

# Embedding Community Participation in Public Sector Culture and Practice

Gillgren C\*

Citizens and Civics Unit, Department of Premier and Cabinet, Western Australia, Australia

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Citizenship, public sector culture, capacity, consistency, adaptive practice

## Abstract

Many facets of modern life have eroded our sense of community, involvement and worth as contributing citizens, and our confidence in the ability of our governments and major institutions to deliver the type of society we want.

While there is an 'overload' of information today, genuine, participatory and effective communication within and between our diverse communities and governments is often very poor, which can lead to misinformation, marginalisation, mistrust and disengagement.

Increasingly, however, citizens from all walks of life are seeking a more active role in decision-making processes that affect their lives.

At the same time governments are recognising that effective government requires teamwork, partnerships and collaboration, not only across its own departments and agencies but also across the broader community it services. Governments are acknowledging that listening to, and consulting with the public about important issues leads to better service delivery and more legitimate outcomes.

In 2001 the Citizens and Civics Unit (CCU) was established within the Department of the Premier and Cabinet to help address these issues.

The CCU has developed a *State Citizenship Strategy: A Voice for All: Strengthening Democracy*. This strategy embodies a whole-of-government approach and provides a basis for all Western Australians to have a voice and become more active citizens. It has four key pillars, which are: knowledge and understanding; inclusion; participation; and democratic governance.

There is no doubt that involving the public in policy and decision-making requires a paradigm shift in government's relationship with the public but this is the fundamental intent of the Citizenship Strategy. The strategy recognises the responsibilities that government has towards citizens and one of these responsibilities is to ensure that appropriate mechanisms exist for the wider community to participate in decision-making processes.

To find out the level to which these mechanisms existed, the CCU spent several months researching state government public participation and consultation practices. This audit consulted with senior managers, policy officers and community consultation managers and identified a number of factors that were limiting the ability of agencies to improve their current practices and make effective use of community input when reviewing and developing policies and services.

As an aside, it wasn't *all* bad news because the audit *did* identify a number of agencies that are actively encouraging community involvement in decision-making, and in partnering with government to ensure successful outcomes.

It was apparent, however, that more work needed to be done to bring agencies 'up to speed' in the area of community engagement. Broadly speaking, the issues identified fell into three areas: capacity; consistency; and culture.

To begin we found that there was a wide discrepancy in the distribution of skills and capacities needed to undertake effective community engagement. While there was a high level of support for broader community engagement (evidenced by the high turnout by key departmental and agency personnel at the Innovations in Community Engagement Conference held in Perth in late May), there remain significant gaps in the understanding of officers. One of the consequences of this is that often consultation is pushed to the end of the policy development cycle and left to junior officers. It is difficult, then, for consultations to be focussed on strategic outcomes and they rarely inform higher decision-making levels.

A related finding from the audit is the prevalence of a 'silo' approach to consultations. We identified a lack of coordinating frameworks for community input, preventing a cross-utilisation of information, experience and learning — and the sharing of knowledge between agencies. If we are concerned with delivering integrated government services then this needs to be addressed.

Developments in the area of e-government are making substantial progress towards alleviating some of these issues through the increased use of ICT. The CCU has developed the ConsultWA website, where government departments and agencies list their consultations. This contributes significantly to reducing replication while providing a channel for information sharing.

Our audit also highlighted how agencies can 'silo' the consultation process itself. This has two components. Firstly, community members often muse as to why the questions they are asked are so narrowly focussed. They may be asked their preference for the placement of a single road but are not asked about issues of safety and pollution for the whole area. Secondly, when given the opportunity to share their values and visions the ideas of the community are often interpreted very narrowly. As an example, in a recent road building project the community expressed concerns about safety beside the

road. This was interpreted as meaning that the community wanted the road walled off when in actual fact they were more interested in the provision of adequate lighting in the area.

Approaching community consultation with such a 'silo' mentality narrows interpretations. This often limits the capacity of the agency to uncover a whole range of relevant information they might otherwise gain.

While the audit showed that some agencies have now developed or accessed training programs, few have developed supporting community engagement policies or manuals that ensure consistency and coherence. Some of the agencies that have made progress in this area have done so in isolation, with little regard for community expectation.

Finally, concerning the question of cultural change, there is a high level of awareness and appreciation for sound community engagement practices but few agencies have developed a systematic approach to engagement within their policy cycle, and there is little correlation between best practice engagement and an agency's mandate to consult.

Since the review we have been working towards addressing some of the issues raised. We are using an adapted management maturity model of change. This model focuses upon an adaptive practice that will see the outcomes of engagement better managed, and organised, and with greater integration across agencies, jurisdictions and sectors. This change will be realised through strategies that address people and team development, processes and support services, organisational learning as well as through new corporate controls.

Ensuring consistency across government will require increased understanding of community consultation best practice and how it can best inform the policy process. This will be achieved through:

- new training opportunities for skills and professional development
- further developing, using and linking expertise that already exists within government
- identifying and drawing attention to officers from all levels of government, from CEOs to regional officers, who can share their knowledge and influence others to encourage and promote better practice.

Steps to ensure that agencies have the support and the capacity to put community involvement into practice include:

- updating relevant public sector position descriptions to include community consultation competencies
- working with allied professional organisations to build and share professional knowledge and increase service capacity

- developing new guides in the Consulting Citizens Series that will address current and emerging issues in community engagement and capacity building
- promoting training and learning across all sectors — public, private and civil society.

To promote consistency across government, we will work with key agencies:

- to facilitate the development of a whole-of-government *process auditing* and *consultation evaluation framework*. A system of self-evaluation for government is both timely and important, given that government is beginning to apply qualitative community engagement standards on the private sector through such bodies as the EPA.
- to reward and profile best practice through supporting the inclusion of ‘community engagement’ in public sector awards programs.

Corporate controls are intended to introduce consistency and benchmarks between agencies that will measure success and inform our practice.

- To keep track of how far agencies are progressing with their efforts to build their capacity for community engagement, these goals will be included in CEO performance agreements. The focus will be on qualitative and not quantitative measures — because how many consultations have been undertaken tell us nothing about the effectiveness of the consultation or how it has strengthened the policy process.
- We are also exploring whole-of-government community reporting frameworks so that the sum of our engagement activities can be seen and shared with the community and with other agencies.
- This will build on and complement current consultation and community involvement requirements within government processes such as cabinet submissions, environmental works approval and environmental licensing.

This approach is about changing norms — questioning current ideas, values and beliefs around community engagement — and establishing new ‘traditions’ which, over time, will increase community confidence — confidence that we are truly listening, as well as talking, and that within the political and social parameters set by government and society, we as public servants are acting for the long-term benefit of the community.

Through this targeted series of initiatives, and with the Citizenship Strategy as a guide, we can develop a culture of best practice community engagement and consultation across the whole of government.

It is often not enough to simply suggest to agencies that community engagement will bring benefits to their organisation — we have to show proof. As proof that community engagement works, two examples from the Western Australian experience will be presented.

Undoubtedly, one area that is sure to raise the ire of the community is planning for road building (particularly planning that does not take account of community concerns and values). These two examples were both highly contentious. The first involved the building of a road along the coast to the north of Perth in Ocean Reef. This project had a long history going back some 13 years. We had two highly polarised community groups — one in favour of the road and the other strongly opposed — and it seemed unlikely that they would ever agree. We had a long history of council decisions and rescission of decision on the issue of the road, compounded by the dismissal of the entire council and instatement of a board of commissioners part-way through the project. To progress this project a working group was established, which included members from the two opposing community groups. The first task of the community group was to design the consultation process — the format, and questions and most importantly they defined how the outputs from the consultation would be evaluated.

Without going into the detail regarding the consultation processes what was achieved was an outcome that meets the needs of the community. Through the working groups and a number of workshops the participants reached agreement on *what really mattered*. Things that really matter to people are, invariably, value-based beliefs which, once articulated and accepted by the group, can be translated into an agreed agenda. The pathway to agreement involved the recognition of these values, both behavioural and project based and this was achieved through the use of a charrette. The aim of this was for the community to identify and address key issues and values, and build community capacity for ongoing discussion and cooperative action to jointly design solutions.

Consensus was achieved. The various community members could agree that the process was open and fair, and that therefore the outcome was one that they had helped to shape, could all own and live with.

In the second example, the extension of the Roe Highway, we again had many community groups and local residents opposed to the roadworks. In this particular project, however, we also had a new arrangement for construction; that is, the establishment of an alliance between several construction firms and Main Roads Western Australia. This has proven to be a very successful arrangement as far as community engagement is concerned. At the outset the Roe7 Alliance agreed upon achieving social, environmental and economic outcomes (the triple bottom line) for the whole community and each of these were given equal weighting.

Recognising the significance of Peter Sandman's formula that Risk = Hazard + Outrage, the Alliance adopted a Risk Reward Regime approach, which provides a framework for evaluating non-cost key result areas: safety; community; environment; and team-building.

Let me quote from an Alliance document: "The primary aim of the Risk Reward Regime is to drive the right behaviours, that is, to promote innovative thinking towards creating breakthroughs in achieving

outstanding results. If one or more of the performance spectrum measures fails this aim then the Alliance Leadership Team will make adjustments to ensure that it does”.

Utilising this framework enabled the Alliance to achieve effective and successful outcomes across a wide range of community environmental, social and amenity concerns. Throughout the project they have initiated a range of engagement mechanisms through which interested parties could learn more about the project and offer their own views about what they saw as important. What needs to be emphasised from this project is that in addition to the positive social and environmental outcomes were significant cost savings. It has been stated that the cost of consulting with the community was equivalent to 1 per cent of the total budget. As a direct result of the outcomes of the consultation these same project managers have calculated the overall savings directly attributable to more active community engagement 5 per cent of the total budget.

When you can add results like this to the range of other benefits, it is difficult to determine what it is that is keeping some senior managers from embracing community engagement more thoroughly. Any arguments against wider engagement are becoming increasingly difficult to sustain.

For further information, please refer to our website <<http://www.citizenscape.wa.gov.au>>.