable from a public management point of view, cause confusion and loss of trust among consultees. The second section discusses a number of cases in which consultation has not produced the benefits expected of it, and asks how the process could have been better handled.

Consultation and the seven bureaucratic sins

‘The community’ often enrages or disappoints governments, especially when it does not come up with the answer that the experts want. Equally, however, government has a maddening effect on communities. Most public servants have little idea how difficult it is for communities to understand the bureaucratic process. From the community’s perspective, problems are seamless. From government’s perspective, problems are defined by the functional arrangements that have been put in place for dealing with them.

A representative of a prominent peak body provided the following insights into 'the seven bureaucratic sins' and the effects these practices have on the community and some of the ways in which public servants can address the problems (see figure 5.1 below).

Dealing with the silos

Many of the sins of bureaucracy result from a lack of communication between and within agencies: the tendency for public servants to view the world from the perspective of the ‘silo’, or functional hierarchy, to which they belong. When it comes to engaging with communities more directly, whether the objective is to solve problems or to produce outcomes, the effects of the silos become even more problematic. Two case studies—the Murdi Paaki COAG field trial and Centrelink’s Murray-Darling Basin initiative—show what can be done when agencies are prepared to think and to work more flexibly.
### Table 5.1 The seven bureaucratic sins of consultation

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sine</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Remedies</th>
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<tr>
<td>1. ‘You’re off the topic’</td>
<td>Many points that are raised in consultations are not relevant to the designated topic and/or participants have not fully read the consultation documents. There is a tendency to ignore or sideline concerns that are not relevant to the matter in hand.</td>
<td>Suggested remedy: even if it’s off the topic, at least pass the point on to the person whose responsibility it is.</td>
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<td>2. ‘That’s not our job’</td>
<td>The consultees have read all the documents, but their particular concern falls between several agencies—in other words, no-one is dealing with it.</td>
<td>Remedy: try to pass the information to the agency that should take it up or at least suggest that the person writes to the minister about it, and suggest which minister they should approach.</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. ‘Consulting on motherhood statements’</td>
<td>The consultation never gets near anything controversial or even concrete. The propositions put forward cannot be disagreed with, but the same questions have been canvassed previously, often many times over. Consultation fatigue quickly sets in when this happens.</td>
<td>Remedy: check to see what others have done. If there is a real need to proceed, have something specific to talk to the community about. If you are consulting on something broad, such as a health strategy, try to give people some sense of what particular elements might mean for them.</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. ‘You can’t come in here’</td>
<td>The desire for control sometimes results in consultations that are not open to groups whose views are not sought or whose participation is not welcome. At times, there are really difficult scenes when people are physically prevented from coming into the room.</td>
<td>Remedy: if you can’t handle the heat, don’t hold the consultation.</td>
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<td>5. ‘Contrived support’</td>
<td>Agencies often misrepresent the true outcomes of consultation. They say, ‘We’ve consulted on this’, giving the impression that their view enjoys widespread support. Or they consult using leading questions that push people’s views in certain directions.</td>
<td>Remedy: report fully on what you have found, even if it is negative.</td>
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6. ‘The black hole’
Lots of issues come up through the consultation, only to disappear into the black hole of the bureaucracy. Those who participated in the process hear nothing until an announcement is made, but often there is no tangible outcome at all.

Remedy: agencies should produce a consultation report that conveys the comments that were made. Privacy concerns should be dealt with by asking permission for names to be used.

7. ‘The left hand and the right hand’
Decisions are made (often in a budgetary context) that affect a number of programs, leaving ‘unconsulted’ community organisations with contracts to deliver these programs. The collective impacts on the organisations concerned can be quite heavy. A variation on this theme occurs when a decision in one department impacts directly on the ability of a community organisation, contracted to another, to deliver a program.

Remedy: better coordination mechanisms are needed, particularly where community organisations are delivering programs to a number of different agencies. Compacts between government and the community sector should make specific mention of these kinds of issues.

Murdi Paaki
Murdi Paaki is a region of western New South Wales that takes in 16 Indigenous communities including those of Bourke, Broken Hill and Brewarrina. In 2003, an agreement was signed between the Murdi Paaki Regional Council and the Commonwealth Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST) to implement an innovative field trial designed to improve outcomes in health, education and economic development.

The field trial was sponsored by COAG and was based on a philosophy of proactive partnership between Indigenous communities, state and Commonwealth departments and non-governmental organisations (NGOs). The Indigenous communities wanted action across a range of issues, but were tired of years of well-intentioned government intervention that achieved few lasting results. The task of the public servants was to establish ways of working with the communities that would develop trust and deliver real outcomes.

Shared responsibility was one of the underlying principles of the trial. Twenty-nine shared-responsibility agreements were signed, forming a basis for ownership of the changes that were implemented. The governance structures chosen reflected a new way of thinking, one that aligned bureaucratic ways of working more closely with those of the local people. For example, the local people’s preference was for loose working groups that were as representative
as possible of particular communities. In order to work with these communities, the public service departments had to work through local representatives of the departments involved.

These local representatives formed action teams that worked closely with community groups and the regional council to identify specific actions that needed to be pursued (Jarvie 2008). This activity was backed up by, and oriented towards, measurable improvements in key indicators, such as school attendance and literacy. As Sam Jeffries (2008), chair of the Murdi Paaki Regional Council put it, ‘[W]e concentrated on the results, rather than competing for the dollars to achieve the results.’

What was being established here? In the technical sense, we might see a mode of governance that aligned resources with change. When we look deeper, we see that the people themselves determined the priorities and the government agencies worked at linking that way of thinking with their need for performance indicators. Administration was thereby personalised. Information flowed from the ground upwards.

Information also had to flow across departmental boundaries. In some ways, this was the greatest challenge of all. Departments that were accustomed to working in particular modes, and ignoring (or fighting) others, had to shed their habitual ways of working. For many, this proved very difficult. As Mark de Weerd, leader of the action team, puts it, when you have a sympathetic manager, you can achieve anything. Governments were prepared, in this case, to learn from communities and to allow the communities to engage them, rather than the other way around.

Structures and processes, however, were important, as were the principles governing communication. Form followed function. One of the most successful subgroups was set up to deal with employment, education and training. This subgroup brought together local representatives of some 10 government departments, representatives from the regional assembly and five NGOs. The main resources were people and the capacity they represented. When money was needed for particular purposes, however—such as building a swimming pool in Brewarrina—it was speedily found.

What is remarkable about Murdi Paaki is the fact that public servants on the ground were supported in developing engagement. With a political warrant from COAG, a high-level group had the authority that was needed. In turn, this group gave members of the action teams the flexibility they needed. If things needed to be done differently, the support was there. If more time was needed, it was given. Even so, some agencies were not able to suspend habitual ways of working in order to meet communities’ needs. Others were. Often, this meant a willingness to adapt what could be done, within an agency’s budget and
framework, to the need. For example, DEST was able to assist in work on the Collarenebri Cemetery by creating a training position to get the job done.

**Centrelink’s Murray-Darling Basin Project**

In April 2007, there was growing concern about the social impacts of the devastating drought that was afflicting the Murray-Darling Basin. The May 2007 Budget appropriated $10 million to Centrelink as part of a special project to provide additional support to drought-affected communities, particularly communities of irrigators who were facing zero water allocations from July 2007. The project presented Centrelink with the challenge of identifying and working with a large number of stakeholders—internal and external—and establishing a community engagement model that was helpful, without heightening people’s concerns.

A Service Delivery Coordination Unit, based in Griffith, New South Wales, was established to coordinate a broad range of government programs in the area. The inspiration for the unit came from the success of the ‘quick-response’ teams that provided practical help in the aftermath of Cyclone Larry in Queensland. In addition, the availability of specific assistance, in the form of a new Irrigation Management Grant, was an important catalyst in establishing contact with the many stakeholders involved.

The money, while important, was, however, only part of the picture. Having the flexibility to provide practical ‘linking’ services was also vital. In this context, the staffing of the unit proved crucial to the success of the initiative. ‘We didn’t have a “budget” as such, for what we were doing,’ says Kate Hay, national manager of Centrelink Rural. ‘What we did have were people. When community groups asked for help, sending them the right person at the right time could open doors, and help make things happen.’

The Centrelink and Murdi Paaki stories show what can be done when capacity is placed at the service of need. There are, however, particular requirements for this type of engagement to be successful. The Murdi Paaki field trial showed agencies working with communities to make decisions about what they would do. The Centrelink Murray-Darling Basin Unit had no preset agenda, but offered guidance where it was needed. In both cases, the lead agency had to be prepared to use its programs and its people flexibly. The lead agency had to possess the resources and the reach to make a difference, although the real actions taken were often on quite a small scale. Although high-level support was required for these initiatives, the risks involved in really doing things—that is, responding to situations on the ground—proved to be small.
Consultation when the news is bad

People are all in favour of consultation, but only when the results go their way.

(Former senior public servant, Federal Department of Education, speaking in 2008)

When governments are handing out benefits, they run relatively few short-term risks if they do not consult, or consult poorly. Benefits given to one group might antagonise others, but are unlikely to cause major political upheavals. The story is a different one when governments have to manage retractions, closures and retrenchments or even changes, which, if badly managed, can lead to considerable antagonism.

Some of the most intractable problems arise when there is a need to get consultees onside, but the fate that is in store for them is unattractive. Not surprisingly, these situations are often mishandled. Governments do not trumpet their ‘bad news’ consultations, so there is not much public soul-searching about these episodes. Precisely because of the mistrust that is generated, however, and the dismay of many activists’ and citizens’ groups, there are many instances on the political record. Here, we look at three instances of this problem and ask how it might have been done better.

The Traveston Crossing Dam

In July 2006, at the height of the 2000–07 drought, the Queensland Government announced its plan to build a dam on the Mary River, north of Brisbane. The decision to dam the river was taken after a ‘desk-top review’ of possible dam sites compiled by consultants GHD (Senate Standing Committee on Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport 2007). There had been no prior consultation with local people, despite the existence of a well-established catchment management authority for the region.

There were fiery meetings in the Mary River Valley about the plan. Not only would the dam flood many hectares of prime agricultural land, including one of the state’s largest dairy farms, even with mitigating action, the dam would adversely affect the habitats of a number of endangered species, including the Mary River turtle and the Mary River cod. When the state-level environmental impact assessment (EIA) process was opened, more than 16 000 submissions were received.

Environmental impact assessment is a broad-ranging process that is public and consultation based. In these cases, consultation is mandated, but structured in ways that ‘mobilise bias’ towards development. As I put it in an article on the dam (Stewart 2008b), ‘[T]he process is carefully stage-managed. And as activists
everywhere have discovered, “they” (the authorities) have everything—time, power, expertise and money—on their side.’

Where governments are themselves proponents of change, consultation has a particularly hollow ring. In the Mary River case, the Queensland Coordinator-General was charged with the responsibility for determining the response to the state-based EIA process, but the proponents of the dam, Queensland Water Infrastructure (QWI), were themselves wholly owned by the Queensland Government and involved in a number of ways in the project. During 2007, QWA bought many properties in the valley. Locals sold because of the uncertainty of their future.

The Commonwealth, under the terms of the *Environmental Planning and Biodiversity Conservation Act*, must also be involved and the Federal Minister for the Environment has the final say as to whether the project is to proceed or not. Public servants advising the minister clearly have a pivotal role to play, but while lobbying continues, consultation does not. Only the Senate, through its Standing Committee on Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport, consulted widely—and even then it brought down a non-committal report.

**How could this process have been better managed?**

EIAs have been heavily criticised for their failure to deal, fully and openly, with community objections to development. One model is for the State itself—so often ranged against the interests of concerned citizens—to take its part in legal proceedings. In Sweden, the State may play this role by representing citizens in environment courts used to determine permits for large installations. ²

Whether or not courts are involved, consultative balance would seem to require the construction of new arenas to enable community views to be heard. In the case of the Mary River, the problem arose because the Queensland Government panicked in the face of unprecedented drought and did not give itself sufficient time to find out the true political (and ecological) parameters of the dam site its consultants had suggested. More research before the EIA process was even invoked would have facilitated more accurate risk assessment.

**School closures in the Australian Capital Territory**

The ACT *Education Act 2004* requires communities to be consulted when closures of government schools are contemplated. Before closing or amalgamating a school, the minister is required to:

(a) have regard to the educational, financial and social impact on students at the school, the students’ families and the general school community; and
(b) ensure that school communities affected by the closure or amalgamation have been adequately consulted during a period of at least 6 months. (s. 20, clause 5)

The act further states that ‘consultation should be open and transparent’ and ‘should lead to sustainable decisions by involving effective community engagement’. To enable effective consultation to take place, relevant information should be provided in ‘a timely and accessible way’.

These aspirations might have been achievable where one or two schools were concerned. They became almost impossible to implement in circumstances in which multiple school closures were on the agenda. In May 2006, the ACT Government, believing that it was faced with a major budget deficit, announced plans to close 39 schools and preschools. Many of these schools had low enrolments and had been under-enrolled for a number of years. Demographic change, as families aged and the number of school-age children fell, was one precipitating factor. There had also been a drift from government to non-government education.

Why such a large number of schools and preschools? There was some speculation that the government was, in effect, making an ambit claim and was prepared from the outset to concede on some closures (in the final analysis, 24 schools and preschools were closed). If this was so, it is hard to see what ‘consultation’ was designed to achieve, unless the government believed that in setting community against community, it was shoring up support in the areas surrounding the ‘saved’ schools.

Not surprisingly, the climate of consultation became highly charged, as communities organised to defend their schools. It soon became apparent that the government had not researched the case for closure in great detail in each instance. Under vigorous questioning from community representatives, public servants from the Department of Education, charged with presenting rationales for the closures, often seemed under-prepared. What was ostensibly a consultation was, in reality, a multilateral negotiation, with citizens defining and redefining the case for keeping their school open, in the light of any feedback they received.

The government tried valiantly to package its final decision as a major breakthrough for government schooling. New schools catering for preschool to year 10 would be built, embodying (so it was claimed) the latest educational principles. The territory’s budgetary outcome, however, was more favourable than expected, adding to community cynicism that a prearranged agenda had been imposed on them.

Having finally made its decision, the government was not about to backtrack, even when, in 2007, it found that more money was available than previously
thought. In 2008, however, with an election approaching, the government realised it had to mend bridges with the community, particularly in relation to the fate of the former school sites. It was widely expected that the government, committed to expanding the supply of housing in the territory, would move quickly to sell off the sites, many of which were in prime residential locations close to shops.

Reacting to criticism that it had not consulted in good faith previously, the government now undertook a further two rounds of consultations, both facilitated by firms of consultants. The first was designed to determine community sentiment about the future of the former school sites. The response was unequivocal: the community was strongly opposed to any sell off and wanted the schools preserved for community use. Realising it had set the parameters too broadly, the government now commissioned a further, more tightly defined consultation designed to elicit support for partial use of a number of the sites for multi-unit housing. It was widely claimed that the government would keep consulting the community until the community told it what it wanted to hear.

How could this process have been better managed?

The government failed to think strategically about the future and its public servants clearly failed to alert it to the dangers it was running. A more considered process—one that tapped community sentiment while presenting, as clearly as possible, the budgetary facts—might have averted the drawn out confrontation that resulted. It might also have prevented the government from being portrayed by its opponents as remote and out of touch.

In an effort to improve its consultative credentials, the government put out a discussion paper that promised to ‘put citizens at the centre of policy development’ (Stanhope 2008). The paper recommended a number of reforms, including enhanced electronic engagement of citizens and improved information dissemination by the government.

Local government amalgamations in Queensland

In 2007, the then Queensland Premier, Peter Beattie, announced that local governments would be amalgamated. The number of councils would be reduced by more than half, from 156 to 72, and more than 700 councillors would lose their jobs. The reasons behind the change seemed compelling: population growth, environmental stress and planning problems were creating problems that local governments, many of them fragmented and small, were ill equipped to handle. The government was particularly concerned about south-east Queensland, where the presence of 18 local councils made the coordination of planning very difficult.

In this case, a consultative process undertaken under the auspices of a Local Government Reform Commission, and with the active involvement of the
Queensland Local Government Association (LGA), had been in train for some time. An impatient treasurer, however, short-circuited the process, clearly with the idea that more development-compliant, as well as more efficient, entities would result.

If the government had hoped that more development-compliant councils would result, it was disappointed in at least some instances. The amalgamated Sunshine Coast Council elected as mayor the Mayor of Noosa, one council that had tried to prevent Gold Coast-style high-rise development.

Not surprisingly, the government had poisoned its relations with the local government sector. As commentator Scott Prasser (2007) observed, from 1998, when Premier Beattie first came to power,

> collaboration and co-operation with local government was the order of the day as shown by the regular renewal of a memorandum of understanding between the Queensland Government and the Local Government Association of Queensland (LGAQ) and state government support for the LGAQ’s *Size, Shape and Sustainability* (SSS) review into the viability of local government and voluntary amalgamation. (Prasser 2007)

The government’s decision to end the discussion, and impose an external review, was, not surprisingly, viewed as a betrayal of trust. As Councillor Paul Bell put it:

> Why kill the *Size, Shape, and Sustainability*? Why not confide in local government if the state was unhappy with progress...Why the deceitful charade over the first three months of the year (i.e. 2007). The LGAQ was deceived, so were mayors and council CEOs, even the Independent Review Facilitators (of the SSS process) right up to the very last day. (Quoted in Prasser 2007)

What went wrong here? As with the school closures in the Australian Capital Territory, what we appear to be seeing is a consultation process that has to do double duty as a negotiation process. There seems little doubt that a consensual result of the SSS review would not have produced the swinging cuts that the final review effected. Again, had the government put its real plan on the table, and presumably been forced to discuss its underlying political agenda, the final result would have been some kind of compromise.

**How could this process have been better managed?**

Inevitably, the answers to intergovernmental questions are more political than administrative. If governments are punished at the polls for riding roughshod over community opinion, they will quickly learn to adopt a more pragmatic approach. For reforming governments, the stakes are particularly high. In
Victoria, the Kennett Government initially tried to encourage voluntary amalgamations among councils, but later abandoned this approach and determined the boundaries without consultation.

Over time, however, the government’s very power to impose its model of local government produced a climate of antagonism so pronounced that voters punished the government by voting in a more gently reformist Labor regime under Steve Bracks.

For public servants, the lessons could be that where negotiation is required, a negotiation (rather than a consultation) stance should be adopted and the emphasis placed on the clarification and resolution of differences, rather than on the public airing of issues. The term ‘review’, which implies consultation rather than negotiation, can obscure rather than illuminate this distinction.

**Rural and Remote Area Health Services in Western Australia**

Consultation occurs frequently in relation to health service provision at the local level. The evaluative literature, however, in the words of Durey and Lockhart (2004:97), ‘abounds with examples of the disparity between institutional rhetoric and the reality of practice when it comes to health programs that aim to put the community first’.

An illustrative case study shows the problems that can arise when there is a disjunction between the managerial/professional agendas and those of local communities. The context is that of the introduction of a Multipurpose Health Service (MPS) in rural Western Australia. The parameters will be familiar to many readers. During the 1990s, the Commonwealth and state governments were concerned that rural health services were being delivered in a manner that was not only inefficient (because of the duplication of many services), but was failing to keep pace with the changing needs of communities. Budgetary stringency, as well as a genuine need for change, had created a window of opportunity for far-reaching reform.

An MPS, the professionals were convinced, filled the bill. They were keen to implement the program across the state. Community consultation was necessary, according to the Health Department of Western Australia, to ensure that all participants were fully informed and endorsed each step of the process towards the goal. The consultations, however, did not go to plan. Two WA towns, Diamond Head and Wongabeena (both names are pseudonyms), were chosen for an evaluation of the issues involved.

For the professionals, the objectives of the MPS were clear. They were to centralise control of the administration of health services in the two towns and to provide a common pool of funding that would then be used to provide services in line with community needs.
As interpreted by the community, these objectives meant just one thing: reductions in existing services. It was not surprising, then, that as the consultation developed, the atmosphere became more and more heated. Residents of Wongabeena feared that their hospital would be lost or downgraded and that services would shift to the more rapidly growing, tourist-based town of Diamond Head. For their part, Diamond Head residents were concerned that directives from health department bureaucrats would overwhelm their nursing service.

This was not at all the consultative agenda that those in charge had mapped out. Health department public servants and professionals in the field had envisaged an orderly process of information gathering to determine community needs. To this end, a consultative committee had been formed, comprising broad-based input from the community at large, and allowing for as diverse a range of participants as possible.

An initial attempt to survey residents produced a modest response: 17 per cent of the surveys sent out were returned. Efforts to obtain written input failed dismally. Town meetings were subsequently set up and these were well attended. By this time, alarm bells were ringing, not just in the community, but among stakeholders (hospital committee members, GPs and nurses).

While the professionals believed the community had been consulted, the community and stakeholders felt that they had not been consulted at all, because the key issues (for them) had not been aired. As one GP put it, ‘It was the traditional government approach. We know what is good for you. We had to push ourselves forward to have our say’ (Durey and Lockhart 2004:103).

**How could the process have been better managed?**

Clearly, the professionals should have found better ways of explaining their intentions to the community. They might reply that no such better way existed. As we noted earlier, the more sensitive the issue, the more difficult it is for governments to consult, without the issue spinning out of control. On the other hand, the more controversial the issue, the more important it is that affected communities should be consulted. There often seems to be an inverse correlation between the need for consultation and the likelihood that it will occur.

In these kinds of situations, governments might feel they are damned if they do and damned if they don’t. The goal, however, need not necessarily be to secure ‘buy-in’ to decisions that are going to prove unpopular. Citizens appreciate they might not always get what they want, but they are less likely to feel aggrieved if they believe that they have, at least, been heard.

**‘We arranged a consultation and no-one came’**

Many participatory exercises fail to get off the ground because they do not provide adequate incentives for citizens to become involved. Irvine and
Stansbury’s analysis of Papillion Creek near urban Omaha, Nebraska is a case in point. They ran a consultation and no-one came, because citizens were not sufficiently dissatisfied with the status quo to turn up (Irvine and Stansbury 2004).

Similarly, consulting on ‘motherhood’ statements, particularly when they are the same ‘motherhood statements’ presented over and over again, is unlikely to generate much community interest. One of the abiding dilemmas of consultation is that communities are least likely to miss consultation when the system is working well. It is when material change is on the agenda that people most want to know. Then, however, governments are least inclined to tell.

Some personal experience goes to this point. I remember agreeing, as the vice-president of a community group, to chair a consultative meeting about a new housing development. Everyone was there: the public servants from the development authority, the engineers, architects and landscape designers from the firm that would build the development—everyone, in fact, except the public. There was one chap who showed up to everything, because he had a passion for talking about the problems of solar orientation, and there were a couple of other people who seemed to have wandered in. There were lengthy presentations from the experts but, apart from the solar orientation chap, no questions.

In the course of the evening, I learned that the development in question would, in due course, be flanked by two high-rise office blocks. When I attempted to ask about these, however, I was told that they had nothing to do with the estate development and would, in any case, be the subject of separate development applications. Someone asked about the large concrete stormwater drains that ran past the site—there had been some talk about ‘softening’ these—but there was no information forthcoming here either. Another inquiry, involving another part of the bureaucracy, was supposed to be dealing with this. All fair enough, but why hold the consultation in the first place? The answer was that as a preliminary assessment for a new estate development, the proponent was required to tick the box on public consultation. There was, however, nothing particularly controversial about the new estate to talk about.

On another occasion, as a new mother, I attended a session on maternal services in the Australian Capital Territory. This was, literally, a ‘motherhood’ consultation. There had been announcements about the sessions in baby health clinics, but again, hardly anyone turned up. There were plenty of issues to interest new mothers: the lack of a birthing centre in the local hospital was a continuing concern. The department, however, already knew about this problem, because the community had told it about it. Setting up a very general consultation about ‘services’, and pursuing it through an open meeting, was doomed to fail.
How could the process have been better managed?

Attracting people to meetings means consulting on issues that are of importance to them and recognising that consultation has costs as well as benefits. Some of these costs can be difficult to measure, particularly when they fall on citizens and community organisations. For community groups, the opportunity costs of involvement in traditional advisory or consultative bodies can be far greater than the travel allowances and sitting fees that usually accompany them.

Benefits can be difficult to measure, too. Crase et al.’s work on consultation on the Murray-Darling Basin suggests the importance of understanding the structure of the problem that the consultation is meant to affect. Cost–benefit analysis, sensitively carried out, can often expose poor priority setting *ex ante* (Crase et al. 2005). By seeing costs and benefits from the community’s and government’s perspectives, this kind of analysis (even if quantitative data are limited) forces those organising consultation to see the issues as a whole.

We could not get political ‘buy-in’

The Netherlands has experimented with a number of interactive processes for civic redesign, which attempt to involve citizens in decision making. One of the problems of these processes is the tendency for the consultation and the politics to remain separate—a version of the ‘multiple streams’ described in Chapter 4. Together with two colleagues, the Dutch academic Juriaan Edelenbos undertook a comparative study of interactive processes for urban redesign in five Dutch municipalities: De Bilt, Helvoetsluis, Leerdam, Zeewolde and Enschede (Mayer et al. 2005). Process-based evaluative criteria of accountability, learning and cooperation were chosen for the study.

One key type of cooperation identified in the empirical work was that between elected officials, civil servants and citizens’ groups. As summarised in an overview published in 2005, in only one of the municipalities (Leerdam) was there sufficient cooperation to ensure continuing political ownership of the preferences voiced through the consultation process. In the others (of which Enschede was the example), the necessary cooperation could not be achieved.

Enschede is a city of 150 000 people, with a historic town centre, the Stadcerf. The mayor of the city proposed a project to rejuvenate the city, with improved pedestrian access and major renovations of buildings and streetscapes. The process involved three key groups: a reference group consisting of civil servants, a group of businesspeople and a consultative group consisting of representatives from citizens’ interest groups. Unfortunately, the businesspeople (who had the financial power) tended to bypass the consultative process and talked directly to the council officials. For their part, the council officials had little contact with the citizens’ groups.
How could the process have been better managed?

For the Dutch researchers, this experience suggested the importance of avoiding ‘parallel trajectories’—that is, an interactive process with few connections to the ‘real’ process. Remedies included:

• the involvement of political office-holders from the earliest stages
• provision for feedback between interactive and conventional processes.

The Dutch researchers concluded that political executives needed to be ‘brought along’ with the interactive process to minimise the possibility that they would reject outcomes that could be awkward or bothersome (Edelenbos 2005).

Summing up

Many engagement problems derive from a failure (by public managers and other professionals) to consider the process from the point of view of those being consulted. Mistakes can be avoided by constructing what is familiar (to the public manager) as unfamiliar (that is, requiring explanation). Even seemingly intractable problems, such as bureaucratic silos, can be overcome when there is a will to do so. Elaborate forms of inter-agency coordination might not be necessary. With support from agency leaders, it is possible for managers on the ground to overcome many of the bureaucratic sins of consultation by discovering and using flexible ways of working within the one agency.

Responding to the political dimensions of consultation requires an acute appreciation of context. In Australian government, achieving political buy-in is often difficult because public servants are in the position of reacting to decisions already made (or being made) at the political level. In these situations, in which the politics of conflict are involved, distinguishing negotiation from consultation becomes important. Trying to do deals through consultative processes is almost certainly to overload them.

Endnotes

2 The *Swedish Group Proceedings Act*, which came into force in January 2003, makes it possible for the Environmental Protection Agency to use the Environment Court to seek environmental injunctions or damages on behalf of a group of citizens (see <www.eu2006.bmsg.gv.at/cms/eu2006/attachments/4/2/7/CH0604/CMS1133429025309/renfors.pdf>.
3 This case study comes from Durey and Lockhart (2004).