Better together: improving consultation with the third sector

Report and handbook

Better together: improving consultation with the third sector

Emily Fennell, Karin Gavelin and Richard Wilson.

involve Data Services GuideStar

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About the Office of the Third Sector

As part of the Cabinet Office, the Office of the Third Sector (OTS) leads work across government to support the environment for a thriving third sector (voluntary and community groups, social enterprises, charities, cooperatives and mutuals), enabling the sector to campaign for change, deliver public services, promote social enterprise and strengthen communities. The OTS was created at the centre of government in May 2006 in recognition of the increasingly important role the third sector plays in both society and the economy.

About Children England

Children England is an umbrella organisation whose members are registered charities working with children, young people and their families. They range from very large national organisations to small local based charities. Between them they invest over £500 million in direct services. They work in different ways, in and across various disciplines, and with different groups of children, but they share the aim of improving the quality of life for children. Children England undertakes a range of consultative activities for government departments and other agencies both with members and the wider voluntary child care and family support sector, as well as occasional publications, projects or action research.

About Involve

Involve are public participation specialists; bringing institutions, communities and citizens together to accelerate innovation, understanding, discussion and change. Involve makes a practical difference by delivering high quality public participation processes as well as undertaking research and policy analysis into what works in public and stakeholder involvement. It is a not for profit organisation that receives funding from the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust and the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation, among others. Involve has transformed how leading public bodies and companies engage, including Shell International, the OECD, Ministry of Justice, Communities and Local Government, the European Commission, the States of Jersey, the Sustainable Development Commission, the BBC, the NHS Centre for Involvement, the Cabinet Office and numerous Local Authorities.

Involve, 212 High Holborn, London WC1V 7BF
020 7632 0120 info@involve.org.uk
www.involve.org.uk
www.peopleandparticipation.org.uk

About GuideStar Data Services

The GuideStar Data Services database connects organisations with information on the activities, finances and structure of 169,000 registered charities in England and Wales, extending to include all UK Third Sector not-for-profit companies, social enterprises and industrial and provident societies. GDS has developed a range of products and services that serve a wide audience including: government as policymakers and funders; Third Sector umbrella, networking and funding bodies; government, academic and market researchers; professional services; financial institutions; utility companies; suppliers; corporate donors and sponsors; and the media.

www.gs-ds.co.uk

About this document

Who is this document for?

The primary audience for this publication is public servants, to help them understand the third sector and guide them towards a successful and mutually beneficial way of engaging with the third sector in policy making. Other audiences that may benefit from the document include third sector organisations, politicians and academics with an interest in the relationship between government and the third sector.

The document is divided into two parts: a research report and a practical handbook. The intention is for the two documents to complement each other, with the research report providing the contextual background to the practical guidance given in the handbook. Pdf copies of both documents can be downloaded from www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/third_sector/Consultations

How this document was produced

This report presents the findings from a six-month research project conducted by Involve and GuideStar Data Services into the most effective way for government, local authorities and other public bodies to involve third sector organisations in decisions and policy making. The project was commissioned by the Office of the Third Sector (OTS) and Children England, formerly the National Council for Voluntary Child Care Organisations (NCVCCO). The research methodology can be found in Appendix 2.

Both the report and handbook seek to build on the tools and evidence already in place and endorse the consultation guidance available in the Compact Code of Good Practice on Consultation and Policy Appraisal[1] and the HM Government Code of Practice on Consultation.[2]

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[1] The Compact (2008) Code of Good Practice on Consultation and Policy Appraisal. London: Compact. Available at www.thecompact.org.uk/shared_asp_files/GFSR.asp?NodeID=100320
[2] Department for Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform (2008) Code of Practice on Consultation. London: HM Government.

Foreword by Minister for the Third Sector Kevin Brennan MP

One of the most fundamental tasks that the third sector undertakes is to ensure that the voices of individuals, organisations and communities – often from the most marginalised sections of society - are heard. In this way, they are vital to making our society fairer. Third sector organisations help to influence the debate about local needs and can provide unique perspectives and insights as to how those needs are addressed. I believe this should be encouraged; we should nurture an environment in which the third sector can work in partnership with government and also campaign for change, whilst retaining its independent voice.

It was in the spirit of this partnership working that this project was co-funded by the Office of the Third Sector alongside Children England, formerly the National Council for Voluntary Child Care Organisations (NCVCCO).

The project's focus was specifically on consultation as one of the most effective means by which government hears voices from the third sector. We recognise that consulting with the sector is often different to consulting with other interested parties, and raises different questions.

In particular, this research has asked two central questions: how can we involve more third sector organisations in consultation, and how can we diversify the types of organisations taking part? In doing so it looked at what makes successful consultations effective.

Consultation is only one way of fostering the engagement with the third sector that government at all levels needs. Indeed, a strong theme from this research is the importance of building continuing relationships between the public sector and the third sector, and increasing understanding between them.

I hope you agree that this research has produced a number of useful insights. Accompanying this report is a practical handbook to help people embarking on a consultation exercise, to think about how they can plan it most appropriately to get the maximum from it, and how best to involve the third sector. It is my hope that this will result in better consultation with the sector which will in turn lead to better policy-making, and a stronger, fairer society.

Kevin Brennan

Minister for the Third Sector

Part 1: Research report

Executive summary

This is a time of unprecedented change and possibilities for the third and public sectors. Never before have there been so many opportunities for the third sector to work alongside government towards shared goals. As the roles traditionally played by third sector organisations and public bodies become blurred and partnership working more common, those involved are having to adapt to a new, more interdependent working relationship.

This report argues that for consultation to achieve its potential within this context it needs to be reconfigured.The framework for consultation has been too rigid to engage the broad composition and varied nature of third sector organisations, and therefore risks not making the best use of the third sector and what it can provide. This report has many great examples of techniques that can and have been used to help reach people on the ground. This report seeks to put people back into consultations, in the belief that it is only through recognising public and third sector bodies as comprised of individual members of the same society that consultation can become a basis for constructive dialogue, which will underpin shared efforts to meet

society's challenges. Consultation may be just one component of the important relationship between the third and the public sectors, but it is a vital one, a key path to policy influence for the third sector and an invaluable tool for public servants seeking to tap into the knowledge and experience of third sector bodies.

The report begins in **chapter 2** by exploring what the third sector is and what the term means to different people.

Chapter 3 then looks at why governments consult the third sector, starting by looking at the broader relationship between the public and third sectors before concentrating on what the third sector can bring to decision and policy making specifically. Here, the report argues that the third sector's scale and multiplicity gives it a unique flexibility and reach, which enables it to provide a wealth of insights and experience about Britain's society and citizens. Yet its ability to fulfil this role depends on public bodies understanding the specific circumstances and constraints under which third sector organisations are working and on institutions also maintaining

relationships with third sector bodies outside consultation processes in order to make best use of their knowledge and experiences.

Building on these arguments, **chapter 4** explores in more detail the specific opportunities and challenges when consulting third sector organisations in their diversity. This chapter focuses on issues such as shortage of time and resources in both sectors, myths and negative preconceptions, and knowing how to reach the right people in such a large and diverse sector. Here, the report suggests that there remains work to be done to improve consultation practice and overcome negative perceptions of its value, both of which are factors that undermine the willingness and ability of people in both sectors to use consultations constructively. Yet it also shows that consultations, if done well, can help overcome these barriers and support a constructive and mutually beneficial relationship between the third and the public sectors.

To serve that end, this research report has been produced alongside a **practical handbook** on planning and delivering consultation with the third sector, which can be found at the back of this document. The report also includes seven recommendations for policy, which are outlined in more detail in the conclusion:

Recommendation 1 – Quality not quantity

That public bodies coordinate consultation activities across departments and seek to only undertake consultations when there is the time and capacity to delivery high quality processes, which meet the expectations of the consultees and maximise value for government.

Recommendation 2 – Innovation in consultation

That public agencies explicitly encourage their employees to deliver innovative consultation processes that are bespoke for third sector stakeholders and compatible with their unique role.

Recommendation 3 – Building third sector literacy among public officials

That public servants are given support to better understand the working reality of third sector organisations, through measures such as training, shadowing, secondments, visits, partnership working and direct involvement in consultation activities.

Recommendation 4 – Building relationships

That public servants are given the time and resources to develop considered and sustained relationships with members of the third sector above and beyond the formal consultation process.

Recommendation 5 – Public sector capacity

That those policy officials and politicians most involved in the service or policy in question are directly involved in the consultation process, in order to gain first hand experience of the knowledge, relationships and valuable engagement skills that these processes can generate.

Recommendation 6 – Freedom to be critical

That public bodies make more efforts to show, in their actions as well as words, that consultations are a safe space for the third sector to voice their views and criticisms about public sector policy and conduct, without fear of adverse consequences.

Recommendation 7 – Political support for open dialogue

That public bodies are open about the role of consultation alongside other influencers such as political pressures, honest about the scope of consultation to actually make a difference, and only consult when both politicians and policy makers are genuinely willing to take the findings on board.

1.Introduction

At a glance, the organisations that make up the 21st-century third sector bear little resemblance to the voluntary organisations of old. Now the sector includes social enterprises, trade unions, non-profit consultancies and specialist campaigning organisations alongside faith groups and traditional community and voluntary organisations. As the sector has grown, so its boundaries have become blurred, with the organisations within it increasingly taking on roles formerly reserved for government or private business. Third sector organisations today lobby government, deliver public services and even make a commercial profit – sometimes all at once.

As the third sector has evolved, its relationship with government has also changed. The state now relies on the third sector to deliver services, provide access to communities and interest groups and, more and more, comment on or help shape policy developments and public decisions. The importance of the third sector is acknowledged across government and the political parties, with a consensus on its vital role in filling the gaps and serving the causes that the public and private

sectors cannot, or will not, reach. Yet this changing relationship and blurring of roles also raise new questions and challenges. How can the third sector retain its role as campaigner and critical friend of government without biting the hand that feeds it? How should third sector organisations prioritise between meeting their own, internal objectives and helping public bodies shape theirs? And how can public bodies tap into the unique skills, experiences and knowledge that the third sector holds, without exhausting the patience and resources of third sector organisations in the process?

This report seeks to go some way towards answering these questions. Focusing on public sector consultation with the third sector, it starts by exploring what the third sector is and how its relationship with government is changing. It then explores the value of bringing third sector voices into the policy making process, the complex cultural and institutional factors that frame interactions between public sector officials and third sector organisations and the need to build relationships between these sectors outside the process of consultation. The term consultation is defined here as requests to third

sector organisations by public bodies to respond to proposals and contribute to public policy and decision making. This includes formal and time-bound written consultation processes as well as more informal and iterative processes involving dialogue and deliberation.

1.1 The methodology

This report draws on data gathered during a six-month research process, to address the following research questions:

- What are the key benefits of involving third sector organisations in decision and policy making?
- What is different about engaging with third sector organisations?
- How can government most effectively engage third sector organisations in policy and decision making?
- How can government become better at reaching underrepresented third sector organisations?

Qualitative data in the form of 39 interviews with third and public sector representatives was gathered in relation to five case studies of recent consultations (which are described in section 3.4).

A quantitative mapping exercise was undertaken by GuideStar Data Services for each of the case studies to assess the reach and scope of the consultations. The research questions were also addressed through three deliberative workshops and an online survey. For a detailed methodology see *Appendix 2.*

1.2 The practical handbook

This report has been produced alongside a practical handbook for public officials seeking to engage third sector organisations in policy and decision making. The handbook draws on this research and provides tips and examples on how to plan for effective consultations with the third sector and so overcome the challenges presented in this report. The intention is for the two documents to complement each other, with this research report providing the contextual background to the practical guidance given in the

handbook. Pdf copies of both documents can be downloaded from www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/third_sector/Consultations

2.What is the third sector?

Third sector organisations can be described as the organisations and groups that occupy the space between the state, the citizens and the private sphere, what is sometimes referred to as non-governmental organisations, non-profit organisations or simply civil society[3] The Office of the Third Sector describes the third sector as:

a diverse, active and passionate sector. Organisations in the sector share common characteristics:

- *Non-governmental*

- *Value-driven*

- *Principally reinvest any financial surpluses to further social, environmental or cultural objectives.*

The term encompasses voluntary and community organisations, charities, social enterprises, cooperatives and mutuals both large and small.[4]

Within this broad framework the range of size, purpose, working practices and type of organisations can vary dramatically. The sector includes varied categories of organisations that include community groups, faith organisations, charities, trade unions and housing associations. It is estimated that there are now over 168,000 registered charities[5] in England and in November 2006 there were 55,000 organisations defined as social enterprises, a number considered to be growing.[6] However, these figures do not reveal the true size of the sector; in addition there are thousands of small, informal or unregistered organisations and groups that, although playing an integral role in Britain's communities, are often unknown to authorities.[7] These are sometimes referred to as "under the radar" third sector organisations.[8]

Third sector organisations differ widely in the roles that they play in society, from campaigning and advocacy to service delivery, and a single organisation can work under more than one "hat" or role. In addition, the third sector has a well-developed infrastructure – locally, nationally and internationally – with a range of organisations supporting the work of other groups by providing capacity-building activities, information and resources such as grants and volunteers. These infrastructure, or umbrella, organisations also play a vital role in supporting the relationship between government and the third sector.

The size and diversity of the third sector presents both opportunities and challenges. There are opportunities in that the sector's scale and multiplicity gives it a unique flexibility and reach, enabling third sector organisations to tackle social problems and causes that the public and private sectors are unwilling or unable to address. But the sector's diversity can also be a source of misunderstandings and crossed purposes. This can happen when people fail to grasp its wide-ranging nature and needs, perceiving it as a unity rather than a multitude of interests, or misunderstanding the roles played by different organisations within the sector. This has implications for those public sector workers who are increasingly called upon to engage third sector organisations in service delivery or decision making.

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[3] "Civil society refers to the arena of uncoerced collective action around shared interests, purposes and values… Civil societies are often populated by organizations such as registered charities, development non-governmental organizations, community groups, women's organiza-tions, faith-based organizations, professional associations, trades unions, self-help groups, social movements, business associations, coalitions and advocacy groups." Centre for Civil Society (2004) What Is Civil Society? London: London School of Economics. Available at: www.lse.ac.uk/collections/CCS/what_is_civil_society.htm

[4] www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/third_sector/about_us.aspx

[5] www.guidestar.org.uk/gs_aboutcharities.aspx

[6] Cabinet Office (2006) Social Enterprise Action Plan. London: Cabinet Office Available at: www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/~/media/assets/www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/third_sector/se_action_plan_2006%20pdf.ashx

[7] BMG and GuideStar (2008) Research Paper: The Environment for a Thriving Third Sector – Overview. London: BMG. Available at: www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/~/media/assets/www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/third_sector/research%20paper%20chapter%201%20pdf.ashx

[8] The term "under the radar" is used here to refer to those informal and unregistered third sector groups that can be easily missed by public authorities unless they know how and where to look for them. Importantly, the term should not be read as a reflection on the value of these organisations. On the contrary, this report argues strongly that these small and informal third sector groups are an important and often untapped asset for public authorities that can provide a different and very valuable perspective on policy making.

Confusion about the nature of the third sector is not reserved only for those who stand outside the sector, looking in. This research revealed that many people who work in the third sector are confounded by the terminology that surrounds it and find it hard to identify their organisation with the official government definition. It was clear that people were more comfortable using more narrow categories, such as "community and voluntary groups" or "charities" rather than the overarching umbrella term third sector. In fact, when asked to describe in their own words what the term third sector meant, only five mentioned social enterprises and none mentioned cooperatives and mutuals. This does not imply that the third sector is an unhelpful term, but it means that public officials need to be aware of how the language used to describe the sector fluctuates, so that they can adapt the language they use to make sense to the audience.

3. Why consult the third sector?

Summary

This chapter explores the benefits of engaging third sector organisations in policy and decision making. It does this by first looking at the changing relationship between government and the third sector characterised by an increased drive towards partnership working and interdependence, and the vocal recognition by government of the unique and vital contribution that the sector can make to public bodies.

The specific benefits of consulting the third sector are outlined in section 3.3., which focuses on the **valuable insights and experiences** that can be offered by the third sector in influencing policy, the value of **consultation as improving legitimacy and buy-in** for decisions and policy implementation, the third sector's ability to act as a **bridge between the decision makers and citizens** and consultation as a way of **supporting the relationships** between the third sector and government.

3.1 Government and the third sector: a changing relationship

Historically, the principal role of what is now the third sector has been to identify social needs and ensuring that they are noticed and addressed. Consequently, the sector's role has always fluctuated with the political, economic, social and religious climates of the time. Its influence has been maintained through a combination of pressurising decision makers and businesses to take note of social issues and leading by doing, such as when churches and charities provided orphanages before the state saw fit to do so. In fact, many of the public services that are taken for granted today, such as education, health or social care, originally emerged from charitable endeavours.

It is important to be aware of this long tradition of the third sector acting as advocates and champions of social change, because it puts its current relationship to government into context. Today, third sector organisations are more likely than ever to have a close working relationship with government. Whether as community groups empowering local people, international campaigning organisations pushing for policy change or as social enterprises developing innovative services, there is now a widespread recognition across government that the third sector is at the heart of its social change agenda.[9] This commitment to working with the third sector was confirmed by Gordon Brown in 2007 when he stated that:

... a successful modern democracy needs at its heart a thriving and diverse third sector. Government cannot and must not stifle or control the thousands of organisations and millions of people that make up this sector. Instead, we must create the space and opportunity for it to flourish, we must be good partners when we work together and we must listen and respond.[10]

As we have seen, this is not an entirely new development. However, since 1997 there has been a concerted effort to develop and deepen these relationships. This has led to a substantial growth in the level and range of public services managed and delivered directly by third sector organisations and the development of measures and institutions to

9 Lewis, J. (2005) 'New Labour's approach to the voluntary sector: independence and the meaning of partnership', Social Policy and Society, vol. 4.

10 Cabinet Office and HM Treasury (2007) The Future Role of the Third Sector in Social and Economic Regeneration: Final Report. London: The Stationery Office.

help oversee this process. A related development is the emergence of a wider recognition within government of the important role that the third sector plays in building capacity and confidence among individuals and communities. This was a key theme in the 2008 Communities in Control White Paper, which emphasised the role of the third sector in empowering Britain's communities and stated that:

[Third sector] organisations are where people learn the skills of democracy and where democracy can flourish... Many thousands of third sector organisations already contribute to the aims of this White Paper in a w ay that no one else can.[11]

Consequently, there has been a shift away from seeing the third sector as a separate entity whose role is parallel to that of the public sector. Instead increasingly the public sector and the third sector are now working as partners for the public good.[12] This partnership approach was formalised in the development of a Compact in 1998 between Government and voluntary and community organisations.[13] The Compact, which now exists at both the national and local level, lays down

basic principles for partnership working between statutory and voluntary sector bodies, recognising shared values and principles.[14] The agreement was developed from recommendations made by the Deakin Commission Report on the future of the voluntary sector[15] and thus focuses exclusively on government's relationship with the voluntary and community sector, rather than with the third sector more widely. However, government is now acknowledging the value of the Compact in setting the standard for the relationship between public bodies and the wider third sector. This intention was explained in the Communities in Control White Paper, which stated that "both central and local government are committed to working with the third sector in line with the Compact".

After to the creation of the Compact, the creation of a Compact Code of Practice on Consultation and Policy Appraisal released in 2000, the creation of an Office for the Third Sector in 2006 and the forthcoming Duty to Involve[16] have further reinforced the government's commitment to working with third sector organisations. Moreover, the

new local government performance framework implemented in 2008 includes an indicator that measures the environment for a thriving third sector in local authority areas.[17] This indicator is being measured through the National Survey of Third Sector Organisations (NSTSO), which will survey 104,000 organisations about their opportunities for involvement and influence in their local area.[18]

These developments present both new possibilities and new challenges for the two sectors. There are possibilities in the sense that a closer relationship to government gives the sector more channels to make a difference in society. But, as we shall see, negotiating this new relationship can also be challenging, particularly while trying to protect the sector's traditional position as independent outsider.

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[11] Communities and Local Government (2008) Communities in Control, Real People Real Power. London: CLG.

[12] Bubb, S. (2006) Choice and Voice: The Unique Role of the Third Sector. London: Acevo; Taylor, M. and Bassi, A. (1998) 'Unpacking the state: the implications for the third sector of changing relationships between national and local government', Voluntas, vol. 9, no. 2, pp. 113–35.

[13] Communities and Local Government (2008).

[14] Note that at the time of writing the Compact is under review and due to be updated. There is a possibility that the Compact will be given statutory powers, which would have implications for how public sector bodies consult the third sector. See www.thecompact.org.uk for more information.

[15] Commission on the Future of the Voluntary Sector (1996) Meeting the Challenge of Change: Voluntary Action in the 21st Century. Commission on the Future of the Voluntary Sector.

[16] Communities and Local Government (2008) Communities in Control.

[17] Cabinet Office (2008) Briefing Note for Local Strategic Partnerships NI7: Environment for a Thriving Third Sector. London: Cabinet Office. Available at: www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/~/media/assets/www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/third_sector/ni7_briefing_note_final%20pdf.ashx

[18] www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/third_sector/partnership_working/local_government.aspx

3.2 Public and stakeholder engagement: a recent history

At the same time as government and the third sector have grown closer and more interdependent over the past decades, the relationship between government and citizens has weakened. This has taken the shape of a decline in traditional forms of political activism, with party membership in free fall, voter turnouts significantly lower than 20 years ago,[19] and public satisfaction with politics deteriorating.[20] Political parties originally conceived as mass participation movements which would connect a country's leaders to the general population are no longer able to fulfil this role. At the same time, society is facing a number of highly difficult challenges, or "wicked issues", such as the pension crisis, climate change and obesity, which cannot be solved unless government, citizens and the private and third sectors work together to change their behaviours.

For a number of reasons, then, government is having to find new ways of connecting with individuals and organisations, and as a consequence the last decade has seen a step change in the priority given to public and stakeholder engagement. No longer the niche pursuit of a few enthusiastic public servants; engaging with citizens and stakeholders is now a central element of British policy making and service design. The potential of this way of working to improve the quality and legitimacy of decisions and services has also captured the imagination of politicians and there is now recognition across the political spectrum that public decisions are often best made in collaboration with the people and organisations that they are going to affect. Evidence of this commitment is widespread; from the recent Communities in Control white paper, promising a bigger role for citizens and communities in local decision making, and the Third Sector Review report, which maps out the role of the third sector in economic and social regeneration, to the forthcoming Duty to Involve, which will make public and stakeholder engagement a statutory requirement for many public institutions.[21]

This surge in opportunities for citizens and stakeholders to help shape policy and public services is not unique to Britain. Around the world, people are exploring new ways of bringing decision makers, citizens and stakeholders closer together. The movement that first captured the world's attention through the celebrated participatory budgets in Porto Alegre[22] and participatory planning in Kerala[23] is now spreading fast, resulting in a string of new democratic innovations that connect and inspire people worldwide. The influence of the movement on governments and politicians around the world is undeniable. In 2007, Segolene Royale tried to get elected to the French presidency on a public engagement ticket; she continues to raise awareness about the issue in France.[24] The same year, Governor of California Arnold Schwarzenegger attended California Speaks, one of the world's biggest ever public engagement events,[25] and in 2008 the European Commission made citizen engagement the focus of its annual Quality Conference. Much of this revolution in participatory governance is being led by civil society organisations, which play an instrumental role both in facilitating dialogue between governments and citizens and in making governments more open to external influencers overall. Examples include the annual World Social Forums, which bring together around the world to counteract the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland; the many cross-European non-governmental groups from networks set up to strengthen the influence of civil society on the European Union; and the growing involvement of non-governmental organisations at UN conferences and World Trade Rounds.[26]

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[19] At 61.4% in 2005 compared with 75.3% in 1987. Source: www.ukpolitical.info/Turnout45.htm

[20] Kelso, A. (2007) 'Parliament and political disengagement: neither waving nor drowning', Political Quarterly, vol. 78, no. 3, pp. 364–73.

[21] Communities and Local Government (2008) Communities in Control.

[22] World Bank (2003) Study 2 Porto Alegre, Brazil: Participatory Approaches in Budgeting and Public Expenditure Management, Social Development Note no. 71. Washington, D.C,: World Bank Available at: http://info.worldbank.org/etools/docs/library/205481/Porto%20Alegre_English.pdf

[23] Chathukulam, J. and John, M.S. (2002) Five Years of Participatory Planning in Kerala: Rhetoric and Reality. Available at: http://www.mgu.ernet.in/DLR/DLArchive/joh02.pdf

[24] For example at the European Civic Days in La Rochelle, France, September 2008: www.forumciviqueeuropeen.org/event08/documents_en/jeudi_4.pdf

[25] www.californiaspeaks.org

[26] See the Global Policy Forum website: www.globalpolicy.org/ngos/ngo-un/index.htm

In Britain, the government's commitment to public and stakeholder involvement has implications for public servants working at all levels and in all policy areas. Today, only the most sensitive issues are exempt from scrutiny and challenge from stakeholders. Recent government consultations have ranged from topics as diverse as stem cell research, nuclear power and climate change to education policy, health care and offender management. In local government, too, public and stakeholder engagement is now at the heart of how areas and services are shaped. Indeed, the proximity between institutions and communities at the local level lends itself well to public and stakeholder engagement, as people can see for themselves how the activities make a difference to their local area and services. It is at the local level that much of the experimentation in participation happens, as public agencies are able to work closely with the communities they serve to invent new ways of working together, based on local circumstances and needs.

A good example of where public and stakeholder engagement is having a visible impact nationally and locally is in health and social care. The NHS is now involving patients, the general public and stakeholders at every level of decision making; from shaping national strategy[27] to scrutinising and evaluating local health services.[28] In social care, individual budgets are giving people the power to decide how their funds will be spent, providing them with the money and support to create a care package that better fits their personal requirements.[29]

Such examples of devolving power over decisions and budgets to individuals and community groups are becoming increasingly common. Most often, these initiatives happen at the local or neighbourhood level due to the proximity between institutions and communities and the more manageable size of a local constituency. The most radical and famous example of this type of collaborative engagement is participatory budgeting, which involves communities in deciding how a defined local budget should be spent.[30] Having been piloted in 34 local areas in England at the time of writing, the government is aiming to roll the scheme out to all English local authorities by 2012.[31]

The growing role of public and stakeholder involvement means that new perspectives are being introduced to policy areas that were traditionally closed to scrutiny from citizens and third sector organisations. Science is a case in point. In the past couple of decades, British policy makers and research communities have come to realise that the big decisions about future science and technology cannot be made without input from citizens and civil society. This realisation has come partly in response to the public controversies that surrounded bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE or "mad-cow disease"), genetically modified (GM) crops and climate change. Today, public and stakeholder dialogue are at the core of science governance, championed by government, the science community and civil society alike. These changes are not only making a difference to the quality of public services and decisions, but can also have a profound impact on the people involved. More and more, debates about the value of public and stakeholder engagement acknowledge the many different ways in which these activities can benefit those who take part: by educating people, giving them a better understanding of government and public decision making, empowering them to take part in public life and even contributing to building tolerance and reducing tensions in society.[32]

[27] See for example the Your Health Your Care Your Say consultation process from 2005: www.dh.gov.uk/en/Publicationsandstatistics/Publications/PublicationsPolicyAndGuidance/DH_4127357

[28] Martin, J. *2007+ 'A new vision for local democratic accountability of health care services', in Healthy Democracy: The Future of Involvement in Health and Social Care. London: Involve and the NHS National Centre for Involvement.

[29] Social Policy Research Unit and University of York (2008) Evaluation of the Individual Budgets Pilot Programme: Final Report. London: Department of Health. Available at: www.dh.gov.uk/en/Publicationsandstatistics/Publications/PublicationsPolicyAndGuidance/DH_089505

[30] www.participatorybudgeting.org.uk

[31] Communities and Local Government (2008) Communities in Control.

[32] Communities and Local Government (2008); Gavelin, K. and Wilson, R. with Doubleday, R. (2007) Democratic Technologies?, chapter 4. London: Involve; Ministry of Justice (2008) A National Framework for Greater Citizen Engagement. London: MoJ.

3.3 What the third sector can offer

Within this context, the third sector is now recognised as a key stakeholder and critical friend of government. Unique in its reach, size and range of experience, the sector is ideally placed to help public bodies better understand society's needs and comment on how a policy is likely to work in practice. The specific qualities that the third sector may bring to consultations can be grouped into four overarching categories:

- improving decisions and services through insights and experience
- increasing transparency, legitimacy and buy-in
- building bridges between institutions and citizens
- ongoing relationships.

Improving decisions and services through insights and experience

Knowledge and experience are arguably the most important assets that third sector organisations bring to the policy making process. Third sector organisations are often motivated by specific issues and therefore tend to build up a strong knowledge base about their area of expertise or the communities in which they operate. They are value-driven and, since they are less constrained by political pressures, government agendas and a desire to make profit than their public and private sector counterparts, they can afford to set ambitious altruistic objectives and remain committed to them. This means that they can often provide a useful external perspective on policy developments. Moreover, the length of service and commitment to a particular issue or community means that many third sector organisations have long-standing experiences of the government's handling of the issue, including knowledge of past consultations. This can make third sector organisations an invaluable resource for public servants in planning and delivering consultations, as they can comment on consultation plans and point out things that have worked or not worked in the past. In particular, the public servants interviewed in this research emphasised how many third sector organisations hold useful "on the ground" understandings of specific issues and communities, which can help fill knowledge gaps and alert authorities to issues and groups that need attention:

Quite often we find that the [community and voluntary organisations] have a lot more detailed information about local communities than we could ever put together – purely because they might be there every day working in it and speaking to local people.

Interviewee from local government

Research participants were also vocal about the ability of third sector organisations to offer practical insights about how a policy is likely to work in practice:

I think they offer a more down to earth, practical view, you know, because they tend to be the people who are in direct contact with the people who the policies will be affecting.

Interviewee from central government

The third sector – because of its knowledge and understanding of how things work – particularly around interventions and how they can be made, is incredibly to-the-point and useful. Things like 'why don't we try a joint surgery' or 'how about here rather than there' have made some of the difficulties in managing services immeasurably easier to manage.

Interviewee from local government

At times, this recognition leads to public bodies going a step further than consultation by inviting third sector bodies to co-develop rather than simply comment on a service or decision. Such approaches, commonly referred to as co-design or coproduction of services, involve high levels of collaboration and shared responsibilities between the actors involved.

Increased transparency, legitimacy and buy-in

Another common rationale for consultation is that it helps build transparency, legitimacy and buy-in for public decisions. This notion was echoed by the public servants involved in this research, who were generally of the opinion that consultation with the third sector is the "right thing to do", because it gives stakeholders who are affected by a decision a voice in the process. In this context, stakeholder consultation is seen as legitimising the decision making process, a belief that is sometimes considered justification enough for undertaking the activity.

It is true that, when done well, consultations can help improve understanding among stakeholders about how and why decisions are made, and so can contribute to improving legitimacy of a decision, policy or service and strengthening relationships between the sectors. This research, in line with other texts on the subject[33] suggests that this is particularly the case when consultation takes place early in the decision making process and when it involves face-to-face discussions between stakeholders and decision makers, where each are given time to express their views and listen to what others have to say. This is particularly crucial when dealing with services that the third sector organisations in question are directly affected by or will be involved in delivering themselves. Today, many policy areas rely on the actions of non-governmental actors to ensure that they are translated into change on the ground, as in the cases of recycling, community cohesion and health and fitness, among others. Many such policy areas have a significant third sector presence, either because third sector organisations are delivering related services or because they are working to raise awareness about the issues in question. It is vital to engage these third sector organisations at an early stage of the process, to ensure that the policies build on their knowledge and expertise but also to ensure their support for the policies in future.

This argument requires a note of caution, because just as good consultation can be instrumental in building legitimacy, so can poor consultation be seen to undermine it. As the next chapter will show, frustration with poor consultation practice and consultations that are a "done deal" were rife among participants in the research. The risk when carrying out consultations primarily because they are seen as "the right thing to do" is that the activities themselves, however well meaning, become

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[33] See for example Department for Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform (2008) Code of Practice on Consultation; Involve and National Consumer Council (2008).

unfocused and lacking in influence.

A common complaint among third sector representatives interviewed was that many consultations lack clear links to decision making. The added legitimacy often sought in consultations is therefore only achieved if the process itself is robust, achieves what it set out to do and, crucially, is seen to do so by the stakeholders themselves.

The third sector as bridge between institutions and citizens

In the context of declining voter turn out and low trust in many public institutions, there is a growing tendency in the public sector to see the third sector as a bridge between government and citizens. This stems from the recognition that third sector organisations often elicit higher levels of trust from the public and are able to draw on a wealth of ground-level experience of communities that is seen to be lacking in public agencies.[34] A prevalent theme in the research was the perceived "reach" of third sector organisations,[35] which makes them ideal partners for public servants trying to understand and meet the needs of an increasingly diverse population. There was also acknowledgement of the enviable rapport that third sector organisations tend to have with the public, an association considered to be stronger than the bond between citizens and government:

They can reach people that we wouldn't normally reach, and many of them cover more sensitive areas, where you couldn't possibly expect government to be dealing with those situations and actually people wouldn't want to talk to government about those issues, but because they are more trusted organisations by individuals... they have the techniques for engaging people and they know the sensitivities around certain groups.

Interviewee from central government

The third sector's ability to reach underrepresented groups has been widely acknowledged within government. The department for Communities and Local Government states:

[The sector] works with the most disadvantaged people and places and engages people in social and environmental challenges. It can help strengthen cohesion by building bridges and bonds within communities. It provides voice and representation for citizens and communities.[36]

Given the diversity of the sector, however, the nature of this voice and representation will clearly depend on the situation and the organisation in question and should never be taken for granted by public bodies. The next chapter will explore in more detail the challenges and risks involved in relying on third sector organisations to provide a voice for the public.

Ongoing relationships

Traditionally, consultation and other forms of engagement with citizens and stakeholders have been based on market and social research methodologies. The emphasis has been on the robustness of the methods used and the quality and representativeness of the data they produced. These factors are no less important today, as the ever growing number of codes and quality standards for consultation practice can verify.[37]

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[34] Blackmore, A. (2004) Standing Apart, Working Together: A Study of the Myths and Realities of Voluntary and Community Sector Independence, NCVO Research paper, February
[35] Six out of 39 interviewees spoke explicitly about the benefits of using third sector organisations to reach underrepresented populations, and the importance of a consultation's "reach" was a strong theme present in nearly all of the interviews.
[36] Third sector strategy for Communities and Local Government Discussion Paper, June 2007.
[37] Department for Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform (2008) Code of Practice on Consultation.

However, there has recently been a growing awareness of the need to complement these research-based methods with building ongoing relationships with stakeholders that can help institutions achieve their long term objectives. Relationship-building activities such as providing feedback and opportunities to evaluate the impact of a consultation on the beneficiaries, or engaging with third sector groups outside the consultation activities, are often considered to be of secondary importance next to the more robust techniques of data gathering and analysis. Nevertheless it is vital that relationships are not overlooked in consultations, as these more informal processes can be highly important in securing the success of the exercise, the implementation of the policy and retaining support for future consultation activities. For more practical guidance on how to support ongoing relationships with the third sector, see the handbook that accompanies this report.

3.4 The case studies – five examples of consultation with the third sector

This section outlines the five case studies that formed the central part of this research. These were recent consultations, three from central government and two from local government, that had all targeted the third sector in some capacity. The case studies illustrate the range of approaches now used in the public sector to involve third sector bodies in decision and policy making; ranging from traditional written consultations to more innovative and hands-on approaches such as deliberative workshops and outreach activities. Within each case study, the researchers interviewed organisers, policy makers and participants, as well as non-participants – organisations that were deemed part of the target audience for the consultation but had chosen not to respond. This data, alongside the findings of the research workshops and online survey, provided the researchers with a rich source of materials on which to base the analysis presented in this report.

For a detailed research methodology see *Appendix 2.*

Case study 1: Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF): Time to Talk, Consultation on the Children's Plan

In the autumn of 2007, the Department for Children, Schools and Families released a consultation on its draft Children's Plan, a policy document with the stated intention of making "England the best place in the world for children and young people to grow up".[38] The consultation was broad in remit and audience, inviting responses from "anyone with an interest in making things better for children, young people and families".[39] Within this broad definition, third sector organisations were considered stakeholders alongside young people, teachers, parents and health care professionals.

The consultation included a range of methods to engage with this wide audience, including expert group meetings at the pre-consultation stage, followed by an online survey, deliberative workshops (some of which were linked up via the internet), focus groups and devolved consultation activities for which the department provided a

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[38] Department for Children, Schools and Families (2007) The Children's Plan: Building Brighter Futures. London: DCSF, p. 5.
[39] www.dcsf.gov.uk/consultations/conResults.cfm?consultationId=1505

consultation pack. Specific consultation materials were also produced to consult children and young people. At the end of the process, the organisers brought together 400 people who had been involved in the earlier stages of the consultation for a feedback workshop.

What makes this consultation interesting from the point of view of this research is the phased approach the organisers took, which allowed the Department to target different groups of stakeholders at different stages. The pre-consultation phase was considered particularly useful by the organisers, as it helped shape the consultation process and increase buy-in among key stakeholders of the outcomes. In the words of one public servant:

I think they felt that they owned the product because they were not only involved in responding to the consultation but they were involved in thinking about what we consult on and who we ask. They weren't just given a document to respond to, they were actually involved much more on a one-to-one basis in discussion.

Consultation organiser

Case study 2: Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra): Third Sector Strategy Consultation

This consultation invited response from third sector organisations on how the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs could best engage and work with the sector in the future, particularly around informing policy, mobilising communities and service provision. At the centre of the strategy would be an acknowledgement of the value of the sector's role: "The Strategy will aim to highlight and capitalise on the special contribution which the third sector can make to achieving our objectives and priorities, where we share a common goal."[40] The consultation involved three stakeholder workshops, a written response consultation and commissioned "think pieces". The consultation was also discussed at external third sector meetings and forums.

This consultation is a good illustration of the advantages of using a combination of methods to reach a diverse third sector population. The "think piece" method in particular was unusual in that it offered funding for organisations to produce a response, thus allowing the respondents to focus on a consultation topic of their choosing and make detailed suggestions:

In commissioning the think pieces, they were able to... focus on any aspect of the sort of issues we wanted to consult on and they did that in the way they wanted to do that with their expertise and their networks so that brought in that whole... their perspective to bear on those issues.

Consultation organiser

Case study 3: Ministry of Justice: National Offender Management Service (NOMS): Third Sector Action Plan Consultation

The Third Sector Action Plan Consultation resulted from the need to build on and sustain the ever-developing relationship between the department and their third sector partners in order to strengthen

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[40] Defra (2007) Towards a Third Sector Strategy. London: Defra, p. 4.

the third sector role in reducing re-offending. The draft third sector action plan was released at the end of 2007 and invited "colleagues from the third sector who engage, or wish to, with the National Offender Management Service (NOMS); relevant policy leads; other relevant partners"[41] to comment on the plan. Apart from a traditional written consultation, the process also incorporated key messages from a third sector advisory group and consultation events. These consultation events were run in partnership with the umbrella body Clinks, which enabled NOMS to collect a greater variety of responses. One civil servant stated that the final draft of the Action Plan changed significantly due to the feedback received during the consultation process:

Our final plan looks quite different as a result. The final plan sets out what the key messages were from the consultation. It takes some of the ideas that came through that to create actions, and it sets out a response to the key concerns. I'm really pleased about that and I think that our third sector advisory group felt that it really did reflect the key messages that came back from the sector and that it took them on board.

Consultation organiser

Case study 4: Birmingham City Council: Transforming Day Services in Birmingham

Birmingham City Council worked in partnership with the Birmingham Third Sector Assembly to deliver a consultation on the modernisation of day services in Birmingham. The target audience were third and private sector organisations involved in the provision of day services. The recently established Assembly works to empower third sector organisations and encourage partnership working, and so was considered an ideal associate in the consultation process, providing a gateway to relevant stakeholders. The consultation took the form of a one-day deliberative workshop event. One of the organisers described why they chose to use this method of consultation:

The third sector tends to respond to that format well; you have an event and people come along, you give them a chance to network, you also put the senior people up to talk about the thing, and then you drill it down into workshops.

Consultation organiser

This method was also deemed to be appropriate because of the contentious issues surrounding the closure of day centres raised by the consultation. Hence the event was seen as a chance for third sector representatives to hear from the decision makers within the council and also get a chance to express their views with senior council officials in the room:

So because this is such a big change, Birmingham City Council wanted to come and present the vision, which I thought was appropriate. I suppose we could have done smaller focus groups, but it kind of needed to be big, really, it needed to get as many people in the room as possible.

Consultation organiser

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41 National Offender Management Service (2007) Third Sector Action Plan: A Draft. London: NOMS, p. 3.

One of the factors that made this consultation interesting was that it was contracted out to the Third Sector Assembly, which was then able to design a process that suited the requirements of local thirdsector organisations.

Case study 5: Brighton and Hove City Council: Housing Strategy Consultations (Black and Minority Ethnic, Older People and Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender)

Brighton and Hove Council released consultations on new housing strategies aimed at groups particularly vulnerable to housing difficulties. The consultation processes took place over a year and a half. Organisers began by asking stakeholders to respond to a document which outlined the specific issues and needs around housing within Brighton and Hove; the subject matter open for consultation became more condensed as the consultation process progressed. Methods of consultation included questionnaires, a consultation fair, outreach work, briefing pack and "piggy-backing" the consultation onto existing meetings and events.

This consultation is a good example of how consultation at an early stage can shape the questions asked later in the process and therefore produce outcomes which best meet the needs of the stakeholders. Notably, working groups in the specific interest areas were also established, and the organisers hope that these will continue to convene after the consultation process and support the implementation of the strategy:

Once the strategy is published, we don't want to just stick it on the shelf and forget about it. We want these groups to be self-sustaining, and we want them to come back to us after six months and say "right, you've done your strategy now tell us what's been implemented, what's worked, what's not worked?" and get that regular reporting system set up. So once we set up the group, we made sure that the chair is a community representative. We'll still facilitate the group and provide the admin support and fund the meetings, but really once the strategy is launched it's their agenda and they can take the groups in any direction they want. But they've got a platform where the council, the PCT and all the other main providers are sitting around that table, which provides a model for pretty much any other service within their remit.

Consultation organiser

4. Working with the third sector: opportunities and challenges

Summary

The previous chapters have outlined the benefits of consulting with third sector organisations, the contextual background, and movements towards more inclusive decision making both in Britain and worldwide. It is important to bear in mind, however, that no consultation occurs in a vacuum. The willingness and ability of third sector organisations to participate is influenced by other policy and political developments, past experiences and, as we shall see, the unique interests, challenges and barriers affecting the organisations in question.

The aim of this chapter is to explore the distinct challenges and opportunities in consulting with third sector organisations, focusing on five themes **time and resource constraints** faced by the third sector; the impact of **culture, myth and preconceptions** on people's willingness to get involved; **different agendas and roles within the third sector** and the potential for these to cause conflicts of interest; with **infrastructure organisations**; **connecting with a diverse third sector**, and getting the **political leadership** on board.

4.1 Time and resources

Although the third sector workers involved in this study were generally positive about consultation and keen to continue to be involved in the future, accounts of the barriers to participation were common throughout the research. Unsurprisingly, the biggest issue for many third sector organisations in responding to consultations is a lack of time and resources. Many smaller organisations grapple with staff shortages, lack of funding and cramped work spaces, and have to work hard to meet their own objectives. To take time out from their core activities to respond to a policy consultation adds extra pressure and can be difficult to fit in. Some organisations are staffed entirely by volunteers, which can make the task even more of a challenge. As one research participant argued:

What would you rather respond to on a Monday morning, the consultation you've been emailed or the woman waiting in reception whose partner has just beaten her up and who's looking for some emergency accommodation for herself and her child? That's often the reality that third sector workers are faced with.

Interviewee from local government

Even large organisations with dedicated policy teams can find it challenging to meet the growing number of consultation requests they are sent by local and national agencies. A common complaint by research participants from organisations of all sizes was the sheer number of requests they receive, often at short notice, to take part in consultations in order to fit in with policy and institutional timetables. One interviewee argued:

Our problem is that they tend to come in clusters, we don't get a consultation paper for months and then they all come at once, all with the same return date. But no, I don't think there can be too many. Though it would be nice sometimes if people in government talked to each other so they didn't send them all out at once.

Interviewee from a national third sector organisation

This suggests that public bodies sometimes show a lack of sensitivity to the pressures facing the respondents to consultations. In trying to fit the consultation process in among policy timetables and political pressures, the needs of participants are sometimes overlooked. The result is that many third sector organisations feel overburdened by consultation requests and unable to give each consultation the time and attention it requires.[42] This reflects the need for public agencies to think carefully about how they can reduce the burden of consultation on respondents. This point is emphasised in the government's Code of Practice on Consultation, which states that "keeping the burden of consultation to a minimum is essential if consultations are to be effective and if consultees' buy-in to the process is to be obtained".[43] There are a number of measures that public agencies can take, including better joining up their consultation activities, offering a range of ways for participants to respond and making use of information already gathered elsewhere before embarking on a new consultation activity. Sometimes it may be helpful to offer incentives, practical support and extra time to allow smaller and under-resourced organisations to take part on the same terms as large organisations. It may also be necessary to invest effort in specifically targeting smaller or underrepresented third sector organisations to ensure a broad response base. More practical tips for reducing the burden of consultation can be found in the handbook that accompanies this report[44] and in the government's Code of Practice on Consultation.[45]

4.2 Culture and preconceptions – how the circle can be broken

What all third sector organisations have in common is that they are value driven: they work for public benefit. In many ways, this makes third sector organisations ideal partners of public agencies in shaping policy and delivering services. Their objectives are often compatible with those of public bodies, but their means of achieving them are different, which means that they can provide a fresh perspective on how an issue should be addressed or a problem solved. In the words of one local government employee:

At the end of the day, we all want to do the same things. The council wants to improve the community, it wants to improve the quality of life of local people, and that's what the community and voluntary sector is all about as well. So we've got the same remit and the same overall objective. The common ground is there.

Interviewee from local government

Of course, this does not mean that the relationship between third sector organisations and public agencies is always smooth. The two sectors may be broadly compatible in their goals, insofar as they are working towards "the public good", but the interpretation of what the public good is or how an issue should be addressed tends to differ widely between and within the sectors. A key theme to emerge from the research was how the preconceptions that third sector workers and public servants hold about each can have a negative effect on their willingness and ability to work together. While the majority of officials interviewed were enthusiastic about how much they have

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[42] Seven out of 39 interviewees reported feeling that consultation fatigue was a problem for their organisation.
[43] Department for Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform (2008) Code of Practice on Consultation, p. 11.
[44] See in particular the sections 'Collaborating and planning ahead', 'Reaching underrepresented and under the radar organisations' and 'Supporting third sector organisations to take part'.
[45] Department for Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform (2008) Code of Practice on Consultation, p. 11.

gained from consultations with third sector organisations, some were more sceptical about the value of third sector involvement to their work. Such scepticism is sometimes rooted in a belief that working with third sector organisations will be difficult and will raise uncomfortable or challenging issues that the public agency will not have the time or resources to address, as this quote illustrates:

> *I think a lot of local authorities hang back from hearing difficult messages from [an audience] that they don't know enough about.*

> Interviewee from local government

At this point it is worth acknowledging that many people find it easier to build relationships with people who are like themselves. This is as true for organisations as it is for individuals, and is arguably part of the reason that public bodies can find it easier to work with organisations of similar scale and reach to themselves. On a day to day basis a worker for a central government department often has more in common with an employee of a large national charity than one

from a smaller, less formally structured third sector organisation, simply because the systems and procedures which govern their working life are bound to be more similar and thus form a stronger basis for engagement and understanding. It should be noted, however, that when negative sentiments were raised in the research it was as second order accounts; in reference to colleagues' attitudes, or to beliefs that the interviewees had held in the past. It is therefore difficult to say to what extent these attitudes are still prevalent among public servants who in the past few years have become increasingly used to working with the third sector and other stakeholders.

In fact, both this study and past research[46] indicate a shift towards a more positive attitude toward stakeholder and public engagement in the public sector as a whole. In this study this was exemplified by the many positive stories told by public sector representatives about how much they felt they had learned from engaging with the third sector through consultation:

> *Doing this [consultation] has really changed the way that we work. It has been immensely positive, and not at all the kind of experience to be afraid of.*

> Interviewee from local government

> *It is a really good way to ensure that we are developing robust policies, that we aren't making policy in a vacuum, that we are consulting with all those people who either have the expertise to make those informed decisions, or those people who are affected directly by the decisions we are making*

> Interviewee from central government

These positive accounts were most prevalent among public servants with personal experience of engaging with third sector groups. This supports previous research,[47] which has shown that officials derive most value and learning from consultations in which they have been directly involved, in particular when those consultations involve face-to-face interactions. Participants in this research were vocal in their support for this idea[48]:

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[46] Creasy, S., Fisher, H., Gavelin, K., Holmes, L. and Desai, M. (2007) Engage for Change: The Role of Public Engagement in Climate Change Policy, research for the Sustainable Development Commission. London: Involve; Gavelin, K. and Wilson, R. with Doubleday, R. (2007) Democratic Technologies? London: Involve.

[47] Creasy et al. (2007) Engage for Change; Gavelin et al. (2007) Democratic Technologies?

[48] 19 out of 39 interviewees talked about the benefits of face to face meetings and events.

I wish is that more officers were expected to get involved in consultation work, to understand the communities they're serving, and to understand the value of the third sector in providing access to information about those communities that we would not otherwise know – information that is really vital for us to plan adequate services, policies and strategies.

Interviewee from local government

This is such a good learning experience for the team, and because it builds those bridges directly it gives us real contact. If we sent a consultant out and said "go and speak to these groups and find out what they think" we wouldn't get a fraction of the information that we've got.

Interviewee from local government

Yet what also emerged in the research was the feeling that that the relationship between public agencies and the third sector is still going through a period of transformation, with both parties getting used to the new ways of working together. And although consultation practice is improving around the country, there is still some way to go in ensuring consistency in the quality of consultations. Unsurprisingly, perhaps, the need to raise the standard of consultations was felt most urgently among third sector representatives, many of whom were disappointed by what they saw as a reluctance among public sector bodies to consult in a meaningful and accessible way and to genuinely take account of their views. Fatigued and disillusioned by past processes that had seemingly little impact, it was felt that many consultations are tokenistic and have little relevance for policy. This sentiment was in fact shared by respondents from both sectors, with 14 out of 39 interviewees raising the issue of ineffectual or tokenistic consultations:

There is a lot of tickboxing that still goes on, and maybe really intelligent consulting is about thinking that "actually, we know this stuff, or we can find this out from somewhere else, or we might want to refresh it a bit, but let's really focus on these things, which are the real challenges".

Interviewee from national government

Sometimes consultation can be just a tick box exercise. There will be a statutory requirement to carry out stakeholder consultations, but not with any real thinking or commitment to get any value out of that input.

Interviewee from local third sector organisation

The need to uphold the standards in consultation practice across the public sector is becoming more imperative in the light of the growing number of demands on public servants to consult the public and stakeholders at all levels of policy making. In this study, respondents from both sectors expressed concern that the pressure to carry out more and more consultations meant that public officials sometimes had to compromise the quality and integrity of the exercises:

We have to do it [consult] and because we have to do it so much, because there is so much policy development, we have had to develop models, and the models are restrictive and too often end up being tokenistic.

Interviewee from central government

When talking about past experiences of consultations, a common complaint among third sector bodies was the frequent lack of evidence that their involvement, or even the consultation in itself, had made a difference. Too often consultation respondents receive no feedback afterwards, and when it is provided it often neglects to include information about policy impact. Research participants made clear that a lack of feedback about how the consultation findings had been used made them feel that their input was not valued and made them question the point of responding to future consultations. In raising this point, people did not suggest that their views should always be acted on; they simply wanted evidence that their response had been considered, and if it had been discounted they wanted to know why. This requires the public sector to take more responsibility for setting out clearly what is up for grabs in consultations and what is not, and reporting back afterwards to demonstrate how the consultation findings were used. By definition, a consultation is about listening to people's views. This means not only taking their views into account, but also being seen to listen and explaining why

certain contributions were taken forward and others not, within reason. It also means having strategies in place for dealing with unexpected issues that, although not recognised by the institution as directly relevant to the consultation questions, may be legitimate and valuable in their own right. These points are emphasised in the handbook that accompanies this report and in the government and Compact's guidance on consultation.[49]

As these findings indicate, a consultation may be expertly planned and carried out, but a failure to communicate its impact back to respondents can undermine the whole process and may damage the institution's relationship with the responding organisations. Once damaged, such relationships can take a long time to repair. Many interviewees talked about how there are no easy and quick ways to break down years or even decades of mistrust that can underpin presumptions about the value of consultation among people from both sectors. And although interviewees from both sides acknowledged that the mistrust born from negative consultation experiences is often justified, they argued that this

is difficult to overcome even when public institutions try to improve their ways. One local government employee said:

Some of the groups have spent years and years slagging us off, for good reason in a lot of ways, but now we're approaching things differently and we want to engage – and some of the community and voluntary groups are finding that change in attitude difficult. They are so used to the adversarial role that they don't know how to get around the table in a friendly way.

Interviewee from local government

This reflects the need for both public and third sector workers to think carefully about their own responsibilities in improving the relationship between the sectors, including being willing to see each other's perspectives and acknowledging improvements when they happen. In doing so, it is important that public sector officials also acknowledge the impact that their position of power has on shaping the relationship between the public and the third sector.

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[49] The Compact (2008) Code of Good Practice on Consultation and Policy Appraisal. London: Compact. Available at www.thecompact.org.uk/shared_asp_files/GFSR.asp?NodeID=100320

Third sector bodies are acutely aware that it is the public agencies that hold the purse strings and the power to make final decisions. They know that consultations are only one form of policy evidence among many, and this can make some people experience consultations as top-down and ultimately futile endeavours, with little power to make a difference. Indeed, some third sector organisations are explicitly shunning consultation opportunities in favour of other ways of pressurising decision makers, such as by public campaigns, lobbying and informal relationships with politicians and policy makers:

I have to say that I am also extremely dubious about whether there is any point at all in doing them [in] my own experience – in [my] field – of giving our views to government, although we have had one very big success, but only because we approached Tony Blair directly with another charity.

Interviewee from a small third sector organisation

It should be noted that the practice of public and stakeholder engagement and consultation is improving in response to these types of concerns and that more genuinely interactive and dialogue-based approaches are gaining favour as a result.[50] This includes the growing use of deliberative engagement methods and the tendency to use a mix of consultation methods over a longer period, allowing stakeholders to steer the course of the consultation and policy development in a more involved way. An example is the Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affair's (Defra's) Third Sector Strategy consultation, which involved a combination of deliberative and written consultation methods over several months, thus allowing both the consultation process itself and the ensuing strategy to be shaped by the insights and requests of the participating third sector organisations. Another example from the research is the Brighton and Hove Housing Strategy consultation, which spanned over a year and a half and involved a variety of consultation methods, each tailored to the needs and circumstances of the groups they were seeking to reach.

Despite these emerging good practice examples, however, this study confirmed that there is still some way to go in challenging the enduring negative preconceptions held by some third and public sector workers about the value of consultation. Yet the research has also shown that if done well, consultation and other forms of engagement can, over time, contribute to breaking down these long-standing feelings of mistrust. This will not happen overnight, and it will not happen without a culture shift in both sectors. To unleash the full potential of the new working relationship between the third and public sectors requires the public sector to be open about the role of consultation alongside other influencers such as political pressures, to be honest about the scope of consultation to actually make a difference, and to consult only when they are willing to listen. It also requires the two sectors to see their differences as a resource rather than a hindrance and to be genuinely willing to learn from what the other can contribute. As one local government official argued:

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[50] Examples include participatory budgeting as advocated by the department Communities and Local Government (2008), the growing use of deliberative conferences and citizens' juries in government consultations and the emphasis on public dialogue in public engagement in science and technology (see Sciencewise, the government's public engagement programme for science and technology, which supports public servants to undertake dialogue with the public: www.sciencewise-erc.org.uk). Another example of this trend is the publication by Involve and the National Consumer Council, Deliberative Public Engagement: Nine Principles (2008), which was produced in collaboration with 19 organisations from the public and third sectors including five government departments.

[This consultation] is taking the best of what we've got, the best of what they've got and it's overcoming all the negative expectations and problems we've had in the past.

Interviewee from local government

Practical guidance on building a culture of engagement and learning can be found in the handbook that accompanies this report.

4.3 Different agendas and roles: a conflict of interest?

As we have seen, over the course of the last decade the relationship between the third sector and national and local government has changed in a number of ways. However, although these changes are generally welcomed by both sectors, their growing interdependence is sometimes seen as compromising the independence of the third sector and leading to conflicts of interests among the parties involved.[51] This issue was raised by a number of participants in the research. Many spoke of the risk of organisations that depend on a public body for funding becoming weary of "biting the hand that feeds them" and thus feeling unable to respond frankly to consultations. Others mentioned that some public bodies hold back from engaging with organisations with a campaigning or lobbying arm for fear that they will be adversarial or raise difficult issues:

Not all third sector organisations want to be seen as working too closely with the government body for fear that it compromises or it may be seen as compromising the work they're doing.

Interviewee from a private consultancy

Local authorities have often taken the view that consultation with the third sector is too difficult to manage, [especially] around organisations that have a campaigning wing that may have a particular position which makes it difficult for local authorities to move quickly on.

Interviewee from local government

It is true that tensions can arise when third sector organisations are at once relying on funding from a public body, trying to protect their independence and seeking to influence policy. However, it is important that this is not seen as an obstacle to consultation. As participants in one of the research workshops pointed out, such perceived conflicts of interest are equally prevalent in the private and public sectors, not least in the latter where policy makers are juggling political priorities with stakeholder views and budget constraints. In fact, it can be argued that it is precisely because third sector organisations play such varied roles in society that they can offer government insights and perspectives that are lacking in public institutions. Service delivery and campaigning therefore need not be barriers to constructive involvement in consultation as long as such roles are made explicit, and as long as the consulting body is open to receiving criticisms from grant holders and close partners. This is now widely recognised in government, as demonstrated in its vocal support of a healthy and independent third sector and in repeated statements about its commitment to take on board third sector views and criticisms.[52] This recognition is also at the heart of the Compact, which exists partly to ensure that government and the community and voluntary sector are able to work together without compromising the latter's independence or its right "to campaign, to comment on government policy and to challenge that policy, irrespective of any funding relationship that might exist".[53]

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[51] Blackmore, A. (2004) Standing Apart, Working Together; Bubb, S. (2006) Choice and Voice.

[52] HM Treasury and Cabinet Office (2007) The Future Role of the Third Sector in Social and Economic Regeneration.

[53] The Compact (2008) On Relations Between Government and the Voluntary and Community Sector in England COI: London (9.1)

Despite these positive developments, however, this research indicates that preconceptions about conflicts of interests for third sector organisations that combine service delivery with advocacy and campaigning remain alive within the third and public sectors. Equally, the study has shown that despite the government's assurances to the contrary, some third sector organisations feel that being openly critical in consultations can damage their relationship with the consulting body and impact on future funding prospects. It would be unwise to simply dismiss these concerns as unfounded. The fact that strategic and political leaders embrace open and inclusive stakeholder engagement does not mean that this commitment is always shared by the officials charged with running the activities.

In fact, some public servants feel uncomfortable dealing with challenges and confrontations by external bodies, even within the context of policy consultation, and this can affect their approach to the task.[54] It is therefore critical to recognise that beneath the vision of partnership given by political and strategic leaders, tensions can exist. In fact, tension and difference are often integral to the consultation process and can be a source of innovation and change. They should be acknowledged as such, rather than framed as negative and undesirable. Indeed, one of the major criticisms of historic consultations with the third sector is that in their drive towards consensus they fail to identify the very real and important range of positions that exist in all policy areas.[55]

To counteract these perceptions of conflict of interest it is therefore vital that public agencies lead the way by ensuring that the commitment to an open and collaborative relationship between the two sectors is not only an ambition of strategists and politicians, but shared by officials at all levels. For this to happen, public servants need support to get to know the sector better and to understand the benefits that can be derived from working together. This includes helping them to understand the different roles played by third sector organisations in society and how individual organisations balance their different roles and activities. It also means giving officials the chance to see for themselves how much they could learn from working with third sector organisations and actively listening to their insights and experiences. This can be done by ensuring that officials at all levels get direct experiences of engaging with third sector bodies, or by encouraging secondments and visits between the sectors.[56]

The following table illustrates a range of different roles third sector organisations play in society. The table is purely illustrative and intended to be used as a tool for thinking through the different types of organisations and their potential contributions. This can help public bodies consider their relationship to the organisation in question and any implications this may have in consultations. For example, those who play a service delivery role may be in particular need of methods of consultation that are sensitive to the relationship with the public sector, and in these cases consultation organisers need to be reassuring towards stakeholders, open about their relationship, and explicitly state that third sector organisations are permitted to be open and independent without putting current or future funding at risk. When the role of an organisation includes infrastructure responsibilities, consulting bodies need to be clear about whether they are seeking the views of these organisations or their constituents, or both.

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[54] Creasy et al. (2007) Engage for Change; Maddock, S. (2002) 'Making modernisation work: new narratives, change strategies and people management in the public sector', International Journal of Public Sector Management, vol. 15, issue 1, pp. 13–43.
[55] Wilsdon, J., Willis, R. (2004) See Through Science. London: Demos.
[56] For more practical tips, see the handbook that accompanies this report.

Note that the table is intended to be illustrative; there is plenty of overlap between categories; organisations that appear similar may have completely different functions and the roles played by individual organisations may overlap or change over time.

Third sector roles

Role	Activities	National umbrella organisation representing and supporting third sector organisations	National dis-ability charity	Housing association	Think tank doing research to inform and advise public policy	Social enterprise helping disad-vantaged youths start their own businesses	Local faith group helping elderly people	Sports club
Capacity builder	Building capacity in the third sector or in the wider community; educating and empowering people	X	X	X		X	X	
Bridge-builder	Building bridges between communities or between insti-tutions and citizens, for exam-ple by helping public bodies access and understand the needs of specific groups.	X	X	X			X	
Service deliverer	Delivering public services on behalf of or in partnership with public agencies.			X				X
	Delivering specialist or local-ised services that are not pro-vided or funded by the public sector, "filling the gaps".	X	X	X		X	X	
Critical friend	Providing advice and consultancy services to public agencies.	X			X			
Campaigner	Seeking to influence political and policy agendas by campaigning, lobbying and raising awareness.	X	X					
Leisure/culture/ informal groups	Activities around a specific leisure activity or hobby such as arts, sports or wildlife.			X			X	X
Infrastructure	Delivering support, information and other services to the third sector.	X						

4.4 The third sector as voice of the people?

As we have seen, there is a tendency in the public sector to see third sector bodies as a bridge to the wider public, a way of understanding the needs of individuals and communities that the public sector is unable to reach by itself. Yet the research showed that there is often a confusion in both the third and the public sector about the capacity in which third sector organisations are targeted in consultations: as stakeholders in their own right, as representing the interests of other stakeholder groups (in the case of infrastructure organisations) or as representatives of the public?[57] While many public servants interviewed spoke of consultations with the third sector as a means of tapping into the views and needs of ordinary people, it was clear that this interpretation was not always shared by the third sector employees submitting the responses. One interviewee described experiencing this dilemma in a previous job:

I was a public affairs officer in a children's charity. Now, I don't have children, I have never worked with children, don't work in children's services

and yet I was writing responses to consultations. Obviously based on information the charity held, but still…

Interviewee from central government

These concerns, which were raised by participants from both sectors, highlight the need for public agencies to be realistic in their expectations of what third sector organisations can offer in terms of public voice and representation. Large umbrella organisations may be able to provide useful and policy-ready advice based on their own research, but they may not have the grassroots perspectives and real-life stories that small frontline organisations can provide. Importantly, it should never be assumed that any third sector bodies represent the views of any group unless it is clearly stated how they have arrived at their knowledge and position. Equally, it is unrealistic to expect organisations of any size to carry out devolved consultation activities with citizens and service users without providing them with the resources and support to do so. Involving members and constituents in

consultation activities and then translating the findings into policy recommendations can be both costly and time consuming for third sector bodies. Moreover, doing so can carry a number of risks for the organisations. There can be reputational risks in being seen to support a consultation of questionable quality or purpose, or risks of damage to the relationships with constituents, if raising people's expectations with a consultation that then leads nowhere or to unpopular outcomes. As pointed out by one participant:

Public bodies assume that there will be no negative consequences for third sector organisations in getting involved, when that can be far from true... they can be picking up the bits for months afterwards.

Interviewee from national third sector organisation

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[57] For example, when participants in the workshops and interviews were asked what they would most like to see in the practical handbook and several mentioned help for public servants to understand the third sector and the different roles it undertakes.

It is important that public servants are aware of these potential risks and constraints on third sector bodies when expecting them to respond to consultations on behalf of a wider constituency. It is also vital that public bodies are clear and open about why they are targeting certain groups in consultations, and that those groups in turn state clearly in their responses how they have arrived at their positions and who, if any, they seek to represent. Importantly, public bodies should never see consultation with the third sector as a substitute for speaking directly to citizens, but rather as a complement to public engagement and a way of tapping into the vast knowledge and experiences held by third sector organisations in their own right.

4.5 Working with infrastructure organisations

Another factor that makes consultations with third sector organisations different is the existence of a well-developed infrastructure within the sector, with umbrella and infrastructure organisations offering support, information, training and networking opportunities to the sector. These organisations often work behind the scenes to provide a range of services to their members and networks, either within a locality, such as a local third sector assembly or council for voluntary services, or around a common concern such as childcare or mental health issues. They sometimes act as a collective voice for their third sector constituents, providing a précis of their views, lobbying on their behalf or alerting government to support or development needs within the sector. In this capacity, infrastructure organisations often assist public bodies in carrying out consultations with the third sector, by running devolved activities, providing information about specific issues or groups, or providing feedback on consultation plans and language to ensure that they are suitable to the audience. These organisations are often well placed to carry out the work as they tend to be familiar with the third sector audience and the conditions under which it works:

Some of the groups that we deal with, young people, may be people from different backgrounds; whatever it might be, the best way to reach them is normally through umbrella groups.

Interviewee from central government

For third sector bodies, infrastructure organisations can play an important role as mediators and facilitators between the wider sector and government. They are often instrumental in informing third sector organisations about consultation opportunities, providing briefings about the consultation topic or collating responses on behalf of their members and networks. One interviewee from a small third sector group explained how they rely on umbrella organisations' help in responding to consultations:

It's really helpful. If I've had some information come through that I don't understand, there's always somebody at the end of the phone to clarify what they think [it means]. And also for support... they might be able to put me in touch with another voluntary organisation who is doing the consultation, so that we can go through it together.

Interviewee from a local third sector organisation

Hence infrastructure organisations can be a significant asset in consultations with the third sector – in particular in helping authorities reach smaller and underrepresented groups. When consulting on its Third Sector Action Plan the Ministry of Justice and National Offender Management Service (NOMS) worked with Clinks, a membership organisation which supports third sector organisations working in the criminal justice system, to deliver devolved consultation events. Such methods can help to ensure that the consultation reaches more organisations which were previously not on the department's radar. Birmingham City Council, too, drew on the benefits of working with an infrastructure organisation in its consultation on adult social care services. It contracted the consultation event to the Birmingham Third Sector Assembly, an organisation which exists to promote networking and communication for local third sector organisations.

Yet, as the participants in this research were keen to point out, it is important to be mindful of the pitfalls of using infrastructure organisations in this capacity. In particular, the research participants raised concerns that through these organisations' roles as partners in consultation and "voice of the wider sector", they may inadvertently become gatekeepers between government and the wider third sector. There is a risk that in asking infrastructure organisations to collate responses on behalf of the sector, smaller and in particular volunteer-run and unregistered organisations remain invisible, meaning that their views and perspectives are not adequately captured as a result. In the words of one interviewee:

Fundamentally we want to know what disadvantaged people... think, and the bigger the organisations that we hear from, the less likely they are to give us that perspective. And the less likely the person... who has the resources to go along to a consultation event, or respond online to something, the less likely they are to be able to give us the view of the person who is in the estate in Birmingham, that we need to hear from.

Interviewee from central government

This highlights two important points. First, that public bodies must never assume that infrastructure or umbrella organisations are responding to consultations on behalf of their members, without being clear about out how they have arrived at their position. This is covered in the Compact guidance on consultation with the voluntary sector, which states that community and voluntary bodies should clearly explain "how they represent their stated constituency by stating who they are, what groups or causes in society they represent and how they involved those interests in forming their policies and positions, and in responding to the consultation itself". If organisations are not able to consult their members, the Compact states that they should make clear that they are "responding on the basis of their accumulated knowledge and experience of working with the groups concerned".[58] This is sensible advice, which applies equally to consultations with the wider third sector. The second point is that public bodies must take care not to become too reliant on infrastructure organisations to carry out consultations on their behalf. This was echoed by participants throughout the research who argued that improving consultation with the third sector would require public sector agencies to move out of their comfort zone of known infrastructure organisations to speak directly to smaller and underrepresented groups.

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[58] The Compact (2008) Code of Good Practice on Consultation and Policy Appraisal. London: Compact. Available at www.thecompact.org.uk/shared_asp_files/GFSR.asp?NodeID=100320

As the next section will show, however, some public servants find this task a daunting one.

4.6 Connecting with a diverse sector

According to the public servants who took part in this research, one of the biggest challenges when engaging with the third sector is knowing who to target within a sector that is so large, diverse and, some argued, diffuse. Describing their attempts to get to grips with the sector, one central government official said:

It's complicated, because [the sector] is so large and so varied. And often [organisations] don't agree with each other. I think it's important to understand that. And also to understand that different organisations and different communities have different abilities to engage, in terms of equality issues and resources. So it's a challenge.

Interviewee from central government.

It is clear that within a sector that includes over 200,000 organisations ranging from tiny social enterprises and faith groups to large national organisations, knowing who to speak to and how to reach them can be a challenge. Many public sector interviewees spoke of a concern that they might inadvertently overlook important stakeholder views simply because they do not know of the groups' existence. It is estimated that there are thousands of under the radar third sector organisations– small, informal and unregistered organisations and groups that are often unknown to the authorities. In this context, it is not surprising that many rely on infrastructure organisations to provide them with contacts or do outreach activities on their behalf. Yet, as we have seen, public bodies have much to gain from augmenting the work they do with infrastructure organisations with efforts to directly target frontline organisations. Indeed, it is often in these interactions that public servants find themselves confronted with ideas and perspectives that they have never considered before, insights that may not stand out when listed in a summary of recommendations but that are brought to life when framed by personal experience. Hence this report argues that public servants would benefit from personally getting to know and engaging with third sector organisations, including smaller, underrepresented and under the radar groups. This knowledge is imperative even if a consultation is not geared exclusively at third sector stakeholders, as it will help the consulting body understand the potential needs and capabilities of different groups, and help it ensure that no category of organisations is inadvertently excluded from consultation opportunities.

The research unveiled some questions about the extent to which public bodies actually carry out comprehensive stakeholder mapping and analysis when planning consultations with the third sector. The quantitative research done on the five case study consultations[59] revealed that the target audience was typically not well articulated in the consultation documents and press releases. This can be problematic, as failing to clearly define and categorise the target audience can make it difficult for consulting bodies to measure their ability to reach relevant audiences. This research also unveiled little by way of explicit tactics to reach smaller, underrepresented or unregistered organisations. An exception was the Brighton and Hove Housing Strategy Consultation,

which included a specific method for engaging with groups that had thereunto been excluded from the housing debate. Their approach included tapping into various other networks such as the local Primary Care Trust, conducting outreach work with a consultation event held on a Saturday, and attending existing meetings and events within the local authority to publicise their consultation.

It can also be helpful to involve different groups at different stages of the process, and to offer a range of consultation approaches in order to give different organisations an equal chance to respond. Another example is the public consultation on the Children's Plan by the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF), which was preceded by a pre-consultation stage where national third sector organisations and other key stakeholders advised the department on how to best reach their respective constituents. In the Ministry of Justice: National Offender Management Service (NOMS) case study, although the priority audience was organisations whose activities were identified as being directly linked to offender management, the consultation was also considered relevant for a wide range of third sector organisations which were working with offenders and their families. These were part of a wider group of users and funded across a range of agencies in areas such as employment, drugs and

alcohol and mental and physical health. It is often advisable to formulate a clear target group (primary audience) in this way and articulate why the consultation is important to them, supported by a more general statement of why it may be of interest to a wider (secondary) audience. Making the case for why the consultation is important, using a language that the target audience can understand, is vital. This became clear when research participants were asked what made them decide whether to take part in a consultation or not. The most common answer given was the relevance of the consultation to the organisation's own objectives. The general theme was that if the topic was considered sufficiently relevant, then people would endeavour to respond, even if they could not always give the consultation the time they would have wanted:

I usually try and think about the [consultations] that will have an impact on the work that we do… quite often there is a very tenuous link to the work that we do, but I have to prioritise it because the amount of documents that come out for consultation is absolutely vast.

Interviewee from local third sector organisation

Practical tips on how to identify, reach and motivate the right organisations to take part can be found in the handbook that accompanies this report, in the

sections *Getting to know the third secto*r, *Deciding who to consult, Reaching underrepresented organisations* and *Supporting third sector organisations to take part.*

4.7 Political leadership

As we have seen, for third sector organisations to prioritise a consultation exercise they need to feel confident that they will be listened to with an open mind and that the process has the potential to make a difference. These requirements sometimes sit uneasily with the culture of centralised government and strong political leadership. When outlining their visions and policies, political leaders can inadvertently close down the scope for dialogue with external stakeholders. Again, this highlights the importance of ensuring that the government's stated commitment to open and effective consultation with stakeholders amounts to more than empty statements. It also emphasises the importance of not raising an expectation that open consultation will take place if there is no genuine intention to do so or to take the findings seriously. Politicians and policy makers must always work together to ensure that they are clear about the scope of consultation and that they are not sending out conflicting messages that can risk closing down rather than opening up the dialogue process.

5. Conclusion

As this report has shown, this is a time of change and unprecedented possibilities for the third and public sectors. Never before have there been so many opportunities for the third sector to work alongside government towards shared goals, whether in delivering services for local people, helping to shape national policy or facilitating dialogue between institutions and citizens. This study suggests that the majority of people in both sectors see these changes as a positive development and welcome opportunities for the third sector to be involved in shaping public policy. Equally, respondents recognised the value of building ongoing relationships between the two sectors so that ideas, experiences and problems can continually be fed into service planning and decision making. Although consultation is only one aspect of this process of relationship building, this report suggests that if done well it can be a driver for better relationships between the public and third sector, and so ultimately contribute to better outcomes for society.

The handbook that accompanies this report sets out detailed practical guidance for how public agencies can become better at consulting with the third sector. Here, we list some of the wider implications for policy. In summary, the key areas that require attention are:

- quality not quantity
- innovation in consultation
- building third sector literacy among public officials
- building relationships
- public sector capacity
- freedom to be critical
- political support for open dialogue.

Recommendation 1 – Quality not quantity

There is a limited supply of time and energy for consultations in third sector organisations. Government must use it wisely or risk losing it completely. It is clear that the high volume of current consultations risks undermining the quality of consultation practice and thus also the perceived value of consultations in both the third and the public sector. This report suggests that public bodies would benefit from better joining up their consultation activities across departments to reduce the burden on participants and ensure better responses. Central government could benefit from introducing a single website for all government consultations, as exists in many local authorities, which would serve to help stakeholders identify relevant consultations and help public servants spot any overlaps in timeframes and consultation topics.

Recommendation: that public bodies coordinate consultation activities across departments and seek to only undertake consultations when there is the time and capacity to delivery high quality processes, which meet the expectations of the consultees and maximise value for government.

Recommendation 2 – Innovation in consultation

Good consultations are tailored to the context and the people involved.[60] Some of the most enthusiastic stories in this research were told by people who had taken the concept of consultation and transformed it, devising an entirely unique process that suited both their own needs and those of their third sector constituency. In contrast, fixed models of consultation do not accommodate different needs and unusual situations, and so risk leaving both organisers and participants dissatisfied with the outcomes. The field of public and stakeholder engagement is constantly evolving, with new approaches being invented all the time. It is therefore vital that officials charged with running consultations have the freedom to experiment, the confidence to combine methods to suit their needs and the skills and imagination to invent new ways of involving stakeholders.

Recommendation: that public agencies explicitly encourage their employees to deliver innovative consultation processes that are bespoke for third sector stakeholders and compatible with their unique role.

Recommendation 3 – Building third sector literacy among public officials

This research has revealed that many public servants lack a good understanding of the third sector, including the different types of organisations that constitute the sector, the different roles they play in society, the specific constraints they work under and how they could contribute to policy making. Lacking this knowledge can lead to consultation processes that are insensitive to the needs of third sector organisations, which in turn can undermine efforts to build positive relationships with the sector.

Recommendation: that public servants are given support to better understand the working reality of third sector organisations, through measures such as training, shadowing, secondments, visits, partnership working and direct involvement in consultation activities.

Recommendation 4 – Building relationships

This research has shown that personal relationships between public servants and third sector workers are key. Preconceptions and myths exist on both sides, which are often symptomatic of a lack of positive personal experiences of working directly with people from the other sector. These negative sentiments are sometimes reinforced by a reliance on external researchers and dedicated consultation teams that can act as a gatekeeper between policy makers and third sector stakeholders. It is therefore critical that time is allocated for public servants to be directly involved in consultation activities and to engage directly with people from third sector organisations outside the consultation process.

Recommendation: that public servants are given the time and resources to develop considered and sustained relationships with members of the third sector above and beyond the formal consultation process.

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[60] Involve and National Consumer Council (2008) Deliberative Public Engagement: Nine Principles. London: NCC. Available at: www.involve.org.uk/deliberative_principles

Recommendation 5 – Public sector capacity

Many public servants lack the skills or time to consult the third sector and rely on special consultation units, communications teams or external contractors to run consultations for them. This means that a large number of officials miss out on hearing first hand from third sector stakeholders about their experiences and views. This research suggests, in line with previous studies[61] by Involve, that officials derive most value and learning from consultations in which they have been directly involved, in particular when those consultations involve face-to-face interactions.

Recommendation: that those policy officials and politicians most involved in the service or policy in question are directly involved in the consultation process, in order to gain first hand experience of the knowledge, relationships and valuable engagement skills that these processes can generate.

Recommendation 6 – Freedom to be critical

Some third sector organisations, in particular those relying on a public body for funding, fear that being openly critical in consultations will damage their relationship with the consulting body and impact on future funding prospects. This problem is often more prevalent in local government where authorities and third sector organisations tend to work closer together through Local Area Agreements and other forms of partnership.

Recommendation: that public bodies make more efforts to show, in their actions as well as words, that consultations are a safe space for the third sector to voice their views and criticisms about public sector policy and conduct, without fear of adverse consequences.

Recommendation 7 – Political support for open dialogue

This report has demonstrated how political involvement in consultations can serve to close down rather than open up debate. Politicians and policy makers must work together to ensure that they are not sending out conflicting messages that may undermine the consultation process.

Recommendation: that public bodies are open about the role of consultation alongside other influencers such as political pressures, honest about the scope of consultation to actually make a difference, and only consult when both politicians and policy makers are genuinely willing to take the findings on board.

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[61] Creasy et al. (2007) Engage for Change; Gavelin et al. (2007) Democratic Technologies?

Final reflections

This report has argued that although consultation practice is improving around the country, there remains work to be done to ensure that consultations will contribute to building the foundations of a truly effective relationship between the third and public sectors. For too long consultation has been framed as a top-down and rigid policy instrument as opposed to a tool for listening, learning and supporting human relationships. This historic framing has contributed to maintaining an arms-length relationship between the third sector and policy makers. This report suggests that by making the process of consultation more people friendly, it can become a basis for constructive dialogue and relationship building between the third sector and government, which unlocks the added value both can bring to policy and service development. There are many inspiring examples of the transformational effects of good consultation, both in the UK and elsewhere, which have transferable ideas and techniques. The handbook which accompanies this document provides practical tips and guidance on how consultations can be made a more rewarding experience for all who engage in them.

Part 2: Practical handbook

About this handbook

This handbook provides advice, information and practical examples to help public bodies engage third sector organisations in decision and policy making.

It aims to complement, rather than replicate, the extensive guidance already available on public and stakeholder consultation and engagement; therefore it includes links to other documents and websites where readers can find more information. This handbook endorses the government's *Code of Practice on Consultation*[62] *and the Compact*[63] *Code on Consultation and Policy Appraisal*[64].

Who is this handbook for?

The primary audience for the handbook are officials in the public sector whose work involves consultation with third sector bodies. The document also aims to be useful for public sector workers not directly involved in consultation activities but whose work could benefit from more third sector input.

How were the examples chosen?

The case studies used in this handbook have not been quality controlled and are not included to represent best practice; rather they have been chosen to reflect a diversity of practices, policy areas and government levels. Some of the examples used in the handbook are taken from the case studies that were used in the research on which this handbook is based. See the research methodology in *Appendix 2* for more information.

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[62]Department for Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform (BERR) (2008) Code of Practice on Consultation. London: HM Government (See appendix 2 for a summary of this document)

[63] Note that at the time of writing the Compact is under review and due to be updated. There is a possibility that the Compact will be given statutory powers, which would have implications for how public sector bodies consult the third sector. See www.thecompact.org.uk for more information.

[64] The Compact (2008) Code of Good Practice on Consultation and Policy Appraisal. London: Compact (See appendix 4 for a summary of this document)

Questions for planning consultation

This handbook has been designed as a resource for people with different levels of experience of consultation and of working with the third sector. Some people will benefit from reading the document in full whilst others will use it to dip in and out of as and when they need.

These questions can help you identify what you are looking for:

Before consulting, ask yourself..	If the answer is no, take a look at these sections:
Do you already know your third sector constituency?	• Getting to know the third sector - page 52 • Building ongoing relationships with the third sector - page 55 • Reaching underrepresented organisations - page 77
Are your colleagues and seniors supportive of consultation?	• Building a culture of engagement and learning - page 58 • Collaborating and planning ahead - page 60 • Building consultation into decision making - page 66
Can anything change as a result of the consultation?	• Building consultation into decision making - page 66
Are you clear about why you are consulting?	• Planning consultation with the third sector - page 62 • Being clear about the purpose - page 63
Do you have a good knowledge of the history of the issue, including past consultations?	• Planning consultation with the third sector - page 62 • Building consultation into decision making - page 66

Before consulting, ask yourself..	If the answer is no, take a look at these sections:
Are you clear about who needs to be consulted and how you will reach them?	• Deciding who to consult - page 68 • Reaching underrepresented organisations - page 70
Are key decision makers and stakeholders clear about why the consultation is happening?	• Building consultation into decision making - page 66 • Being clear about the purpose - page 63 • Communications - page 78
Have you thought about how you can make it easier for third sector organisations take part?	• Reaching underrepresented organisations - page 70 • Supporting third sector organisations to take part - page 81
Have you thought about how third sector organisations could help you consult better?	• Devolved consultation: how third sector organisations can help you consult better - page 85
Do you know which consultation method to use?	• Choosing the right method - page 74 • List of methods - page 92
Do you know how to communicate with a third sector audience?	• Communications - page 78
Have you thought about what will happen after the consultation finishes?	• Building consultation into decision making - page 66 • Feedback and follow up - page 88
Have you thought about how you will measure the success of the consultation?	• Evaluation and learning - page 90

Building the foundations for good consultation

1. Getting to know the third sector

What would you rather respond to on a Monday morning, the consultation you've been emailed or the woman waiting in reception who's partner has just beaten her up and who's looking for some emergency accommodation for herself and the child? That's often the reality that third sector workers are faced with.

Representative from local government

In order to make the most of the skills, experiences and knowledge held by third sector organisations, it is vital that people working in public policy making have a good understanding of the sector, the constraints it operates under and what third sector organisations can offer policy making and public services.

What does this mean?

• **Find out how the other side lives**. Take the time to visit third sector organisations to see what a typical working day is like for them, and invite them to do the same with you. Secondments and shadowing are excellent ways to gain insights into a different sector, which can help public sector and third sector workers understand each other better.

• **Map your constituency.** Who are the third sector organisations in the field or local area? Are there any organisations that are less likely to take part in consultation or that have been overlooked in the past? Ask the organisations you know who else should be involved and consider what support you could offer to make it easier for more organisations to take part in your consultation activities.

• **Do not assume that you know best.** Ask your third sector constituency what they want to be consulted on and how, to avoid wasting their time and yours.

• **Acknowledge how third sector organisations see themselves.** Many organisations that fall under the official definition of the third sector do not recognise the term and may not see themselves as part of the sector. Avoid using jargon and ask for help from the relevant organisations to make sure that appropriate language is used when engaging with your third sector constituency.

• **Acknowledge that there is diversity within organisations in the third sector as well as between them.** Staff members of different ranks will have different abilities and levels of willingness to respond to a consultation, with volunteers in particular often finding themselves unable to respond to consultations unless given extra support.

See also: *Building ongoing relationships with the sector, Deciding who to consult, Reaching underrepresented organisations* and *Supporting third sector organisations to take part.*

What others have done

Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra): Asking third sector bodies how they want to be consulted

Many government departments now ask their third sector stakeholders what they want to be consulted on and how. When Defra broached this topic in its Third Sector Strategy consultation, it received a number of constructive suggestions; many of them focused on how to engage better with smaller third sector bodies. Suggestions included making the language of consultation more inspiring and jargon-free, introducing an engagement programme between community activists and civil servants and emphasising two-way communication and action through secondments and visits.

In the later stages of the development of Defra's Third Sector Strategy, the department advertised a secondment opportunity for a third sector professional to join the third sector team within the department to support the implementation of the strategy.

See: www.defra.gov.uk/corporate/consult/thirdsector%2Dstrategy

Helpful links

• **Charity Commission** – holds information about all registered charities in the UK: www.charity-commission.gov.uk

• **GuideStar UK** – a database of all registered charities, voluntary organisations, social enterprises and community groups in England and Wales:
www.guidestar.org.uk/

• **Office of the Third Sector website** – contains key statistics on the third sector: www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/third_sector/Research_and_statistics/Key_statistics.aspx

• **The Compact website** – information about the Compact and about the community and voluntary sector more generally: www.thecompact.org.uk

• **National Association for Voluntary and Community Action (NAVCA) website** – contains a directory of local third sector groups and organisations:
www.navca.org.uk

• **Getting to know your local voluntary and community sector** – toolkit provided by The National Association for Voluntary and Community Action (NAVCA):
www.navca.org.uk/stratwork/localgov/areaprofiles/vsprofilestoolkit.htm

• **The environment for a thriving third sector report –** contains third sector statistics:
www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/~/media/assets/www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/third_sector/research%20paper%20chapter%203%20pdf.ashx

• **The Third Sector Review 2007 –** sets out the government's ten-year strategy for working with the third sector: www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/third_sector/third_sector_review/Third_sector_review_final_report.aspx

• **Social Enterprise Coalition website –** contains information about social enterprise in the UK: www.socialenterprise.org.uk

• **Get to know Scotland's Third Sector** – webpage explaining the different types of third sector organisations and the roles they play: www.scvo.org/scvo/Information/ViewInformation.aspx?al=t&page=&all=&from=DSR&Info=1623&TCID=27&PageName=Facts

• **What is the Community and Voluntary Sector?** – Information and guidance provided by the Improvement and Development Agency (IDeA): www.idea.gov.uk/idk/core/page.do?pageId=1344967

• **Social enterprise and local government** -Information and guidance provided by the Improvement and Development Agency (IDeA): www.idea.gov.uk/idk/core/page.do?pageId=8840188

2.Building ongoing relationships with the third sector

I'm more likely to respond to a consultation where I'm already engaged in a conversation with the [consulting] body.

Representative from national third sector organisation

Effective consultation with the third sector is not just about applying the right techniques and speaking to the right people. Often, the consultations seen as most successful are those where there is an ongoing relationship between the organising body and the participating organisations, founded on cooperation and mutual respect. Ensuring that the relationship between public institutions and third sector organisations is productive and sustainable requires **patience**, an **open mind** and an **ongoing commitment** from both sides.

What does this mean?

• **Establish an ongoing working relationship with your third sector constituency** such as stakeholder groups that meet regularly to inform policy or service discussions, oversight groups that help design and monitor the consultation or a larger forum or assembly. Whatever the format, ensure that the working relationship is transparent, membership of any group is open and that it includes a cross-section of organisations. This means thinking about how to support smaller organisations to be involved.

• **Tap into existing networks**. Get to know the relevant infrastructure and umbrella organisations[65] and use their expertise and contacts to build relationships. **Local Strategic Partnerships (LSP), Local Area Agreements (LAA)** and local and regional infrastructures such as **Third sector Assemblies** can provide an ideal forum for promoting consultation with the third sector. However, do not rely entirely on the networks of infrastructure organisations to reach your audience as they may not be in contact with all relevant **parties themselves.**

• **Maintain communications throughout any consultation process**, and stay in touch afterwards. See also sections on C*ommunications, Supporting third sector organisations to take part* and *Feedback.*

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[65] Infrastructure and umbrella organisations are networking and membership bodies, which often work behind the scenes to support third sector organisations. They can provide a range of services and support for their members, either within a locality or around a common concern such as childcare or mental health issues. Infrastructure organisations can also sometimes act as the collective voice for the third sector organisations they represent; collating their views and lobbying on their behalf.

What have others done?

Communities and Local Government: Introducing a Third Sector Partnership Board

The department Communities and Local Government has established a Third Sector Partnership Board to help improve its understanding of the third sector and the role the sector might play in its work. The Board is made up of representatives from third sector organisations large and small; it aims to serve as a critical friend to the department; bringing voices from the margins into policy making.

See: www.communities.gov.uk/communities/thirdsector/partnershipboard/

Brighton and Hove City Council: Setting up sustainable third sector working groups

When running their housing strategy consultations, Brighton and Hove council officers established working groups with members of the council, social services and third sector organisations. The groups were set up with the expectation that they would continue to meet after the consultation process and help to sustain the relationship between the council and third sector. Explaining the idea behind the process, one of the organisers said: *"once the strategy is published, we don't want to just stick it on the shelf and forget about it. We want these groups to be self-sustaining, and we want them to come back to us after six months and say 'right, you've done your strategy now tell us what's been implemented, what's worked, what's not worked?'*

See: www.brighton-hove.gov.uk/index.cfm?request=c1188834

Birmingham Third Sector Assembly

Birmingham's Third sector Assembly works to promote the influence of the local third sector. One of its key aims is to improve relationships between the sector and public sector partners such as Birmingham City Council.

See: www.bvsc.org/assembly

Helpful links

• **Partnership informationbank** – contains information and tools for building local partnerships with the third sector, provided by the National Association for Voluntary and Community Action (NAVCA): www.navca.org.uk/localvs/infobank

• **Local Area Agreement and Local Strategic Partnerships** – information and guidance provided by the Improvement and Development Agency (IDeA): www.idea.gov.uk/idk/core/page.do?pageId=1174195

• **Communities in Control: Real people, real power** - Empowerment White Paper:www.communities.gov.uk/publications/communities/communitiesincontrol

• **Partnership intelligence self assessment questionnaire** - tool for getting the most out of partnership working, provided by OPM: https://services.opm.co.uk/lip/home.aspx

• **Working with the third sector** – National Audit Office report: www.nao.org.uk/publications/nao_reports/05-06/050675.pdf

• **Working together in practice** – a toolkit to support Learning and Skills Council (LSC) working with the community and voluntary sector: http://readingroom.lsc.gov.uk/LSC/2005/quality/goodpractice/working-together-in-practice-vol-2-working-smarter.pdf

• **Local Compact Implementation Workbook** – contains guidance on setting up and maintaining a local compact: www.thecompact.org.uk/shared_asp_files/GFSR.asp?NodeID=101225

3.Building a culture of engagement and learning

I wish that more officers were expected to get involved in consultation work, to understand the communities they're serving and to understand the value of the third sector in providing information about those communities that we would not otherwise know.

Representative from local government

If third sector consultation is to become truly embedded into policy and decision making, more needs to be done to help officials at all levels understand how engaging with the third sector can help them in their work. This means building consultation objectives into organisational strategies, offering training in consultation skills and giving staff at all levels the chance to see for themselves how and when engaging with third sector organisations can make a difference to their work.

What does this mean?

Measures that can help achieve this goal include:

• **Investing time and resources.** Running good consultations takes time, as does building and sustaining relationships with third sector organisations. This needs to be acknowledged at the senior level; staff should not be expected to carry out more consultations unless they have the time and funds to do it well.

• **Encouraging secondments and visits,** both from the public sector to third sector organisations and vice versa. If full-time secondments are not feasible it may be possible to lend staff members to other organisations on day release or part-time. Secondments and shadowing can be effective ways of strengthening relationships and improving understanding between the public and the third sector.

• **Building consultation with the third sector and other stakeholders into institutional strategies and make it a part of the job description for staff at all levels.** This will send a message of buy-in from the leadership of the organisation and will help officials see consultation as an intrinsic part of their work rather than an add-on that is dealt with by consultation units and communications departments.

• **Ensuring that staff at all levels,** including the leadership, have personal experience of working with third sector organisations. The more direct the interaction the better: face-to-face discussion with third sector representatives is more likely to give officials an understanding of their perspective than reading a summary of responses to a paper consultation.

• **Training staff at *all levels* in the skills and value of consultation with the third sector.** Training should include building knowledge and understanding of third sector organisations and the specific constraints under which they operate. Ideally, training should be linked to an existing consultation exercise in order to give participants practical experiences of engaging with the third sector. Consider encouraging staff to run their own consultation events, thus saving money and making the process less convoluted.

• **Setting up internal and external networks for sharing experiences about consultation.** This allows colleagues to exchange good practice stories and learn from consultations that were not successful.

What others have done

Welsh Assembly and Carnegie Young People Initiative (CYPI): Building a culture of engagement from the top down

In 2005 and 2006 The Carnegie Trust teamed up with the Welsh Assembly and Strategic Developments International to pilot a one-year youth engagement programme for senior officials in the Welsh Assembly. The objective was to go beyond training and one-off events and instead challenge the leadership of key departments to work closely with a consortium of children and youth organisations over the course of a year. The idea was that by giving senior officials first-hand experience of working with the youth consortium, their buy-in for youth engagement and the lessons they learnt would trickle down through the departments, gradually leading to a culture change among the rest of the staff. The Human Resources Directorate in the Welsh Assembly Government supported the pilot and plans are being considered for a wider roll out of the programme. The Carnegie Trust writes that "this innovative approach to cultural change was made possible by the way in which government and the third sector in Wales work closely together, and their receptiveness to CYPI's idea to challenge conventional approaches to learning and change."[66]

See: http://cypi.carnegieuktrust.org.uk/files/cypi_final_report_0.pdf

Ministry of Justice (MoJ): Offering participation planning support to government departments

The Ministry of Justice teamed up with public participation experts to offer a support programme to staff from all government departments in the delivery and evaluation of public engagement exercises. The Participation Partners programme was free and offered to all government departments via the Democratic Engagement Team at the Ministry of Justice.

Helpful links:

• **The Democratic Engagement Team at the Ministry of Justice** – offers information and support to central government departments in their engagement with the public and stakeholders: www.justice.gov.uk/whatwedo/democraticengagement.htm

• **International Association of Facilitators website**: www.iaf-world.org

• **CIPD website** – contains general information on secondments: www.cipd.co.uk/subjects/lrnanddev/secondment/secondment.htm

• **Is your organisation a learning organisation?** Information and interactive questionnaire provided by the government's Inspire Learning for All website: www.inspiringlearningforall.gov.uk/go_further/learn_as_organisations/learn_as_organisations/_220/default.aspx

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[66] Carnegie UK Trust (2008) Empowering Young People. London: Carnegie UK.

4.Collaborating and planning ahead

I don't think there could be too many [consultations]. Though it would be nice sometimes if people in government talked to each other so they didn't send them all out at once!

Representative from local third sector organisation

Many third sector organisations feel overburdened by the number of government consultations and frustrated at being asked the same questions over and over again by different departments. Collaborating and planning ahead can help limit the number of consultations that are released, saving time and resources for both the consulting body and the responding organisations. Consulting selectively and avoiding repeating the same questions can also help prevent consultation fatigue among the participating organisations.

What does this mean?

• **Join forces with others where possible.** Working together to consult the same groups saves time and helps ensure that different departments are not asking the same questions.

• **Make use of information already gathered elsewhere.** The government's Code of Practice on Consultation recommends that consideration is always given to whether information gathered in the past consultations can be reused. If so, details of how that information was gained should be clearly stated so that consultees can decide whether to comment or contribute further[67].

• **Plan ahead**. The Compact recommends that departments keep a consultation calendar showing forthcoming consultations and contact points for further information. These should be made available on institutional websites to keep stakeholders and other public sector departments informed of the plans.[68]

• **Evaluate and learn from consultation** and make sure that the lessons learnt are shared across departments.

What others have done

Consultation handbook and calendar – St Helen's Council

St Helen's Council's website hosts a combined e-consultation handbook and consultation calendar, which provides information for staff and the community. Officers can use the handbook to plan consultations and share findings and evaluation reports, whereas citizens and community organisations can use it to find out about

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[67] Department for Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform (BERR) (2008) Code of Practice on Consultation. London: HM Government, p.11.
[68] Compact (2008) Code of Good Practice on Consultation and Policy Appraisal. London: Compact, p.10

ongoing consultations or learn what happened with the ones they responded to in the past. The handbook also contains a database of community and voluntary groups and information about how to ensure diversity in engagement.

See: http://umbrella.sthelens.gov.uk/Consultations/home.htm

Sharing events to save time and effort – Brighton and Hove City Council
The Housing team in Brighton and Hove held joint consultation events with the local Primary Care Trust to tap into each others' networks and avoid duplication of efforts.

See: www.brighton-hove.gov.uk/index.cfm?request=c1188834

Coordinating consultation plans – Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF)
Many central government departments now have dedicated consultation units that keep track of consultation needs and coordinate the consultations taking place across the departments. The consultation unit at the Department for Children, Schools and Families keeps a list of forthcoming policy developments, from specific issues like changes in legislation to more broad-reaching and open consultations on strategic objectives. The aim is that by coordinating forthcoming consultations the department will minimise the burden on officials and stakeholders.

See: www.dcsf.gov.uk/consultations/conResults.cfm?consultationId=1505

Helpful links

• **Info 4 Local** – provides a database and email updates about consultations relevant for local government: www.info4local.gov.uk

• **Code of Practice on Consultation** – the official government guidance on consultation: www.berr.gov.uk/files/file47158.pdf

• **Compact Code of Good Practice on Consultation and Policy Appraisal** – contains advice on planning and delivering consultations with the voluntary and community sectors: www.thecompact.org.uk/shared_asp_files/GFSR.asp?NodeID=100320

• **The Democratic Engagement Team at the Ministry of Justice** – offers information and support to central government departments in their engagement with the public and stakeholders: www.justice.gov.uk/whatwedo/democraticengagement.htm

Planning consultation with the third sector

Many people whose work involves running consultations find themselves replicating processes that have worked in the past. This approach can be mistaken, as it does not take into account what is different about a new situation. Effective consultation with any stakeholder group requires careful consideration of the political, social and institutional context in which it takes place.

A useful formula[69] for making sure that the consultation process is tailored to the situation is:

purpose + **context** + **people** + **process** = **outcome**

• **Purpose** – being clear about what the consultation seeks to achieve.

• **Context** – being mindful of the political situation, the culture of the institution running the exercise, the history of the issue and of the relationship between the different parties involved.

• **People** – making sure that there is an understanding of how to involve the right third sector actors and the needs they may have in order to participate.

• **Process** – choosing an approach that fits the purpose, context and organisations involved.

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[69] This formula was previously used in: Involve and National Consumer Council (2008) Deliberative Public Engagement: Nine Principles. National Consumer Council. Available at: www.involve.org.uk/deliberative_principles

5.Why consult?

Being clear about the purpose

I think until the council gives some credible evidence that it's actually doing consultation for a purpose... then it's never going to get organisations like our own giving meaningful [input in consultations].

Representative from local third sector organisation

A common cause of conflict and failure in consultations is a lack of clarity on the purpose of the exercise and mismatching expectations about its role and influence. Institutions can sometimes embark on consultation activities without being clear about:

• why they are doing it

• how the process will make a difference

• who will be responsible for taking the findings forward.

Lacking an explicit purpose can lead to mismatching expectations and friction between organisers and participants. This in turn diminishes the chance of being able to plan for and successfully deliver an effective consultation.

What does this mean?

Defining the purpose is the first and often the most important step of any consultation exercise.[70]

• Setting a purpose means being clear about the **desired outcome and outputs.** The outcome is how the exercise will make a difference and the outputs are the different activities and products that will make the outcome happen, such as meetings, workshops, websites, surveys and reports.

• When thinking about the purpose it is useful to **separate the primary objective from secondary objectives**. Primary objectives are the reason the consultation is taking place in the first place, and secondary objectives are any added benefits, such as new working relationships. This helps ensure that the process stays focused and does not get sidetracked by secondary aims along the way.

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[70] Adapted from Involve (2005) People and Participation. London: Involve.

• Defining the purpose also means clarifying the **scope of the process – what level of influence it will have on decision making** – and making plans to ensure that there are resources in place to take the findings forward. See the section *Building consultations into decision making.*

• Finally, it is important to **manage the expectations of all involved.** This means communicating the purpose and scope to everyone who is affected by the consultation.

What others have done

Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF): Setting the agenda together

Before the Department for Children, Schools and Families embarked on its Time to Talk consultation on the Children's Plan in 2007, it held pre-consultation meetings with select groups of third sector organisations, which helped shape the purpose and agenda of the consultation. According to one consultation organiser, this led to greater consensus further down the line: *"I think [the organisations] felt that they owned the product because they were not only involved in responding to the consultation but they were involved in thinking about what we consult on and who we ask. They weren't just given a document to respond to; they were actually involved much more on a one to one basis in discussions."*

See: www.dcsf.gov.uk/consultations/conResults.cfm?consultationId=1505

Birmingham Third Sector Assembly: Managing expectations

The organisers of the Birmingham's Third Sector Assembly made the decision to remove the word "consultation" from their promotional materials when publicising a Local Area Agreement event. They felt that the scope for changing the direction of the LAA was limited and believed that, in this instance, the word consultation would raise false expectations. One of the organisers said: *"If we get sent something that's not a wide open consultation we'll try to manage expectations and I think we did so at that instance by changing the name to engagement."*

See: www.bvsc.org/assembly

Helpful links

• **People and Participation –** contains tools and information for planning public and stakeholder engagement: www.peopleandparticipation.net

• **Code of Practice on Consultation –** the official government guidance on consultation: www.berr.gov.uk/files/file47158.pdf

• **Compact Code of Good Practice on Consultation and Policy Appraisal –** contains advice on planning and delivering consultations with the voluntary and community sectors: www.thecompact.org.uk/shared_asp_files/GFSR.asp?NodeID=100320

• **Deliberative public engagement -** nine principles. Guidance by Involve and the National Consumer Council: www.involve.org.uk/deliberative_principles

• **International Association for Public Participation (IAP2) website** - contains information and tools for public and stakeholder engagement: www.iap2.org

• For more useful guides and resources, see *How to Consult.*

Building consultation into decision making

A proper consultation should be at the right time, where fundamental feedback can alter the vision.

Representative from local government

Good consultation makes a difference. There is no point in asking people for their views unless the consulting body is committed to carefully considering their input.[71] However, building consultation activities into fixed and time-bound policy processes can be easier said than done. To make sure that the consultation findings can be used in the policy decision-making process requires careful planning by the organisers and ongoing commitment from those charged with taking the findings forward, including senior policy makers and politicians.

What does this mean?

• **Do not consult until there is a detailed plan for how the consultation findings will be used.** This should set out *who* will be taking the consultation findings forward, *how* they will be used and *what weight* they will be given alongside other sources of evidence. Make this information available to those who are affected by the consultation, including participants, policy makers and politicians.

• **Get the right people onboard from the start.** This includes politicians and policy makers who will be affected by or asked to respond to the consultation findings. When the consultation involves face-to-face meetings with respondents, seek to have the relevant policy makers and politicians in the room to ensure that they hear the participants' views first hand.

• **Consult early** to ensure that there is adequate scope for the consultation to influence the decisions or policy.

• **Consult over time.** It may be appropriate to consult iteratively to allow the third sector stakeholders to give their views at different stages of the decision making process, such as the scoping stage, the policy drafting stage and the implementation stage.

• **Provide enough time for participants to respond.** The government recommends a minimum of twelve weeks for written consultation processes, with consideration given to longer timescales where feasible and over holiday periods.[72]

• **Do not bite off more than you can chew.** Do not plan activities that require large amounts of data processing, analysis and follow up unless there is time and resources allocated to carry out these tasks.

• **Plan for the unexpected.** Make sure that all involved understand the scope of the consultation, but do build in some contingency for dealing with any unexpected issues as ignoring them can reduce the participants' faith in the consultation process.

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[71] Involve and National Consumer Council (2008) Deliberative Public Engagement: Nine Principles.
[72] HM Government (2008), p.8.

• **Do not repeat what has been done before.** Find out what other consultations and research have taken place on the same subject and consider whether old data can be used before embarking on a new consultation.[73]

• **Plan for the unexpected.** Make sure that all involved understand the scope of the consultation, but do build in some contingency for dealing with any unexpected issues as ignoring them can reduce the participants' faith in the consultation process.

What others have done

Brighton and Hove City Council: A phased consultation approach

Organisers of Brighton and Hove's housing strategy consultations employed a phased consultation approach extending over a year and a half. At the beginning of the process the subject open for consultation was very broad: a document outlining some of the housing issues was published and respondents were asked to comment and point out the gaps. The findings of the first stage informed the draft housing strategy, which was then consulted on through a range of activities. In this way the consultation developed over time, gradually homing in on the specific issues that the local residents and third sector organisations identified as important. Summing up the experience, one of the organisers said: *"We asked the people that we wanted to consult what was the most convenient way for them to be consulted. And then we tried to do as much of that as we could. We re-assessed every week what our plans were and what our resources were. We asked senior managers to give their policy officers a bit more time to do this. Generally speaking, it worked out."*

See: www.brighton-hove.gov.uk/index.cfm?request=c1188834

Ministry of Justice: National Offender Management Services (NOMS): Listening to stakeholders all the way

The National Offender Management Service worked closely with a third sector advisory group throughout its Third Sector Action Plan consultation. This included extensive work at the pre-consultation stage when the advisory group and other key stakeholders read early drafts of the plan and commented on the consultation process. The advisory group was also involved in reviewing the responses and the final plan. One of the consultation organisers said at the end of the process: *"Our final plan looks quite different as a result [of the consultation]. I'm really pleased about that and I think that our third sector advisory group felt that it really did reflect the key messages that came back from the sector and that it took them onboard."*

See: www.justice.gov.uk/docs/tsap_consultation_1207.pdf

Helpful links

For links to useful guides and resources, see *How to Consult.*

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[73] HM Government (2008), p.11

6.Who should be consulted?
Deciding who to consult

There's no point in consulting people without understanding what the organisation is doing in the first place, and if it's worth their while doing it.

Representative from local third sector organisation

There are several different approaches to selecting participants. The two basic distinctions are:

• **Open consultation**; where all those with an interest in the subject area can take part.

• **Targeted consultation**; where the consulting body identifies a priority audience and seeks to involve only those people. Participants for targeted processes of consultation are usually selected on the basis of one of three factors:

   o Interest: only organisations with a specific interest in the policy area are invited to take part.

   o Geographic location: the consultation is only open to organisations operating within a specific locality.

   o Relationship with the consulting body: the consulting body targets organisations and people that they already know.

The process of identifying who will be affected by the consultation is often referred to as stakeholder analysis. It is common to use a combination of open and targeted consultation methods within the same consultation. Some processes involve different groups and different approaches at different stages. For example, some open consultations involve targeted elements in order to ensure a broad response base or to encourage participation from underrepresented groups.

What does this mean?

The first step is to identify who should be consulted. These questions can help:

• Which third sector organisations are affected by the consultation topic? Map out the constituency of those who could be interested and affected by the issues. If this is not clear, involve third sector organisations in determining who they think should also be involved; local third sector assemblies and local Councils for Voluntary Service (CVS) hold a wealth of information, as do online databases such as the Charity Commission (www.charity-commission.gov.uk), GuideStar (www.guidestar. org.uk) and National Association for Voluntary and Community Action (NAVCA) (www.navca.org.uk/localvs/lio).

• Are there well-established opposing viewpoints on the issue? If so, ensure that the different sides of the debate are represented in the consultation.

• Is there a case for involving different groups at different stages in the consultation? This might involve doing targeted work with a small group of third sector organisations at the scoping stage, followed by an open consultation with a more general audience later on.

What others have done

Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF): Different people at different stages
Many government departments now use a staged approach to consultation, targeting a different group of stakeholders at each step of the process. This was the methodology adopted by the Department for Children, Schools and Families in its Time to Talk consultation on the Children's Plan. First, the department held a series of discussions with expert groups involving specifically invited stakeholders, including third sector organisations. On the basis of these discussions there was a wider consultation for the public and other stakeholders, which led to the development of the Children's Plan itself. There was also a handbook for organisations seeking to run their own event, and a separate consultation document for children.

See: www.dcsf.gov.uk/consultations/conResults.cfm?consultationId=1505

Helpful links

• **Stakeholder analysis** – information, advice and checklist provided by the Improvement and Development Agency (IDeA): www.idea.gov.uk/idk/core/page.do?pageId=7216611

• **ODI stakeholder analysis information website:** www.odi.org.uk/RAPID/Tools/Toolkits/Communication/Stakeholder_analysis.html

• **Euforic stakeholder analysis guidance:** www.euforic.org/gb/stake1.htm

• **Southern Cross University step-by-step guide to stakeholder analysis**: www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/arp/stake.html

• **Scenario Plus stakeholder analysis template:** www.scenarioplus.org.uk/stakeholders/stakeholders_template.doc

• **GuideStar UK website –** contains information on all registered third sector organisations in England and Wales: www.guidestar.org.uk

• For more links, see *Getting to know the third sector, Reaching underrepresented and under the radar organisations.*

Reaching underrepresented organisations

If there is a particular area of the third sector that a response is needed from, the personal touch can really help. Normally, if people ring you up and ask you to do things, if you can accommodate it you do try to. We certainly do.

Representative from local third sector organisation

When planning a consultation it is important to ensure that no group is inadvertently excluded from the activities. This can happen when:

• the consulting body does not know its constituency well enough and so fails to target all relevant organisations

• an organisation falls "under the radar" because the consulting body is unaware that the organisation exists, perhaps due to the organisation being small or unregistered

• the consulting body fails to communicate the relevance of the consultation to the target organisations

• the timeframes of the consultation are too tight, making it difficult for organisations to contribute in time

• the consultation method or language are inappropriate to certain groups, thus putting them off taking part.

When considering these issues:

• avoid the term "hard to reach"; many people see this as a stigmatising term and feel that it unfairly shifts the focus of effort away from the body seeking to consult, defining the problem "as one within the group itself, not within [the organisation's] approach to them" [74]

• also avoid stereotyping when considering who may be at risk from exclusion as it will differ widely depending on the situation and the consultation method.

[74] Brackertz, N. (2007) Who Is Hard To Reach and Why, ISR working paper. Institute for Social Research. Available at: www.sisr.net/publications/0701brackertz.pdf

What does this mean?

The following questions can help identifying which groups might be at risk from being excluded from the consultation:

• How well do you know your third sector constituency? Use local lists to help identify under the radar organisations. A number of organisations hold lists of locally based organisations (for example local authority libraries and compact coordinators, community foundations and local infrastructure organisations). Local third sector forums or networks on specific issues (e.g. disabilities) may also hold details of organisations and groups that are not yet known to the consulting body. (See also *Getting to know the third sector)* .

• Are there any groups of third sector organisations that are affected by the issue whose views have not been represented to date?

• Are there any groups that could be considered more vulnerable than others, for example because they have fewer resources or because they are affected by language or skills gaps?

• Is it important that the respondents reflect a representative cross-section of the wider public? If the decisions made will affect a wide range of people, are the views of women, elderly people, disabled people or black and minority ethnic groups represented? To assess this it can help to carry out a small demographic audit of the target audience to identify who has contributed and who has not. Which demographic categories are relevant will depend on the topic, but it is important not to overlook these considerations when consulting third sector bodies.

The best way of identifying and reaching underrepresented groups depends on the situation and the group. The following points can help determine the right approach:

• Consider the different types of support outlined in the section on supporting the third sector to take part in consultations.

• Good accessible communications are vital for ensuring that the right people are aware of the consultation.

• Infrastructure organisations and community groups such as faith groups can be invaluable in helping to identify and reach underrepresented and under the radar groups.

• Building relationships with the relevant organisations over time can help encourage wider participation, as can adding a personal touch, such as calling people up, going to visit them and simply asking them what they think of consultations and how they would like to get involved.

• Consider piggybacking onto existing third sector events. Many third sector organisations have a regular calendar of event, ranging from conferences to coffee mornings, support sessions, annual general meetings, fun days, and so on. Attending these meetings and events to give presentations and engage the organisations in policy discussions is one way of getting views. A further step is to offer to fund such an event and then work with the organisation to build a consultation element into the event. *Note: Piggy backing on existing events is not appropriate as the sole method for recruiting stakeholders, as this is likely to identify organisations already connected in some way to each other.*

What others have done

Brighton and Hove City Council: Going to them

In order to reach organisations that would not normally take part in consultations, Brighton and Hove's Housing Team put together a presentation template that could be taken to existing meetings in third sector organisations. Council officers adapted the presentation for each meeting to make sure that it included the questions that were most relevant to that particular organisation. Rather than then asking the organisations to respond to the consultation documents, the officers scribed the discussions at the meetings. Although this informal way of working made it difficult to track the number of organisations and individuals that had taken part in the consultation, this approach gave the officers a wealth of insights into the priorities and concerns of the organisations they spoke to. In the words of one of the organisers: *"You can achieve more in an inter-agency meeting with the third sector than you can with a year's monitoring of national research. Because people would simply tell you where the gaps are."*

See: www.brighton-hove.gov.uk/index.cfm?request=c1188834

Involve and Lambeth Borough Council: Playful consultation

Say&Play is a format designed by Involve for helping authorities reach a broader range of people and organisations in their consultations. The approach, which was first piloted in five schools across the London Borough of Lambeth, was designed to attract busy parents and carers who would not normally have the time to come to consultation events. It involves organising fun and engaging events in venues that are already busy, such as schools, sports centres, churches and town centres. The events combine activities that attract an audience, such as sports, arts or food, and build opportunities to respond to consultation questions into the schedule. The crucial element of this format is the venue; the consultation activity occurs in the spaces and places frequented by the intended audience. The theory is that people are more likely to attend consultation events held in places that they already attend and feel comfortable in. The same philosophy can apply to time- and cash-strapped third sector organisations.

See: www.involve.org.uk/sayandplay

Helpful links

• **Communicating with Communities using Outreach** – a good practice guidance from the department Communities and Local Government:
 www.communities.gov.uk/publications/communities/communicatingwithcommunities

• **Compact Code of Good Practice for Working with Black and Minority Ethnic Community and Voluntary groups**: www.thecompact.org.uk/shared_asp_files/
GFSR.asp?NodeID=100321

• **Health and Safety Executive guidance on working with marginalised communities**: www.hse.gov.uk/research/misc/hardtoreach.pdf

• **Who is hard to reach and why?** – article: www.sisr.net/publications/0701brackertz.pdf

• **Good practice guide for engaging ethnic communities**, by Voluntary Action Hampshire: http://action.hants.org.uk/fileadmin/user_upload/Document_Library/En-
gagingwithBMEMakingItHappen.pdf

• **National Association for Voluntary and Community Action (NAVCA)** – contains information on local third sector organisations: www.navca.org.uk/localvs/lio

• **Participation Works Resource Hub** – contains information on engaging children, young people and youth groups: www.participationworks.org.uk/ResourcesHub/
tabid/59/Default.aspx

• **The Hear by Right framework** – is a standards framework for organisations across the statutory and voluntary sectors on involving children and young people:
www.nya.org.uk/hearbyright

• **NCVCCO Under the Radar** – report highlighting the difficulties faced by under the radar third sector organisations working in children's services: www.ncvcco.org/
UserFiles/File/Under%20the%20radar.pdf

• **IDeA Ethical Governance toolkit:** www.idea.gov.uk/idk/core/page.do?pageId=1115850#contents-4

• **Engaging Small and Medium Enterprises** – guidance containing useful advice that is relevant for consulting small social enterprises and voluntary organisations:
www.sfedi.co.uk/sfedi-research/reports/engaging_small_businesses.pdf

• For more links see: *Getting to know the third sector, Supporting third sector organisations to take part.*

7.How will consultation happen? Choosing the right method

Don't always use the same methods – think about the purpose of the consultation, who it would be useful to hear from and how to make it easy for them to give you the information you want. There is no right way to consult – but some poor practices are self defeating and can create long term damage and distrust.

Survey respondent

Once there is clarity on the purpose of the consultation, the context has been considered and the target participants identified, it is time to select the consultation method. There are numerous tools and techniques available for consultations and new ones are invented all the time. It is important to remember that there is no one-stop solution when planning consultations; a method that works well in one situation will be unsuitable elsewhere. This is why the approach used should always be tailored to the purpose, context and people.

What does this mean?

This handbook recommends that consultation organisers explore the range of approaches available, exchange ideas with colleagues, and commit to being open to try new ideas. The methods listed in section 9 are suggestions only and the list is in no way exhaustive; there are numerous tools and techniques available for consultations and new ones are invented all the time.

Mixing methods for best results
It is becoming increasingly common to combine different consultation methods to gain from the different advantages each option can offer and to reach more organisations. This is beneficial to third sector and public sector workers alike; by combining methods the former get more choice in how to be involved and the latter get a more diverse range of responses.

Online consultation methods
More and more consultations now involve electronic elements such as online surveys, response forms or discussion forums. Web-based consultation tools can be relatively cheap and quick to set up and moderate, and they make it easy to collate and analyse data from large numbers of respondents. For the participants, web-based consultations can be convenient because they are easy to access irrespective of the time and location. Some tools, such as online forums have the added benefit of allowing participants to read and respond to other's views as they present their own. However, it is important to be aware of the downsides and risks when using web-based consultation tools. They exclude anyone who is not able to use or does not have access to the internet, offer little opportunity for relationship-building and tend to attract the "vocal minority" rather than a representative sample of the wider stakeholder group. For these reasons it is advisable to always use a multi-channel approach to consultation – combining web-based tools with face-to-face and written approaches.

For a list of consultation methods, see *Section 9, Methods*

Methods planning tool

This simple tool can help you identify the method, or combination of methods, that is most appropriate for your consultation objectives.
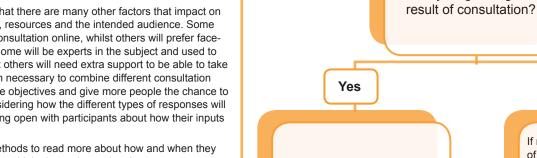
When using the tool, bear in mind that there are many other factors that impact on the choice of method, such as time, resources and the intended audience. Some people will prefer to respond to a consultation online, whilst others will prefer face-to-face meetings and workshops. Some will be experts in the subject and used to engaging with policy makers, whilst others will need extra support to be able to take part, and so on. Therefore it is often necessary to combine different consultation methods in order to achieve multiple objectives and give more people the chance to respond. This means carefully considering how the different types of responses will be analysed and weighted, and being open with participants about how their inputs will be used.

Follow the links to the individual methods to read more about how and when they should be used and what you need to think about when using them.

This is a basic tool based on a small list of methods. For a more detailed version, see the Process Planner at www.peopleandparticipation.net

Can anything change as a result of consultation?

Yes

No

What is the main thing you are trying to achieve?

If nothing can change as a result of the consultation it is best not to raise false expectations by consulting in the first place. A better alternative may be to use traditional communications methods.

Gather feedback on a draft document or proposal

Gather new ideas

Build relationships or ongoing dialogue

Make a decision jointly with stakeholders

Do you want to find out about pre-existing views and opinions?

Do you want to give participants time to develop informed and considered opinions?

Possible methods: **wikis, online forums** or **noticeboards, focus groups, stakeholder advisory groups, deliberative workshops** or **conferences**

Possible methods: **Stakeholder panels, Stakeholder advisory groups**, any reconvened events such as reconvened focus groups or **Deliberative events**

Possible methods: **coproduction, wikis, deliberative workshops** or **conferences** with decision making power

Possible methods: **surveys, written consultations, focus groups, online forums**

Possible methods: **deliberative workshops** or **conferences**

What others have done

Defra: A pick and mix of methods

Defra's Third Sector Strategy consultation is a good example of how different consultation methods can be combined over time to great effect. In 2007 and 2008 the department carried out three formal consultation processes on its draft strategy alongside deliberative events and the commissioning of seven think pieces from third sector bodies. The result was a comprehensive consultation process, which has been widely commended by participants and organisers. One of the organisers said: *"What we've seen from our evaluations is that the stakeholders who have been involved have found the process extremely useful, they've found it very professional and they've felt that their input into the policy decision-making process has been really valued; they've seen how their input has actually made an impact. So as far as we can tell that policy development process and the engagement around it has actually been very successful."*

See: www.defra.gov.uk/corporate/consult/thirdsector-strategy

California Speaks: Mass consultation via internet and satellite

In August 2007 Arnold Schwarzenegger, the governor of California, led a state-wide conversation on the future of Healthcare in California: California Speaks. Billed as the world's biggest ever single day face-to-face public engagement process, the ambitious initiative engaged around 3,500 people at eight simultaneous events across California. An interesting part of the exercise was the use of the internet and satellite to link large meetings with over 1,000 people to small community meetings taking place across the state. The organisers endeavoured to stay in touch with participants after the end of the process via emails and a website full of information and tools for taking further action.

See: www.californiaspeaks.org

Bristol City Council: edecide

Bristol City Council used edecide, an online deliberation tool, to find out what people thought of cycling in the city centre. The method used could be described as an interactive questionnaire system. The user answers questions as in a conventional online questionnaire, but then counter-arguments and further information is fed back to them in order to elicit more in-depth consideration of the issue than a simple questionnaire would otherwise produce.

See: www.edecide.net

Helpful links

• **People and Participation** – a website with information and resources for people working with public and stakeholder engagement, including methods, planning tools, case studies and a resource library: www.peopleandparticipation.net

• **Deliberative public engagement – nine principles.** Guidance provided by Involve and the National Consumer Council: www.involve.org.uk/deliberative_principles

• **International Association for Public Participation (IAP2) website** – contains information and tools for public and stakeholder engagement: www.iap2.org

• **Portsmouth consultation handbook** – award-winning guide to consulting citizens and stakeholders: www.portsmouth.gov.uk/media/PCC_Consulting_People_handbook_pt.pdf

• **Cumbria County Council Consultation planning website:** http://www.cumbria.gov.uk/communityinformation/default.asp

• **Dialogue Designer** – a tool developed by Dialogue by Design to help organisations plan consultation and dialogue processes: http://designer.dialoguebydesign.net

• **Dialogue by Design video guides to online consultation:** www.dialoguebydesign.net/flash/frameset.html

• **Electoral Commission's Democracy Cookbook**: www.dopolitics.org.uk/Toolbox/toolbox-9.cfm#recipes

• **Sciencewise Expert Resource Centre** – a government-owned website with information about public and stakeholder engagement, focusing on science and technology policy: www.sciencewise-erc.org.uk

• **International Centre of Excellence for Local eDemocracy** – information and tools for e-consultations, focusing on local government: www.icele.org

• **Queen's University e-consultation guide** – information and tips for running effective e-consultations: www.e-consultation.org/guid

• **UK and Ireland E-Democracy Exchange** – an online group for people working with e-democracy in the UK and Ireland: http://groups.dowire.org/groups/ukie

• **Armchair Involvement** – online guide to using technology to engage people and stakeholder groups, focusing on health care: www.institute.nhs.uk/building_capability/armchair_no_comment/armchair_involvement.html

• **Democracies Online** – international knowledge-sharing website for e-democracy practitioners: www.DoWire.org

• **E-learning centre** – resources for online learning, collaboration and consultation: www.e-learningcentre.co.uk

Communications

What makes consultation good? A willingness to listen. It doesn't necessarily mean that anything is going to happen, but a willingness to listen makes a big difference"

<div align="right">Representative from national third sector organisation</div>

Open, clear and continual communications are vital to the success of a consultation exercise. Good communications help ensure that:

- the expectations of participants, organisers and partner organisations are managed
- respondents feel that their input is respected and valued
- participants from different backgrounds can understand and respond to the consultation on an equal footing.

What does this mean?

There are three levels of communication that need to be considered:

- communication about the consultation process
- the style and language of consultation documents
- two-way communications.

Communications about the consultation process

This includes:

- publicising the launch of the consultation to the right audience, using a range of media including the internet and making use of *infrastructure organisations,* regional and local organisations and networks as appropriate (see also guidance on *reaching underrepresented organisations)*

- providing clear and accessible information about the *purpose* of the consultation and what is going to happen when. Care should be taken to ensure that potential respondents are not mislead about what the exercise is for

- informing respondents if plans are changed or the schedule slips

- keeping websites and other information sources up to date throughout and after the process

- feeding back to participants after the consultation ends (*see section 8, What happens next?*).

Style and language of consultation documents

[The document] spoke in a particular language... it was such civil service speak. "What is it you want?" I was shouting at the paper! When it's worded like that, it makes me think that you don't actually want my opinion. You've already decided what you want to decide and this is just some exercise for you.

Representative from local third sector organisation

Good communications means ensuring not only that communications happen, but also that they are in a style and language that is accessible to all participants. This means that they should be:

• clearly laid out

• written in plain English

• free from unnecessary jargon.

For the Compact guidance on consultation documents, see Appendix5

Two-way communications (the importance of listening)

I think the only message that people need to have when they're consulting is that consultation is a process of listening; it's not a process of arguing with people.

Representative from central government

Consultation is meaningless unless the institution in charge is genuinely prepared to listen to the respondents and take their views on board. However, it is not enough to do this behind closed doors; the consulting body needs *to be seen to listen* and able to explain why certain items are taken forward or not. Being willing and seen to listen means:

• giving honest responses to the issues and questions raised by the participants

• taking seriously any criticisms that arise and being seen to do so

• making consultation responses and analysis documents publicly available (unless confidential)

• providing feedback to participants after the consultation about how their input was used and how it made a difference.[75]

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[75] Creasy, Gavelin and Potter, Everybody Needs Good Neighbours.

What others have done

Knowsley Council: "Youth-proofing" Participation Standards

Knowsley Council used the help of local Young Advisors to "youth proof" their Participation Standards for involving young people. Young Advisors are trained assessors aged between 15 and 21 who are employed as consultants to show community leaders and public servants how to engage young people in community life and decision making. Young Advisors are trained by the Young Advisors Charity to help organisations in the public, private and third sectors to "youth proof" their policies and practices.

See: www.youngadvisors.org.uk

Helpful links

• **Code of Practice on Consultation -** the official government guidance on consultation: www.berr.gov.uk/files/file47158.pdf

• **Compact Code of Good Practice on Consultation and Policy Appraisal** - contains advice on planning and delivering consultations with the voluntary and community sectors: www.thecompact.org.uk/shared_asp_files/GFSR.asp?NodeID=100320

• **Effective communications with the public** - online guide provided by the National Audit Office: www.nao.org.uk/effective%5Fcommunication%5Ftoolkit

• **Online guide to engaging people with limited English proficiency and low literacy groups –** by the US Department of Transportation: www.fhwa.dot.gov/hep/lowlim/lowlim2.htm

• **Browsealoud** - a tool used to allow people with literacy issues to take part in online engagement activities through using mouse rollovers to read the text aloud: www.browsealoud.com

• **RNIB web accessibility guide** - contains useful information about how to make websites accessible for people with visual impairments: http://www.rnib.org.uk/xpedio/groups/public/documents/publicwebsite/public_webaccessibility.hcsp

• **Am I Making Myself Clear** - Mencap guidance on consulting people with learning difficulties: http://november5th.net/resources/Mencap/Making-Myself-Clear.pdf

• For more links see *Supporting third sector organisations to take part*

Supporting third sector organisations to take part

Small [organisations] don't have the sort of people who can spend time knowing how to respond to government consultations, and frankly don't have the connections.

Representative from central government

Public sector consultations sometimes show a lack of sensitivity to the pressures facing third sector bodies. In trying to meet all the needs of the consulting body, they overlook the needs and expectations of the participants. Although many campaigning organisations and larger charities have dedicated policy teams to lobby decision makers, smaller organisations may be lucky to have one permanent member of staff. For frontline organisations, responding to consultation can mean taking valuable time away from their core activities and is therefore often not a priority. Others are not familiar with the language of policy making and struggle to respond to formal consultations as a result.

Public bodies seeking the views of a range of third sector organisations need to be aware of these different constraints and should always consider how they can support third sector organisations of different sizes and capabilities to take part on an equal footing.

What does this mean?

There are two kinds of support that needs to be considered: logistical support and helping those involved take part on an equal footing.[76]

Logistical support

Logistical support helps organisations that want to take part do so. This means thinking through the following questions:

- **What is the cost of taking part to the participating organisations?** Consider ways in which you could reduce the cost, such as by:
  - compensating for lost time and resources
  - reimbursing travel expenses
  - offering a range of ways of taking part in the consultation activity, including online options.

- **How accessible are events and meetings to different audiences?** Factors that should be considered include:
  - hosting meetings in accessible places and times. ask the target group what venues and times work for them
  - ensuring that venues have disabled access [77]
  - visiting meetings and events held by third sector organisations to gather views rather than expecting them to come to meetings elsewhere
  - providing a carer or childcare allowance to cover the costs that may be incurred by those with family obligations.

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[76] Creasy, S., Gavelin, K. and Potter, D. (2008) Everybody Needs Good Neighbours. London: Involve.
[77] For comprehensive guidance on ensuring that venues are accessible to disabled people, see for example: Manchester City Council (2003) Design for Access. Manchester: Manchester City Council. Available at: www.manchester.gov.uk/downloads/designforaccess2.pdf

- **Is the timing of the consultation conducive to participation?** Make sure that consultation is not conducted at inappropriate times of the day or year. Consider:
  - taking account of the role that religious or school holidays may have in preventing participation
  - extending the consultation period when consulting over holiday periods or at the end of the financial year when many third sector organisations are busy with funding bids
  - for evening activities, providing refreshments and safe forms of transport to encourage participation

- **Do the planned activities comply with equalities legislation?** Ensuring that no individual or organisation is excluded from the consultation on the basis of their gender, age, disability, religion, ethnicity or sexuality is a legal requirement. Consult current equalities legislation if unsure. See:

  http://edit.equalityhumanrights.com/en/forbusinessesandorganisation/publicauthorities/pages/whatdopublicauthoritieshavetodo.aspx

- **Be extra conscious of the burden of consultation on voluntary organisations.** Consider different ways of reaching out to volunteers and staff, such as evening meetings, online forums, events at weekends and so on. When working with volunteers ensure that they are acknowledged for their involvement; say thank you for taking part as part of the feedback process.

Helping those involved take part on an equal footing.

The second type of support is to help organisations and people from different backgrounds take part on an equal footing.

- **Are there gaps in skills and capacity that will affect the ability of some third sector organisations to take part?** Consider what can be done to make it easier for them, such as:
  - providing all documentation in plain English; avoiding jargon
  - offering translation services and translated documents
  - always providing a named contact for an officer who can answer questions about the consultation, the terminology and the policy area
  - offering briefing sessions about policy making and the policy area to target groups
  - supporting networks and infrastructure organisations that offer training, advice and information to third sector organisations
  - see section *Communications.*

- **Are there cultural issues that need to be considered?**

  - For example, will you need to provide separate events for men and women? Are the consultation activities equally relevant to older and younger participants?
  - Consult members of the target group or relevant infrastructure organisations to ensure that the planned activities are culturally sensitive.

• **What is in it for the participating organisations?** What is being done to ensure that the participants find the exercise meaningful?

Things that make a difference include:

- providing clear background information to help organisations understand why the consultation activity is relevant to them
- asking the target group how, when and where they want to express their views.

What others have done?

Birmingham Third Sector Assembly: Supporting the local third sector

Birmingham Third Sector Assembly is one of several third sector assemblies that have been set up across the country. The assembly is designed to grow the third sector's ability to influence and strategically improve outcomes for the people of Birmingham. The Assembly also acts as a channel for communication between voluntary sector organisations and public sector bodies. It also provides consultations, briefings and networking opportunities. The Assembly is hosted by the BVSC, The Centre for Voluntary Action.

See: www.assembly3.org.uk

Defra: Paying for think pieces alongside traditional written consultation and workshop events,
Defra commissioned seven "think pieces" to inform their third sector strategy consultation. The think pieces were paid for by Defra and thus allowed the responding organisations to spend time putting together considered submissions. The initiative was very well received both by Defra and the participating organisations. In the words of one of the think-piece authors: *"I thought that was quite well handled because they said at the start of their consultation: 'we're very open to lots of different ideas and what we'd like is some thinking; not just a response to questions but some thinking from the third sector'. And that's what we did and I think that process was very good."*
See: www.defra.gov.uk/corporate/consult/thirdsector-strategy

Helpful links

• **Design for Access** – Manchester City Council guidance on ensuring that venues are accessible to disabled people: www.manchester.gov.uk/downloads/designforaccess2.pdf

• **Equalities and Human Rights Commission website** – contains information about legal duties and responsibilities regarding equalities and human rights for public sector organisations: http://edit.equalityhumanrights.com/en/forbusinessesandorganisation/publicauthorities/pages/whatdopublicauthoritieshavetodo.aspx

• **Equalities Toolkit** – including information on the legal framework and how to ensure that events are accessible, provided by Regional Action and Involvement South East (RAISE): www.raise-networks.org.uk/inform/docDisplay.cfm?iDocID=849

• **Involvement for Real Equality: the benefits for public services of involving disabled people** – guidance by the Disability Rights Commission (now Equalities and Human Rights Commission) and Office for Public Management (OPM) on how to ensure inclusivity and overcome barriers to involvement: http://edit.equalityhumanrights.com/en/forbusinessesandorganisation/publicauthorities/disabilityequalityd/Pages/Disabilitye.aspx

• **Involving disabled people in planning future strategies** – a research paper by Leeds City Council and Leeds University with useful guidance on how to involve disabled groups in stakeholder and public engagement: www.leeds.ac.uk/disability-studies/archiveuk/armer/LCC%20report%204.pdf

• **Third sector skills report 2008** - report by the UK Workforce Hub: www.ukworkforcehub.org.uk/DisplayPage.asp?pageid=12689

• For more links see *Communications* and *Reaching underrepresented and under the radar organisations*

Devolved consultations: how third sector organisations can help you consult better

If people are saying "we have had all these responses from here... but we have had nothing from there..." then a phone call from the local council to the voluntary service could help plug those gaps; they could inform them of the best people to speak to.

Representative from local government

Public bodies often ask for help from third sector organisations in designing and delivering consultations with the third sector. Third sector organisations can help improve the impact and reach of a consultation in a number of different ways, including by:

• providing feedback on the consultation plan and language to ensure that they are suitable to the intended audience

• providing the consulting body with information about the target audience

• informing their members and networks about the consultation opportunity and about the consultation topic

• running devolved consultation events, perhaps using consultation packs put together by the consulting body

• collating responses on behalf of their members and networks.

Many consultations are also delivered by third sector organisations that specialise in public and stakeholder engagement. These organisations are often well placed to carry out this work as they tend to be familiar with the third sector audience and the conditions it works under.

What does this mean?

• **When asking a third sector organisation to take part in scoping activities or advise on consultation plans, consider:**

o How well do the representatives you have selected match the broader audience that you intend to reach with the consultation? Often the people asked to take part in scoping meetings or to comment on consultation plans are senior staff from established third sector organisations, who are already familiar with the policy environment. This can mean that important perspectives are missed out. If possible, seek to involve a diverse group of people at every stage of the consultation.

o Consider the time and cost implications for the organisations that are giving you advice, and whether it would be appropriate to reimburse them for their time.

- **When asking a third sector organisation to deliver consultation activities, consider:**

  o is the organisation resourced to do this work? If not, what payment, reimbursement or other forms of support will be required?

  o does the organisation have the necessary knowledge about the topic to carry out consultation activities without assistance? If not, or if you are unsure, consider how they can be supported, such as by providing them with consultation kits or making sure that somebody from the consulting body is on hand at events to answer questions.

  o does the organisation have the necessary skills to carry out the consultation activities? Do not assume that they know how to consult well; check their credentials and provide necessary support and training if needed.

  o be clear about who you want the organisation to reach with their devolved activities: other third sector organisations or members of the public?

- **When infrastructure and umbrella bodies respond on behalf of their members and networks, consider:**

  o what is the relationship between the organisation and its members or network? Always make sure that the lines of representation are clear; do not assume that the organisation's position is representative of the views of its constituents.

  o How inclusive is the membership of the infrastructure organisation? Be aware that solely relying on their help to deliver a consultation is likely to mean that some organisations are missed out.

What others have done

Greater London Authority (GLA): Consultation kits and capacity building

For the London Mayor's Housing Strategy of 2007, the Greater London Authority worked in partnership with Homelessness Links to produce "consultation kits", which frontline organisations used to consult homeless people. A training workshop was also organised for these organisations to ensure that they were fully supported to carry out the focus groups and other consultation activities.

See: www.homeless.org.uk/inyourarea/london/policy/mayor/2007.09.06%20Final%20summary%20of%20responses.pdf

Ministry of Justice: National Offender Management Service (NOMS): Devolving consultation to reach the right people

When consulting on its Third Sector Action Plan, NOMS commissioned Clinks, a national umbrella body for organisations dealing with offenders and their families, to carry out devolved activities in four different parts of the country. The devolved events brought back detailed information from local and regional bodies, which fed into the overall consultation findings. One of the organisers said of the consultation results: *"I think that our third sector advisory group felt that it really did reflect the key messages that came back from the sector and that it took them onboard. And that it came up with some solutions. So I think it was very interactive… it was a genuine consultation."*

See: www.justice.gov.uk/docs/tsap_consultation_1207.pdf

Democs – the deliberation game

The new economics foundation (nef) has developed Democs (deliberative meeting of citizens) – a deliberation tool that helps small groups of people engage with complex policy issues. Democs has been used in a variety of settings to help stakeholders learn about a topic, develop their views, seek common ground with the other participants and state their preferred policy position. Democs has been used on subjects as diverse as stem cell research, homelessness, international trade and climate change, by organisations in the public and third sectors including Oxfam, the Human Genetic Council and the Greater London Authority.

See: www.neweconomics.org/gen/democs.aspx

Helpful Links

• **Participation Works guidance on working with infrastructure organisations:** www.participationworks.org.uk/Portals/0/Files/resources/k-items/participation-works/howtoguides/Infrastructure%20guide%20lowres.pdf

• **Navca: What is a local infrastructure organisation?** www.navca.org.uk/about/whatisanlio.htm

• **Communities and Local Government Community Power Packs:** www.communities.gov.uk/documents/communities/pdf/896459.pdf

8.What happens next?
Feedback and follow up

Feedback's critical, you know. If you don't get anything back you think, "Oh, well why am I bothering? Why am I wasting my time?"

Representative from local third sector organisation

Once the findings of a consultation have been analysed[78] and taken forward, giving feedback to participants is crucial. Without clear feedback on the findings of the consultation and how they were analysed and used, participants are likely to feel that their input was not valued. This can cause frustration and lead to a deterioration of the relationship between the consulting body and the third sector stakeholders, undermining future attempts at consultation and partnership.

What does this mean?

• **Make the feedback accessible.** Many participants of this study felt that updating a departmental website is not enough and that email updates or mailouts are more useful. After large consultation processes, briefing events can be a good way of giving people detailed feedback and the opportunity to ask questions.

• **Let the participants know how the findings were used.** Providing feed back to participants should not simply be a case of circulating a summary of the consultation responses. A clear message from the third sector organisations who took part in this study was that they wanted information about how the findings of the consultation had been *used.*

• **Get in touch more than once.** It is good practice to provide regular updates, for example on receipt of responses (to let respondents know what will happen next), after the initial analysis (to let them know what the findings were) and once the policy impact is determined (to let them know how their input was used).

• **Always include a brief summary document** setting out the key findings and outcomes.

• **Encourage regional, local and infrastructure organisations to forward the feedback to their constituencies.**

• **Provide a named contact point** so that participants can ask questions.

• See *Compact guidance on style* and *language of consultation documents* in Appendix 5.

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[78] See: Compact. (2008) , p.11, for guidance on analysing results. Available at www.thecompact.org.uk/shared_asp_files/GFSR.asp?NodeID=100320

What others have done

Involve in Jersey: Staying in touch

When Involve and the government of Jersey ran a large community conference about the effects of the ageing population on Jersey's economy and society, Involve committed to staying in touch with the participants for six months after the event. Those who wanted to remain informed about the project left their contact details and were sent bimonthly updates by email and post informing them about the conference findings, the government's response and how the process was taken forward. There was also a website set up where participants could download the conference report and other information and get in touch with the other participants. The updates were brief and did not involve large amounts of work for either Involve or the government of Jersey, but they meant that participants stayed involved and informed after the project finished. Several participants wrote back saying how much they appreciated being updated about what happened next.

See: www.involve.org.uk/Jersey

Evaluating and learning

We just have to learn from our experiences; if we haven't done it really well, what we can learn about it for next time. Making sure that stakeholders are helping us to improve that process, getting their feedback and getting them to evaluate us on a whole.

Representative from central government

Evaluating the consultation process is important; it helps establish whether the original objectives were met and the right organisations were reached. However, evaluation is also a crucial element of capacity building: through evaluating a consultation process staff members can learn what works and not, helping them to do things differently and better in the future[79]. Evaluations can support the credibility of a consultation by demonstrating that public bodies take it seriously and are willing to learn from their mistakes. Sharing evaluation reports can also be a highly effective way of sharing lessons across departments and authorities.

What does this mean?

Evaluation is done for two reasons: to measure achievements and to learn lessons for the future. A comprehensive evaluation includes assessment of:

• the methods used

• the objectives; whether they were realistic and whether they were met

• the participants targeted and those that responded

• the context in which the consultation was set

• the cost, benefits and impacts. This involves weighing up the inputs (time and resources) against the outputs (e.g. consultation activities) and the outcomes (e.g. policy impact, unexpected benefits).

The scope of an evaluation depends on the size and context of the consultation. Whatever the type of evaluation, it is important to plan for it at the **very outset of the consultation process,** to ensure that sufficient resources are put in place to carry out the evaluation. It is vital that evaluation is not undertaken as an afterthought once the consultation is completed as this is generally too late for important information to be gathered and for lessons learnt to have an impact on the process and final outcome.

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[79] Warburton, D. with Wilson, R. and Rainbow, E. (2007) Making a Difference: Evaluating Public Participation in Central Government. Involve and the Department for Constitutional Affairs. Available at: www.involve.org.uk/evaluation

What others have done

World Wildlife Foundation UK (WWF UK) and Shared Practice: Building evaluation into a project from the outset

When the WWF UK and Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) embarked on a three-year project working with community groups to develop a community-based approach to sustainable living, evaluation was a priority from the beginning. Independent evaluators Shared Practice[80] conducted a literature review that informed the project plans, alongside devising an extensive evaluation process including qualitative and quantitative research methods, a mixture of analytical frameworks, regular reviews and plenty of opportunity for stakeholder involvement. The project is a good example of how evaluation can be useful not just at the end of an engagement activity, but as a way of learning and taking stock at different steps throughout the project.

See: www.sharedpractice.org.uk/Downloads/CLASL_summary_report.pdf

Helpful links

• **Making a Difference** – a guide to evaluating public and stakeholder engagement: www.involve.org.uk/evaluation

• **Was it worth it? Evaluating public and stakeholder consultation** – guidance by the Consultation Institute: www.consultationinstitute.org/research/briefingpapers/Was%20It%20Worth%20It.pdf

• **Guide to evaluating engagement in science:** www.rcuk.ac.uk/cmsweb/downloads/rcuk/publications/evaluationguide.pdf

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[80] www.sharedpractice.org.uk

9.Methods

The aim of this list is to give readers an overview of the range of methods available for consultation and other forms of engagement. The list is not exhaustive; there are numerous tools and techniques available for public and stakeholder engagement and new ones are invented all the time. This list also includes a couple of more informal approaches that are often used by public bodies in consultation and which should therefore be acknowledged.

- written consultation (paper and online)
- surveys
- wikis
- focus groups
- online noticeboards, blogs, instant webchats and online forums
- informal conversation
- stakeholder panels
- stakeholder advisory and expert groups
- deliberative workshops and conferences.

For more on methods, see *Choosing the right method.*

For a more comprehensive list of methods see: www.peopleandparticipation.net/display/methods

Written consultation (paper and online)

Description

Traditional form of consultation where stakeholders are asked to read hard-copy or electronic documents and submit a response to questions about the document by letter or using email, an online form or a questionnaire.

When to use

• When a draft plan or document is already in place and stakeholder feedback is sought.

• When dealing with stakeholders who are likely to want to respond at a time that suits them.

When not to use

• As a single method when one of the goals of the consultation is to build strong relationships with stakeholders.

• As a single method when consulting underrepresented or marginalised groups.

• As a single method when some stakeholders are likely to need more support and information in order to respond.

Things to keep in mind

• Written consultations can give the impression that the policy is in the later stages of development and that there is little scope for change, which can put some stakeholders off responding.

• Ensure that the language and style of document is appropriate to the target audience: avoid using jargon as this can put people off responding.

Surveys

Description

A quantitative research method used to gauge views, experiences and behaviours. They can be carried out online, on paper or in person. They allow structured responses to multiple questions.

When to use

• When seeking to identify and quantify the opinions of a group of stakeholders.

• When asking respondents for their preference on a choice of set options.

• When seeking statistically significant data about the views and experiences of a particular group of people.

When not to use

• As a single method when one of the goals of the consultation is to build strong relationships with stakeholders.

• When seeking information about why people think or behave the way they do.

Things to keep in mind

• As in all social/market research methods there is a risk that sampling error or the wording of the questions affect the findings.

• A consultation questionnaire should always include open-ended questions and comment spaces to allow respondents to elaborate on their opinions and raise additional issues.

Wikis

Description

Online software allowing users to contribute to online documents. Several contributors are able to modify the document at the same time. The software then tracks the changes to the document, recording on the webpage the number of times the document has been changed and by whom. Participants are normally asked to register before contributing.

When to use

• When seeking to promote collaborative working with stakeholders in a relatively quick and informal way, without having to bring people together in person.

• When dealing with respondents who are likely to want to respond at a time that suits them.

• When seeking feedback quickly and easily.

• When the subject area requires little explanation.

• As one of several methods in a phased or iterative consultation process, offering participants the opportunity to comment at different stages.

When not to use

• When there is no time or resources to moderate the online submissions.

• As a single method when some stakeholders are likely to need additional support or information in order to engage with the topic or contribute online.

• As a single method when one of the goals of the consultation is to build strong relationships with stakeholders.

• When seeking statistically significant data.

Things to keep in mind

• Wikis tend to attract mainly people with a keen interest in the topic and so may only capture the views of the "vocal minority".

• They require significant amounts of publicity and drive to maintain meaningful levels of web traffic and participation

Focus groups

Description

In-depth, facilitated conversations with a small group of stakeholders (usually between 6 and 12 people). These can be run as one-off events or be reconvened over time. Sometimes identical focus groups are held with different stakeholders to measure and compare views of different groups.

When to use

• When seeking the views of a specific group of stakeholders.

• When seeking to engage stakeholders who are less likely to respond to a written consultation.

• When the stakeholders involved would benefit from the opportunity to meet and network.

When not to use

• As a single method of consultation – focus groups only involve small numbers of stakeholders and tend to be framed by the consulting body.

Things to keep in mind

• As in all social/market research methods there is a risk that sampling error or the wording of the questions affect the findings.

• A focus group facilitator should always make use of open-ended questions and allow time for respondents to elaborate on their opinions and

raise additional issues.

• Focus groups require skilled facilitation to ensure that all participants are given an equal voice.

Online noticeboards, blogs, instant webchats and online forums

Description

These methods all encourage stakeholders to contribute to an online space by posting their comments and responses. There is some interactivity in that commentators can read what others have written and reply or elaborate on previous comments.

When to use

• When dealing with respondents who are likely to want to respond at a time that suits them.

• When seeking to capture informal debate between individuals and stakeholders with a keen interest in the consultation topic, without having to bring them together in person.

• When seeking feedback quickly and easily.

• When a more informal approach is appropriate.

• When the subject area requires little explanation

• As one of several methods in a phased or iterative consultation process, offering participants the opportunity to comment at different stages.

When not to use

• When there is no time or resources to moderate the online submissions.

• As a single method if some stakeholders lack the means or expertise to contribute online.

• To replace face-to-face meetings.

• As a single method when one of the goals of the consultation is to build strong relationships with stakeholders.

• As a single method when some stakeholders are likely to need additional support or information in order to engage with the consultation topic or contribute online.

Things to keep in mind

• These methods tend to attract mainly people with a keen interest in the topic and so may only capture the views of the "vocal minority".

• They require significant amounts of publicity and drive to maintain meaningful levels of web traffic and participation

Informal conversations

Description

When a consulting body approaches stakeholders directly to discuss their views on the consultation topic or plans. Although not strictly a consultation method, informal conversations nevertheless form part of many public sector consultations, and many third sector respondents in this research listed informal chats as a way of giving their views on policy.

When to use

• When seeking to build or sustain a relationship with an organisation or individual.

• As an early pre-consultation approach to help identify key issues and get early, informal feedback on consultation plans.

• When seeking to hear the views of or achieve buy-in from a key stakeholder.

• When seeking to engage stakeholders who are less likely to respond to a written consultation.

When not to use

• When seeking to build relationships with a broader group of stakeholders.

• As a sole or central approach in consultation.

• When seeking statistically significant data.

Things to keep in mind

Informal conversations are not traditionally recognised as a form of consultation. They can appear selective and closed to those who are not involved and, if used, should be seen as a complement to rather than a central part of any consultation.

Stakeholder panels

Description

These are large and often representative groups of stakeholders convened by public bodies, who are regularly called upon to respond to consultations or give their input and feedback in other ways.

When to use

• When the consulting body wants a group of stakeholders "on call" to respond to consultation requests and give ad hoc feedback on policy issues.

• When there are likely to be multiple consultations on similar issues.

• When a consultation will run over a long period of time.

When not to use

• When seeking to involve time-poor stakeholders who may be put off by the level of commitment involved.

• When the consulting body lacks the time and resources to maintain the panel.

Things to keep in mind

• Setting up and maintaining stakeholder panels take time and resources so this approach is only suitable for organisations with the time and commitment to maintain the relationship in the long run.

• Being a panel member is a significant commitment for stakeholders and this should be acknowledged by the consulting body. Some form of reimbursement or incentive may be appropriate.

• Stakeholder panels can appear selective and closed to non-members. Hence, panels are best seen as a complement to other, more inclusive

consultation methods.

Stakeholder advisory or expert groups

Description

These are small-scale stakeholder committees that are assembled to inform decision making, respond to consultation questions or monitor consultation activities and policy developments. Provided with access to the most relevant information, the group may have one-off or ongoing meetings.

When to use

• In the pre-consultation or early consultation stage, to comment on and inform consultation plans.

• When seeking early and focused engagement with key stakeholders.

• After the consultation, to monitor progress and hold the authority to account.

• When the stakeholders involved would benefit from the opportunity to meet and network.

• When seeking to engage stakeholders who are less likely to respond to a written consultation.

When not to use

• When seeking the views of a wide range of organisations.

• When seeking statistically significant data.

Things to keep in mind

Stakeholder advisory and expert groups are not traditionally recognised as a form of consultation. They can appear selective and closed to those who are not involved and, if used, should be seen as a complement to rather than a central part of any consultation.

Deliberative workshops or conferences

Description

Facilitated events where the focus is on exploring a policy issue in depth through deliberation, encouraging those involved to learn from information given and from each other's different perspectives.

When to use

• When the subject area is complex and the debate would benefit from explanation, reflection and time to develop considered opinions.

• When seeking to gauge not just people's views but why they think like they do.

• When the decision will require trade-offs between different policy options and participants working together can explore the implications of alternatives to result in a better informed decision.

• When the decision-making body cannot make and implement the decision along; there needs to be buy-in from others.

• When the stakeholders involved would benefit from the opportunity to meet and network.

• When seeking to engage stakeholders who are less likely to respond to a written consultation.

When not to use

• As sole method of consultation if some key stakeholders are unable to attend the event or events.

• As a measure of the views of the wider stakeholder group, as people who have not had the opportunity to deliberate may come to very different conclusions.

Things to keep in mind

• Deliberative workshops and conferences require time and effort to get right. Consult Involve and National Consumer Council's Principles on Deliberative Public Engagement for more advice:

www.involve.org.uk/deliberative_principles

• Deliberative events require skilled facilitation to ensure that all participants are given an equal voice.

Coproduction

Description

Coproduction is an approach to decision-making and service design rather than a specific method. The term refers to a way of working whereby decision makers and stakeholders work together to create a decision or a service that works for them all. The approach is value-driven and built on the principle that those who are affected by a service are best placed to say how it should be designed and run.

When to use

• When decision makers are genuinely willing and able to share decision-making powers with stakeholders.

When not to use

• When dealing with contentious issues and/or a large constituency of affected people, which can make managing the process difficult.

• When policy makers lack the time or commitment to take stakeholders' views into account.

• When there is limited interest in the subject matter among potential participants.

• When there is a limited timeframe for consultation

Things to keep in mind

Coproduction approaches can be time and resource intensive, as interactions between stakeholders and policy makers are ongoing and participants need to be supported at each stage of the process. These types of approaches should only be used if there are sufficient resources in place to follow the process through.

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Appendix 2 – Research methodology

Good quality consultation is vital to sustain and build on the relationship between the third and public sector, yet there is a lack of practical and detailed guidance grounded in research that can serve to complement guidelines already enshrined in the Compact Code of Practice on Consultation and Policy Appraisal and the Government's Code of Practice on Consultation. This study has aimed to fill this void by looking at what public sector workers need to know before they consult the third sector. In order to address this, the research team identified the following research questions:

  • What are the key benefits of involving third sector organisations in decision and policy making?

  • What is different about engaging with third sector organisations?

  • How can government most effectively engage third sector organisations in policy and decision making?

  • How can government become better at reaching underrepresented third sector organisations?

In order to deal with these multi-faceted questions, the research team employed a mixed-method approach during a six-month research process that involved well over 200 participants. Research methods used were:

  • examination of secondary research data in the form of third sector responses to the Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform (BERR) Consultation on Effective Consultation

  • a literature review

  • an online survey

  • three deliberative workshop events

  • analysis of five case study consultations using 39 qualitative interviews and a quantitative mapping process undertaken by GuideStar Data Services.

The data gathered in the secondary research, workshops and survey was coded and analysed alongside the interview data and very much contributed to the themes that emerged and are addressed in this report.

In addition, a steering group was set up to inform the research methodology, agree the case study consultations and comment on research findings. The steering group included representatives from five organisations:

- brap (www.brap.org.uk)

- Compact Voice (www.compactvoice.org.uk)

- Department for Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform (BERR) (www.berr.gsi.gov.uk)

- Local Government Association (LGA) (www.lga.gov.uk)

- Social Enterprise Coalition (www.socialenterprise.org.uk).

- How can government become better at reaching underrepresented third sector organisations?

The case study methodology

Five case studies were selected to reflect a diversity of recent local and national consultations (having closed within 12 months of the start of the project) covering a range of policy areas. The research team sought to include both traditional and more innovative consultation approaches. The case studies included consultations that had specifically targeted the third sector as well as consultations where the third sector was considered one stakeholder group among many.

The case studies were:

- Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF): Time to Talk, Consultation on the Children's Plan, 2007

- Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra): Third Sector Strategy Consultation, 2008

- National Offender Management Services (NOMS): Third Sector Action Plan Consultation, 2008

- Birmingham City Council and Birmingham Third Sector Assembly: Transforming Day Services in Birmingham, 2007

- Brighton and Hove City Council: Consultations on Housing Strategies for black and minority ethnic groups, elderly people and lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender groups, 2007 and 2008.[82]

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[82] For further details about the case studies, see Chapter 3.

Mapping process

After the case study consultations were selected a methodology was developed by GuideStar Data Services to map the third sector component of the target audience for each consultation.

GuideStar Data Services provide a mechanism to identify the target population of third sector organisations for a consultation. Its database comprises all incorporated third sector organisations including registered charities, not-for-profit companies, community interest companies, industrial and provident societies, and social enterprises. The database offers a range of hard coded search criteria that can be used to "segment" the third sector, including:

• specific fields of activity (sub-sector/industry), e.g. health, disability, housing, education, arts, sport and leisure, environment, and economic and community development

• specific target beneficiary groups, e.g. children, elderly, black and minority ethnic

• specific roles or functions, e.g. service providers, campaigning and representative organisations, grantmakers, and umbrella or infrastructure.

In addition, the GuideStar database holds extensive narrative information on the activities of third sector organisations which through keyword searching facilitates more specific targeting of specific activities and beneficiary groups, e.g. "residential care", "young offenders" and refugees.

Each third sector organisation held on the database can be allocated to an individual local authority area (or regional health authority area) using the postal address. Other location variables can be used to identify those that have a national or international geographical scope. It was therefore possible to segment the third sector by field of activity, beneficiary group, roles and geography.

Qualitative interviews

The research team conducted 39 qualitative interviews with third sector and public sector representatives. Interviewees were selected on the basis of their relationship to the case study consultation, and suitable participants were identified using the system's mapping process conducted by GuideStar Data Services, which produced a 'pool' of the target audience for each consultation. From this interviewees were non-randomly selected in order to have a mix of the following groups:

• officials responsible for the planning and organisation of the consultation

• policy officers who were likely to be affected by the results of the consultation

• third sector organisations that responded to the consultation

• third sector organisations that did not respond but were deemed to be stakeholders within the target group.

The interview questions were structured enough for us to be able to draw on the attitudes and experiences of the interviewees to address our research questions while allowing flexibility to probe into other areas of enquiry should they arise.

The interviews were coded using a thematic analysis whereby the research team examined the text on a line-by-line basis identifying, coding and grouping the recurrent themes which emerged in the data. NVivo, software used by researchers to organise qualitative data, was employed throughout the process and this allowed the researchers to organise the large amount of data and analyse it in conjunction with the other information gathered in, for example, the research workshops.

Further analysis of the case studies

A methodology was used to enable the research team to make assessments about the level of coverage for each of the consultation exercises. This methodology has four distinct stages, which are discussed below.

Step 1: Identifying the target audience

The first step is the identification of third sector organisations that could be considered as the target audience for the consultations studied. Typically the consulting agency specifies the anticipated recipients for the consultation in the preamble of its consultation paper (or other form of consultation communication), which may be all or part of its usual constituency. Some consultation exercises are broadly focused and open to individuals, business, third sector organisations or public sector bodies; others are targeted on a very specific audience, e.g. users of a particular service.

Step 2: Profiling the target audience

Once the target third sector audience has been identified it can then be profiled using a range of economic, activity and organisation variables including:

- economic: income, expenditure, assets, paid employees, trustees, sources of income, staff costs

- activity: fields of activity, beneficiary groups, roles

- organisation: legal form (charity, company), year of establishment, headquarters.

This profiling provides a detailed "market analysis" of the target audience.

Step 3: Matching known respondents to the target audience

For each consultation studied a list of known respondents was provided. Typically these lists did not differentiate third sector organisations from other types of respondents. The first task was therefore to remove non third sector organisations from these lists of respondents. The types of organisation excluded were government agencies including quangos and local statutory bodies, businesses and individuals. The lists often included multiple contact points for an organisation or multiple responses from organisations running different projects – these were also excluded.

The residual list of organisations was then matched to the whole GuideStar database using the name of organisation and any other contact information provided – postcodes and telephone numbers considerably help the matching process.

Organisations not matched were then checked manually – some were ineligible and therefore excluded as they were found to be part of the government apparatus or a business. The residual non-matched third sector organisations were then checked to confirm that they were unincorporated and not registered. These included local community groups, local branches or chapters of national organisations. Although there is no central list of such under the radar organisations, there is increasing awareness of the types of unregistered organisation that are active in most communities, e.g. organisations hosted by a religious organisation, residents groups, and sports and hobby clubs.

Step 4: Comparing known respondents to the target audience

The responding third sector organisations matched to the Guidestar database could then be compared to the target audience to assess the overall level of coverage and the type of third sector organisation that responded. This task is broadly comparable to the level of penetration used in the commercial world to assess the success of marketing initiatives. Perhaps most crucially this comparison task highlights gaps where certain types of organisation have not responded. The consulting agency may decide that these gaps relate to segments where a response is not essential or that they fall within the membership of an umbrella organisation that has responded. The comparison may also highlight respondents that fall outside the defined target audience – suggesting that the definition of the target audience may not have been comprehensive.

Appendix 3: HM Government Code of Practice on Consultation: Seven Consultation Criteria

Criterion 1: When to consult

Formal consultation should take place at a stage when there is scope to influence the policy outcome.

Criterion 2: Duration of consultation exercises

Consultations should normally last for at least 12 weeks with consideration given to longer timescales where feasible and sensible.

Criterion 3: Clarity of scope and impact

Consultation documents should be clear about the consultation process, what is being proposed, the scope to influence and the expected costs and benefits of the proposals.

Criterion 4: Accessibility of consultation exercises

Consultation exercises should be designed to be accessible to, and clearly targeted at, those people the exercise is intended to reach.

Criterion 5: The burden of consultation

Keeping the burden of consultation to a minimum is essential if consultations are to be effective and if consultees' buy-in to the process is to be obtained.

Criterion 6: Responsiveness of consultation exercises

Consultation responses should be analysed carefully and clear feedback should be provided to participants following the consultation.

Criterion 7: Capacity to consult

Officials running consultations should seek guidance in how to run an effective consultation exercise and share what they have learned from the experience.

The government's Code of Practice on Consultation is available on the department for Business, Enterprise & Regulatory Reform's (BERR) website: www.berr.gov.uk/bre/consultation%20guidance/page44459.html

Appendix 4: Summary of the Compact Code of Good Practice on Consultation and Policy Appraisal

Key points for effective consultation and policy appraisal

- "Build consultation into your regular planning cycle and consult early.

- Appraise new policies and procedures, particularly at the developmental stage, identifying as far as possible any implications for the sector at national, regional and local level.

- Give consultees enough time to respond and be clear about their purpose.

- Write documents in simple language and be clear about their purpose.

- Explain where decisions have already been made – make clear what you and what you can't.

- Use more than one method of consultation and learn from others in both and the sector.

- Be flexible and sensitive to the needs of those you wish to consult – think about to reach all of the intended target audience, and take account positively of the • needs, interests and contributions of those parts of the sector which represent minority groups and the socially excluded.

- Encourage those consulted to give honest views, for example by assuring confidentiality when it is requested.

- Publicise the consultation and encourage participation by involving membership infrastructure organisations.

- Analyse carefully the results of the consultation and report back on the views were received and what you have done as a result.

- Evaluate carefully after consulting, and learn lessons for next time."

The Compact Code of Good Practice on Consultation and Policy Appraisal is available at: www.thecompact.org.uk/shared_asp_files/GFSR.asp?NodeID=100320

Appendix 5: Compact guidance on consultation documents

"All consultation documents should be concise, clearly laid out and written in simple language that will be understood by the intended audience, avoiding jargon (external testing for plain language is commended). Consideration should be given to making the document available in accessible formats and different languages. Consultation documents will ideally contain or be accompanied by the following:

• a summary (ideally no more than one page);

• a description of the issue, proposal or problem being addressed;

• the purpose of the consultation and, if appropriate, the objective which the proposal is intended to deliver;

• the issues on which views are being sought; wherever possible they should takethe form of clear questions and/or fairly argued options and avoid a simple 'Yes/No' format;

• an explanation of what decisions, if any, have already been taken and an explanation of why a particular option is favoured;

• if relevant, various sources of opinion and information, and factual statements that are properly referenced (for example, from academics or consumer groups);

• where appropriate, an explanation of who is likely to be affected, and how, including an assessment or impact statement covering the likely effect of the proposals on voluntary and community organisations (for example, any implementation role or increased costs envisaged);

• where appropriate, an invitation to respondents to submit their own ideas or assessment of how the proposals will impact on voluntary and community organisations;

• the deadline for responses, and wherever possible an outline of the proposed timetable for the rest of the decision-making and implementation processes including a statement of how feedback will be given;

• the name, address and, wherever possible the telephone number and e-mail address of a person whom respondents can contact if they have further queries;

• a list of those being consulted; the document might also ask consultees to suggest any other organisations or individuals who should be consulted;

• a request that those responding should explain who they are and, where relevant, who they represent and specifically who they have further consulted (to help ensure that responses from representative bodies are properly weighted); and

• a statement that responses will normally be made available unless the respondent has requested that they remain confidential;

• an explanation of any constraints that may have limited the full application of the guidance contained in this Code of Good Practice;

• an invitation to provide feedback on the consultation exercise itself and make suggestions for improving consultation in the future."

Making consultation material available in accessible formats

"Where necessary, consultation materials should be provided in accessible formats, for example, Braille, large print or audio formats (further advice on this can be obtained from the Royal National Institute for the Blind), and languages other than English. Be ready to deal sympathetically with requests for materials to be made available in such formats. If necessary, consider other ways of consulting these groups, for example through face to face discussions. If the consultation applies to the people of Wales, remember that it will probably need to be published in English and Welsh in line with the requirements of the Welsh Language Act."

The Compact Code of Good Practice on Consultation and Policy Appraisal is available at: www.thecompact.org.uk/shared_asp_files/GFSR.asp?NodeID=100320