Conclusion

As we look towards the future of engagement, can we say that more participation is likely to work better than less? The answer depends, in large part, on whether participants in general, and governments in particular, are able to overcome a number of fundamental constraints. On the one hand, governments need the kinds of information that engagement provides. On the other, obtaining this information is neither cost free nor without risk.

There are a number of tensions, or dilemmas, at the heart of engagement. There is a tension between the Realpolitik of power and the need to keep faith with communities. There is a tension between the need to maintain control and the need for flexibility. There is a tension between the precision of official language and custom and the need to talk to communities in ways that they understand.

The more important it is for governments to engage—in the sense that the issues involved are likely to be of concern to citizens—the less likely it is that they will do so. Worried about the risks involved, governments either consult blandly or consult in bad faith. They believe that conflict is to be avoided at all costs. At the same time, if governments are doing their job properly, they will necessarily make decisions that offend sections of the community. If consultation is to be judged according to the extent to which it creates consensus, it is clearly doomed.

How, then, should these widely varying processes and practices be judged? And how should public managers evaluate the costs and benefits involved? If public managers are to apply a public interest test, they should be satisfied with their achievements only when the forms of engagement that they sponsor really make a difference, which raises a further question: ‘difference to whom?’ In the case of participatory governance, the answer is clearly ‘difference to the participants’ (remembering that in this sense, government is also a participant). Participatory governance, to be judged successful, must be reaching places and cases that more traditional administrative forms cannot.

For consultation, it might be that we should be asking not ‘what difference did it make?’ but ‘was the process successful?’ In other words, did those taking part in the process view it favourably? I have suggested that there are steps agencies can take to lessen the risk that the process will leave participants feeling let down. Agencies’ needs and citizens’ expectations can be quite different. If, however, there is clear thinking on the part of agencies about their motivation, it is less likely that they will encourage false expectations among citizens.

Beyond the practical, there are normative questions about governance that need to be considered. To what extent should those who are hard to reach be consulted? Those possessing structural power do not, as a rule, need to be invited
in. Those who do not possess this power do need to be invited in; the question is, invited in to what and to what effect? Ultimately, policy processes that impinge on the powerful must be participatory, in the sense that what happens in reality, as distinct from what is in the legislation, will reflect their capacity, if they wish to do so, to evade or to bend the rules. Those with less ability to exercise influence might simply slip through the cracks, their voices unheard.

For public managers wishing to expand the boundaries of engagement, there is some room to exercise values leadership in this direction, but norms must always be served by practicalities. The evidence suggests that those who are hard to reach might be better served by smaller-scale, more participatory forms of governance than by more diffuse, deliberative exercises.

Given the practical importance of context, and the imperatives of politics, it is unclear how much discretion there is for public servants to choose between what are, in effect, differing consultative designs. Capacity, and the self-concept of the Public Service, will be important in creating the confidence to make these judgments in ways that enhance the scope for consultation. A public service that is able to play multiple roles will have more room to experiment and to innovate than one that is trapped by convention. The political executive, and the middle and senior levels of the Public Service, should be prepared to allow this freedom.

A theoretical point is important here. It is unfortunate that information giving is always assigned to the lowest level of the consultation ladder. If governments are always on ‘transmit’ and never on ‘receive’, such an assignment is understandable. Two-way information-flow, however, in whatever context it takes place, is the essence, the fundamental raison d’être, of all forms of engagement.

If we regard policy making as a form of iterative communication, information exchange—using that term to mean communication of ideas, interests and needs—becomes its most characteristic activity. It follows from this that if there is one organisational change that agencies need to make in order to foster engagement, it is to think more creatively about how they communicate with the outside world.