PAPER
19

Consultation checklist

Bob Dick (2001) Community consultation checklist, fifth revision. Interchange: mimeo.

A handout prepared for brief sessions on community consultation.

This document lists some important issues to take into account during the planning and implementation of a community consultation process. The three levels of headings provide a convenient checklist. You can use it to ensure that most of the important issues are addressed in some way. The accompanying text offers some brief suggestions about the approach that may be appropriate under the different conditions.

1 Contextual issues

The context of a consultation influences the outcomes, for better or worse. It also determines to some extent which consultation processes will be effective. It is not enough to pay attention to the immediate issues and the stakeholders who are affected. The aims, the scope, the intended time span, the history: all have an important influence on the consultation.

1.1   Overall aim

One of the most important of the contextual issues is the overall aim of the consultation. It limits your choice of the structures and processes which are appropriate. If you are not clear about the aim, you will find it hard to decide if you are succeeding. (You may also have to be willing to add to, or even change, you aims as the consultation proceeds.)

Some possible aims, arranged in order of increasing ambition, are as follows.

1.1.1   To give information: that is, to inform the community. When the main purpose is to give information, the use of mass media is possibly indicated. However, it is important not to raise expectations that the involvement will be greater than this. Unmet expectations breed dissatisfaction and conflict.

1.1.2   To get information: that is, to gather information to be used in decision-making by government etc. Sometimes the purpose is to gather information, and no more than that. If so, the use of a low key method of accessing a well-chosen sample may be adequate. In general, a maximum diversity sample may work best. Take pains to tap a sufficient variety of opinion—it offers you better information for a given expenditure of money and effort than a random sample does.

1.1.3   To exchange information: that is, a combination of the preceding categories. On other occasions you may wish to bring about an exchange of information. A combination of the methods so far described may then be a good choice. This offers little chance for stakeholders to understand each other's position, however. You may find it useful to consider the next option (for reaching agreement between different stakeholder groups) as a possibility.

1.1.4   To reach agreement or partial agreement on a design for some proposed initiative. A more ambitious aim is for different stakeholders to reach agreement or partial agreement. This can only happen when each becomes

informed about the position of the others. Agreement is likely to require at least some of the stakeholders to change their views. This is most likely to occur in face-to-face meetings within a supportive and consensual climate. People have a better chance of understanding an opposing point of view when they are able to listen to it, face-to-face. It also requires a climate and process which reduce the need for people to defend their own views. (And that is more easily said than done.)

1.2   Scope

The scope, too, has an important influence. In general, *single issue* consultation is more likely to generate strong feelings and antagonistic relationships. More careful design is then indicated.

1.2.1   Single-issue: where only one aspect of community living is being addressed.

A single-issue consultation is one which is focussed on one aspect of community life, for example changes to road traffic or the like. A single issue offers fewer opportunities to find goals which most stakeholders can subscribe to. Single-issue consultation is thus more difficult. It requires more care in planning and implementation.

1.2.2   General: non-defined issues or more general aims (e.g. community development).

This more resembles community development than the usual forms of community consultation. Because citizens have a broad range of potential goals to choose from, it is easier to avoid antagonism and adversarial relationships. People will often put aside their differences if you use a planning technique which allows them to identify their common visions.

Consensus-seeking techniques like search often work well. Large meetings (which are usually to be avoided in single-issue consultation) may work if they are well structured and some care is taken in attracting a representative group of

participants. It is still important to take care in informing participants about the purpose and process of the exercise.

1.3   Time span

Time limits brings their own problems. It is hard to maintain wide involvement over lengthy time spans. But brief consultation may raise more issues than it can address. Most planning authorities allow far too little time for effective consultation.

1.3.1   A brief consultation for a once-only event. In some respects, brief consultations are more easily managed than extended consultations. The silent majority can be involved, and are likely to maintain their interest, for short periods of time. However, any form of consultation may raise expectations which cannot be met in short time periods. Low key consultation methods may therefore be indicated.

1.3.2   A more extended consultation for a substantial but once-only event. For more extended consultation processes it becomes necessary to identify a small number of people who will be most heavily involved. Selecting people who can put aside their own biases enough to act for the community as a whole is difficult, but important. To add to your problems, such people may become distanced from those the community. It is important to maintain communication between those who are more active and those who are less active.

1.3.3   An ongoing consultative process. See the preceding paragraph. In addition it is hard to maintain the momentum of such an exercise beyond about two years. Selection of those who are most directly involved is even more important. So is the maintenance of links with the wider community. You can't expect to get the silent majority along for more than one or two meetings unless you use low key methods like neighbourhood meetings, and organise your activities around specific and attention-getting issues.

The use of a steering committee for overall communica-
tion and coordination, and small working parties for
specific initiatives, has worked well on occasion. Even
then it will be very hard to maintain ongoing consulta-
tion. I suggest outside help, and skill-development
workshops for those most directly involved.

steering
committee

working
party

working
party

working
party
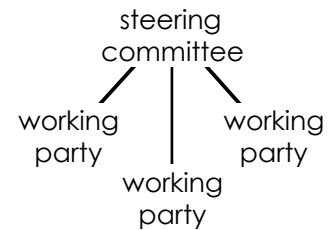
1.4   History

One of the most important influences on community attitudes is previous experi-
ence. On occasion, people are reluctant to become involved in a second consulta-
tion process ("We've already done that."). In any event, their knowledge of
consultative processes and the results is based on their prior experience. If they
have taken part in one form of process, they may be reluctant to try a different
one. This is often true even when the previous process was neither successful
nor satisfying. The careful planner therefore checks out the previous consulta-
tion history before going too far with a consultation process.

1.4.1   Previous consultation and its style. People expect adversarial
processes at the best of times. If this expectation has been confirmed by the con-
sultation style previously adopted, consensual styles will require more care and
effort in planning and consultation. You will have to spend more time with peo-
ple. You will have to give more attention to building open and trusting relation-
ships. If previous consultation has generated mistrust rather than trust, this is
even more important.

1.4.2   People accessed and with what effect. The greater the number
of people previously involved, the harder it is to involve any but the vocal (and
often antagonistic) minorities. More intensive methods are then needed if you
want to tap the opinions of the whole community. Building trust is more impor-

tant. Using methods which take you out into the neighbourhood and the homes will almost certainly be needed to obtain wide involvement.

1.4.3   Polarisation, assumptions, trust within relationships, etc. Many consultative processes actually *polarise* opinions. It is then difficult to achieve good relationships with the various interest groups. Approaching any one of them may damn you in the eyes of the others. The assumptions people form about your intentions, and the trust they are willing to place in you, will also depend on their prior experience.

2   Style

Especially when you hope for agreement between different stakeholder groups, the choice of consultation style has far-reaching effects. The relevant questions are...

■   Who are the stakeholders?

■   How many of them will you involve?

■   How great will their involvement be?

■   What processes will you use to generate agreement.

■   How consensual or adversarial will those processes be?

In what follows, I mostly assume an approach which aims for substantial involvement of as large a proportion of stakeholders as feasible. I also assume a process which is consensual, and which uses face-to-face contact to generate trust, understanding and agreement.

You might summarise the intentions of this preferred style as...

■   the provision of maximum access

■   of mixed face to face groups

■   to real decision-making power

■   using non-adversarial consensual processes.

However, these are all choices; depending on the circumstances you may choose different approaches.

2.1   Target population

The "stakeholders", those with some stake in the decisions to be made, form the population to be consulted. Several categories are described below. For some purposes you may wish to distinguish between two broad categories. Direct stakeholders are immediately and directly affected. Indirect stakeholders have an interest which is less direct, and less immediate.

2.1.1   Local stakeholders: people who reside in the community within which the design is to be implemented. These are the "direct stakeholders", you might say. They are usually most affected by the decisions made, and will expect to be involved. They are also usually the people on whose behalf the activists speak, or claim to speak. For many purposes it is useful to redefine the local stakeholders for each decision within a consultative process. In that way, those most directly affected can be most closely involved.

2.1.2   Non-local stakeholders: people who do not reside locally but who have some direct stake in the issue. Non-local stakeholders are most likely to be overlooked unless you make some effort to involve them. Local stakeholders will try to solve the problem by putting it onto someone else. (This is the "not-in-my-back-yard" or nimby phenomenon.) It is often helpful to involve non-local stakeholders in face-to-face interaction with local stakeholders. In fact, this may be the only way of ensuring that non-local interests are to some extent taken into account.

2.1.3   Government, etc.: those who have the ultimate responsibility for choosing and funding the design, and their agents (typically public service officers). Government officers will usually ensure their own involvement. Usually they will want to minimise the influence of other stakeholders, promising only to take their views into account. It is hard to do effective consultation, however, unless you agree certain conditions with the relevant government officers (or similar). Firstly, try to ensure that your clients in the consultation are *all* the stakeholders, not just those who pay you. Second, encourage the government officers to define the "givens" or limits, and to try to accept all suggestions which are consistent with those limits. Don't expect this to be easy to do.

2.1.4   Experts: people who have technical or professional experience in disciplines relevant to the project. Some of these will be included as part of the previous category. Examples include the planners or traffic engineers or the like who are responsible for the design. Other bodies (the RACQ, for instance) have valuable opinions to offer. On occasion they may claim a greater right to speak for an electorate than is appropriate. In addition, therefore, you may choose to access their "electorate" directly.

2.1.5   Other vested interests. Most important here are the community activists. They are valuable contributors if you involve them—they are usually well informed, have good organising skills, and often excellent knowledge of the community networks. Time put into establishing relationships with them is always valuable and sometimes essential.

But there are traps. Some of them are likely to be adversarial and untrusting. A few seem to believe that any behaviour is fair if it supports their cause. Many of them will assume you are the enemy, and treat you accordingly. As with expert bodies, they tend to overestimate the extent to which they speak for the community. If they decide to make like difficult for you, they are very skilled at this.

2.2   Breadth of involvement

How many stakeholders are you going to involve? The choice is between trying to reach most, or limiting the consultation to a smaller number who are some sample of the wider population.

2.2.1   Direct access: stakeholders are involved directly, in some way, in the consultative process. This is my preferred option. By involving as many stakeholders as possible in face-to-face discussion you increase the likelihood that all views will be taken into account.

This is most true when the silent majority is involved: they often represent a mid ground. Without them it may be hard to avoid extreme polarisation.

The effect to aim for is to allow each person to speak for herself, while being encouraged to take into account the wishes of all stakeholders.

2.2.2   Representation: selected representa-tives of the stakeholder population make decisions, or provide information, on behalf of their "electorate". Although this is the more common approach, it can make agreement hard to achieve. People who "represent" an electorate often feel less free to change their mind in the light of new evidence or information. Representative approaches can also lead to representatives who slowly lose touch with their electorate. You may have to give special attention to maintaining good communication between representatives and electorate.

The use of representative approaches will often be unavoidable because of constraints of time and other resources. If so, you can improve their effectiveness through the use of certain strategies ...

- Try to involve people who collectively are an adequate sample of the whole population — the community in microcosm.
- Check that all interests are included, especially when the sample is small.

■ Avoid selecting people who have poor listening skills and no interest in consensus.

■ Encourage the representatives to behave as full participants, not as spokespeople for a point of view.

■ If necessary, use market research methods to keep them informed of wider community opinion.

■ Give more than usual attention to establishing good relationships and good problem-solving processes.

■ Use the mass media to keep the community well informed.

2.3   Depth of involvement

Depth of involvement can vary widely whether you are using participative or representative approaches. The lower-key approaches are more economical and less time consuming when they are effective, but may be regarded by the community (sometimes with justification) as merely token consultation. They may make it more difficult to engage a full range of stakeholders.

2.3.1   Information: kept informed about developments so that they can react if they wish. This is almost minimal consultation. If there is little reaction from the community it can be economical and easy. When there is a reaction, however, it may be only from those with more extreme views. On occasions you may not know how much consultation is warranted. Especially if time is short, you might then use this approach until a reaction occurs. At that point you can move into a more intensive consultation with a wider sample of stakeholders.

2.3.2   Consultation: an exchange of information takes place between government (etc) and stakeholders. Consultation has two meanings. The narrow one describes an exchange of information without commitment to anything beyond that. The broader meaning encompasses a range of strategies from being informed to being involved in real decision-making. Government

officials will often favour an approach which leaves the decision making in their own hands.

2.3.3   Involvement in decision-making, probably within limits. This depth is rare in community consultation, but has a lot to commend it. Often it cannot be done formally — in Queensland it is Cabinet policy that the government retains all decision-making power. However, government officers can inform the stakeholders honestly about the issues and then honour as many community requests as they reasonably can. A more effective depth of consultation can then be achieved.

False expectations are one of the great obstacles to effective consultation. If false expectations are not to be raised, you will need very careful definition and very clear communication about any limits.

2.4   Form of processes used

As mentioned previously, people enter consultation expecting that adversarial processes will be used. After all, this is what usually happens in most other settings. Majority vote is an example, as in our political system. Non-adversarial methods are also available, however. If your aim is to meet the needs of as many stakeholders as possible, they are to be preferred.

2.4.1   Adversarial: people are encouraged or enabled to argue for their own interests. Adversarial processes tend to create antagonism and polarisation. More importantly, they make it hard to obtain valid information: people say what is most advantageous to their cause rather than telling the truth. On the other hand such processes can be more economical. On some occasions they may be your only choice if time and funds are very limited (though I would not make this decision lightly). (Note: I have some strong biases here—don't treat my opinion as fact.)

If you do use adversarial methods, try to agree on the process with the stake-holders before addressing the issues. They may then be more likely to accept the decision even when they don't agree with it.

2.4.2   Non-adversarial: people are encouraged to try to act for the benefit of the community as a whole. There are two general forms of non-adversarial processes ...

■ Consensual processes focus on those issues on which people are agreed. If the consultation is about multiple issues and the most important issues do not involve major disagreements, these methods will work effectively. There are processes which yield agreement quite readily provided these conditions are met.

■ Dialectical processes generate agreement out of disagreement. They are characterised by the debate which is found in adversarial methods, but with people trying to use the debate to reach agreement on what is best for all. Such processes are not for the inexperienced. They require smaller numbers, more care in their design, and more skilled facilitation than either adversarial or consensual methods.

3   Practice

The previous parts of the checklist are about choosing a consultation process. The final step is about seeing it in place. In a sense, therefore, this section overviews the overall process. The process as a whole, and many parts of it, follow a three-phase sequence:

■ first establish relationships;

■ then agree on the structures and processes;

■ then do the actual implementation and consultation. The effectiveness of the later stages depends upon the care with which the early stages are handled.

3.1   Contracting

3.1.1   Negotiating constructive and mutually-satisfying roles with each of the stakeholder groups. The first task is to establish an adequate relationship with the various stakeholder groups, beginning with those who pay for the consultation. For greatest effectiveness, the result to aim for is twofold. First, only a close and open personal relationship allows you to say what needs to be said without damaging that relationship and the project. Second, without clear agreement on your role and theirs, misunderstanding is very likely to arise. The role I suggest you create and maintain is one where your responsibilities are to *all* of the stakeholders, and you manage the *process*. The issues or problems are then the responsibility of the stakeholders.

3.2   Structure

This is the consultative structure through which the members of the target population are involved.

3.2.1   Identify the stakeholders. Identify the various stakeholder groups. This may be done by ...

■   asking knowledgeable informants,

■   interviewing known stakeholders, and

■   following contacts from person to person on the social networks. At the same time you can begin to find out about the previous history, and define the most salient issues.

3.2.2   Devise the structures through which those stakeholders can be involved or represented. Identify the smallest number of stakeholder groups that can be used without missing important views. Then devise mechanisms (committees, working groups, and the like) to access their views and communicate

with them. (Some of the likely stakeholder groups were mentioned earlier). In most instances, three different structures may be desirable:

- one is to handle decision-making within the design or planning body, usually the responsible public service department;

- a second is to involve the direct stakeholders, usually local; and

- the third is to represent other stakeholder groups.

3.3   Process

This consists of the consultative processes used within the consultative structure to engage the stakeholders. In general, I recommend processes which generate high rather than low involvement. For real attitude change and better agreement, processes which engage different stakeholders in face-to-face interaction are my preference.

3.3.1   Choose the style of consultation process to be used. This was addressed earlier, under the major heading "Style". I suggest that you aim to maximise involvement and access to decisions within the constraints on time, money, and other resources.

3.4   Implementation

These are the steps by which the structures and processes are put in place.

3.3.1   Devise an implementation plan. This will typically be done in a number of stages, which will depend on the situation and the decisions already taken. However, a typical process for designing the implementation plan may include these steps. Decide...

- who will set up the structures;

- who will involve the stakeholders;

- how these people will be recruited and trained;

■ what needs to be done to establish an adequate relationship between the different people involved (including yourself).

   3.3.2   Implement it. Recruit and train the people who are to be involved in the implementation. Then set the implementation in train.

A final thought...

No matter how well you design and implement consultation, you may finish up with all stakeholders disappointed. Even when everyone is better off than if you hadn't set up the consultation, they may still blame you for their disappointment.

So, for your own mental health, here are two guidelines...

■ Engineers, activists, planners, bureaucrats, politicians: all of these are people too, are in some sense well-intentioned, and can be reached by persistence and genuineness.

■ Above all, never take anything personally.