

**CONSULTATION METHODS
IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT**

A REPORT TO THE TOWN OF CLAREMONT

by

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CONSULTATION METHODS IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Objectives of the Report

In his letter of invitation to undertake the consultancy, the CEO laid out five desired outcomes. The Town of Claremont sought a summary of:

- Methods of Engagement/Consultation
- Linking Methods to Problems/Issues
- Criteria for Determining the Best Fit
- Structures for Implementing Consultation Methods
- Estimated Implementation, Time and Resources.

Procedures Adopted

We went about the consultancy via a four phase process:

- Phase 1: a review of literature on consultation methods in local government
- Phase 2: a questionnaire to Claremont councillor and community members selected to participate in focus groups
- Phase 3: three focus groups, with councillors, senior officers, and community members, and
- Phase 4: writing this report, which integrates the findings of Phases 1, 2 and 3 thematically around the five outcomes sought by Claremont's CEO.

The largely internet-sourced literature review conducted in Phase 1 included case studies and consultation wisdom from across Australia, the United Kingdom, Canada and the United States. These materials are included where appropriate throughout the report.

The Phase 2 Questionnaire, 'Preliminary Survey on Preferred Methods of Consultation', was designed to orient focus group members' thinking towards the topic of the meeting. Broadly, Councillors favoured surveys directed to individuals whereas Community Group members expressed preferences for interactive or group methods of consultation. Both groups listed a range of concerns, and these are discussed at appropriate points throughout this report.

The three focus group mini-consultations of Phase 3 were of 2 1/2 - 3 hours duration. The CEO led the Senior Officer (Staff) Group, and the consultants conducted the other two. We do not regard any of the groups as being representative of the whole. Rather they are indicative of selected viewpoints and the selection processes and critiques of them are contained in the summary reports of the focus group discussions, which are included as Appendices 1, 2 and 3.

Matrix 1 (page 3) samples some of what was raised in each group about eight recurrent themes.

This integrative report, Phase 4, compacts the outcomes of the first three phases into a reflective thematic statement of consultation methods in local government.

Matrix 1. Recurrent Themes from Three Claremont Mini-Consultations

Theme	Councillors	Staff	Community
Consultation Methods	Mechanisms are in place, but need fine-tuning to secure objective responses, avoid overload, and reduce jargon.	Staff are resources for internal consultation. Use external consultants where conflict is intense. Interactive groups moderate extremism.	Need simple methods, and stronger Ward emphasis for greater engagement.
Using Technology	Increase use, e.g. through electronic suggestion box and interactive noticeboards.	Increase use. Develop on-line reference groups.	Increase use. Develop website links for each Ward. Promote Ward news and events.
Informing the Community	Opportunity is key. Many need education on how to access information.	Put Committee Reports out for public discussion. Spell out cost implications of proposals.	'Town Talk' could notify future events, become interactive. Personalise ToC email system.
Achieving Representativeness	Town of Claremont is three sub-communities. Must ensure equal representation, information flow etc.	How do you know when you're getting representative views? Use targeted surveys, panels and committees.	Use ad hoc, liaison, decentralised, and inter-agency committees for knotty and cross-boundary problems.
Localisation	Grass-root issues continue to be the most important. Councillors need more specific information.	Walk-arounds, bus-arounds, and location or site-specific consultations prove helpful.	Ward-level meetings, strategic plans and committees engage local support. Field Officer and Councillor involvement desired.
Councillor Role	Role has changed from reactive to proactive. Stronger professionalism now.	Roles are changing, now often ambiguous. Councillor-staff role boundaries are becoming fuzzy.	Councillors not all known in Wards. They need to be more visible, and to engage and respond more.
Council Momentum	Monitor and adapt to changing environment in legislation, policy, culture and life-style.	Keep to Strategic Plan and Key Result Areas. Continue forward planning.	Build and sustain community capacities, neighbourliness and local organisations.
Council Standing	New Local Government Act spurs professionalism among staff, and this increases credibility.	The platform for credibility is demonstrated integrity in decision-making and follow-through.	Addressing community issues, balancing values, and engaging residents together increase Council's standing.

Purposes and Definition of Consultation

In these times of rapid demographic, socio-economic and political change, local government councils across the world are developing consultation policies, structures and practices to:

- create systematic two-way information flows between Council and community
- enhance decision-making with creative ideas drawn from a broader base
- build sustainability via community ownership and support for Council's strategic directions, Key Result Areas, visions, values and general decisions
- surface and work through controversial issues and latent and manifest conflicts
- bring into audibility the voices of lesser heard and often socially excluded residents
- manage the vectors of change that affect sectors of the community differentially
- enhance social integration by building bridges between community sectors and between the generations
- increase the degree of satisfaction with the way Council operates
- increase the quality of participative democracy by building stronger social capital and civic pride within the Town¹.

For our purposes we defined consultation as:

A process of dialogue and community engagement directed towards developing stronger relationships between Council and the community, more broadly-based decisions, and more community ownership of and support for those decisions.

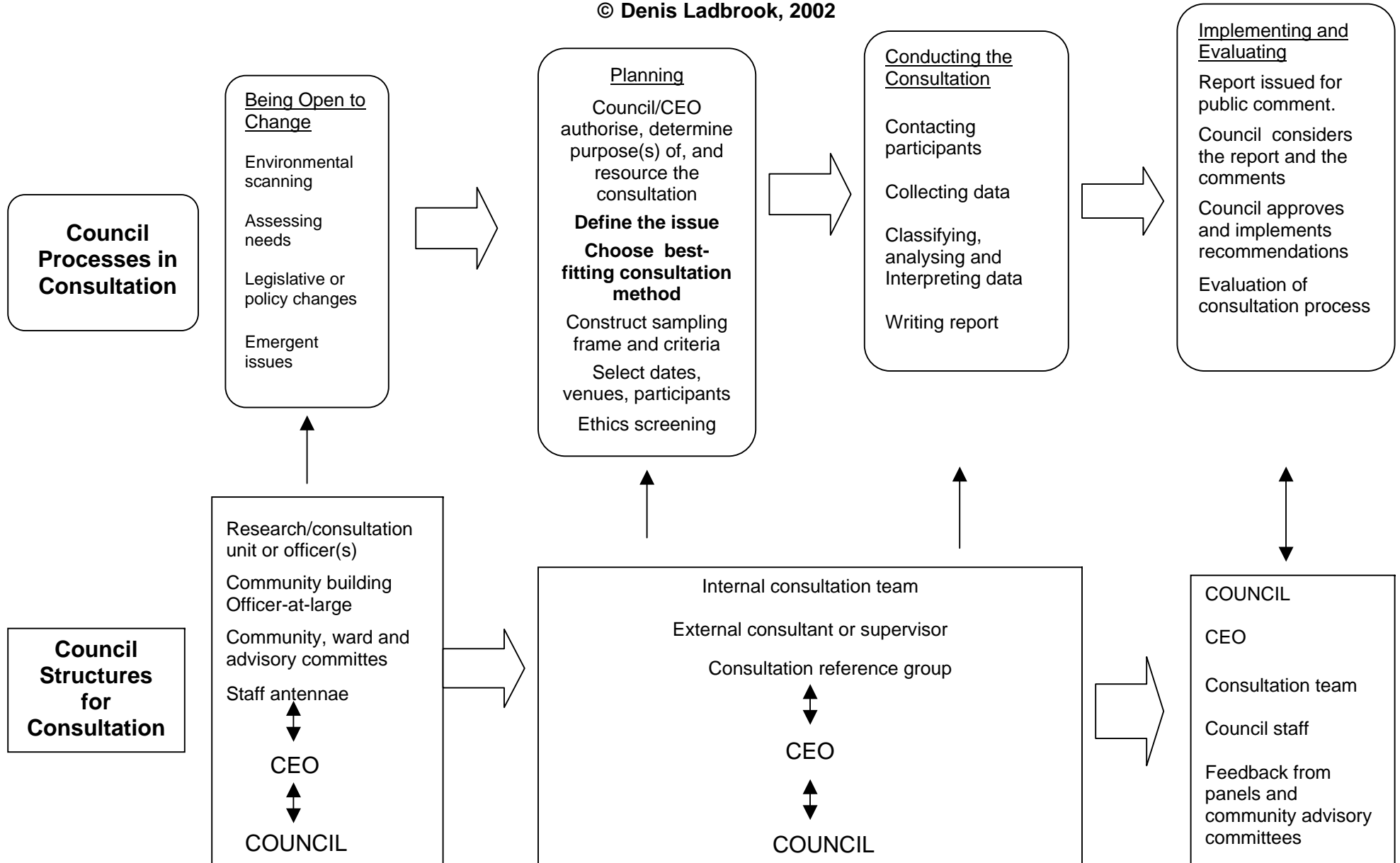
Although the focus of this consultancy is on the limited domain of Consultation Methods, we have set the methods within the context of the overall consultation process, including some structures which are outlined under Objective 4 on pages 22-24.

The dynamism of the process is suggested in the Flowchart on page5.

¹ In a study of rural towns in WA, Max Kamien characterised as 'happy towns' those with high levels of social cohesion and civic participation, and as 'unhappy towns', others that lacked dialogue, resulting in fragmentation.

Flowchart: Overview of Consultation Processes and Structures in Local Government

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Integrating Consultation into Council Infrastructure.

Grounding the consultation function within Council's administrative system involves specifying the lines of authority, responsibility and accountability for these activities.

The Flowchart suggests a model for doing this.

In the upper row, 'Council Processes in Consultation', the four panels 'Being Open to Change', 'Planning', 'Conducting the Consultation' and 'Implementing and Evaluating' specify stages in the conduct of consultations, while the panels of the lower row suggest some Council structures.

The row of structures posits a dynamic, interactive relationship between the Council and the CEO, with the CEO mediating between the Council and the consultation team, in keeping with the statutory authority, responsibilities and accountability attached to the role. This working arrangement facilitates a confluence of Council's purposeful resolve, the CEO's managerial competence, and the staff and contracted external consultants' efficiencies in building the organisation's consultation culture within its overall system.

Putting the Flowchart's two rows together, a number of factors emerge as significant influences on the success of consultation efforts. These include:

- the degree of coordination between the twin authority systems of local government, the 'legislative' mandate of Council, and the executive authority of the Administration
- the status within the Council of the unit conducting the consultation or investigation
- the clarity to operational staff (and consumers) of the consultation's managerial process (purpose, objectives, methodology, data collection and interpretation)
- how the findings are discussed in Council and in the Administration
- the outcomes in terms of changes to the Town's connections with its community.

The structures and processes for implementing consultation methods are discussed in more detail under Objective 4 (page 22). This section is guided by the proposition that

the vitality and sustainability of a consultation culture is a function of the quality of consultation infrastructure integrated into Council's official systems.

Administrative location and managerial control processes give Council's consultation presence form, structure, and status. Its research function is based on a science of design.

Yet the process of consulting is more of a craft. It works in the hurly-burly of the clashing human energies, aspirations and interests that give community its rich texture. The artistry of consultative practice fashions fluid, emergent situations through the wisdom learned from engagement and relationship-building within the community.

Both the science and the art of consultation are essential for long-term effectiveness.

Objective 1: Methods of Engagement/Consultation

Engagement

Proposition

The more the community members are engaged by Council's activities, the more they will contribute their energies and ideas, and the more authentic and widely-shared the outcomes will be.

Consultation is more effective when community members are actively involved, so engaging the community becomes a primary focus in establishing a consultation culture.

Under what circumstances do community members become engaged with the actions of Council?

The American 'D2000 Civic Engagement Project' is grounded in three principles:

- All citizens can contribute ideas, energy and action.
- Proposals for improving a community are far more likely to be accepted if most citizens have a role in shaping them.
- The most effective way to capitalise on citizens' energy is to gather together representatives, each of whom accurately represents a segment of the community.

We call our approach 'interactive representation'².

Both Council and the community thus have roles to play. Men and women from the community become involved when they perceive benefits in doing so, when it parallels their values, or when they sense that not being involved is likely to lead to losses. Multiple layers of motives, desires, fears, and social relationships underlie engagement.

From the Council's side, engaging constituents' ideas and energies is fostered by employing these three principles, and by:

- Council facilities, services, policies and practices that invite and provide for participation, including Councillor accessibility and visibility in their Wards, staff openness, and the clarity of Council's emphasis on social capital (the value of active relationships as resources for quality of life), and civil society (participative local citizenship as a desired and worthwhile goal)
- Council generating solutions to controversial issues that take account of community input in ways that are fairer, more creative, and more widely-accepted than unaided decisions by councillors
- genuinely working through conflicts of interests and of values over future directions
- residents' sense of neighbourliness, belonging and pride in their community and its environment
- residents recognising how much their long-term interests, opportunities, and quality of life are affected by Council actions and programs
- perceived threats to life-style, such as overdevelopment, loss of beauty spots, traffic issues

² The D2000 Civic Engagement Project', www.D2000.com

- a conviction of the relevance, urgency, and cruciality of acting by becoming involved now.

Engagement is hindered by

- Community apathy and alienation (feeling off-side and powerless to get their voices heard, following the stereotype 'you can't beat City Hall')
- perception that an exclusive minority of influential persons dominates decisions
- few and inconvenient access points
- Council staff and Councillor non-responsiveness
- perceived Council spin in information provided. This reduces trust.

How can the Claremont Town Council engage its community more effectively?

- take measures to strengthen the factors that foster engagement
- reduce the factors that hinder engagement
- construct bridges that reduce the distance between Council and community and provide enhanced access
- create decentralised structures and processes for establishing partnerships of understanding, planning and action between Council and community
- use resident input to develop broad-based solutions to community problems and conflicts,
- make Local Government more salient to people's life interests and values.

One Councillor, responding to our questionnaire, moved in this direction with the statement:

'We need to be mindful of Council's role as the promoter of discussion and social change. That is, to be active in facilitating the debate, not just being a representative of the already existing community views.'

Increasing the degree of engagement is an issue of our times. As Local Government Authorities implement the provisions of the new Act, and model democracy at the local level, they will engage more and more deeply with the directions, energies and resources of their people and institutions. The greater the degree of engagement, the smoother the processes of consultation will be.

Consultation Methods

Proposition

Council effectiveness in consultation depends on its consultation culture, including a multiplicity of communication channels and methods stretching deep into its community.

Local government authorities use an enormous array of methods for relating effectively with their communities. These include measures for disseminating, collecting and exchanging information, resolving differences, building and maintaining involvement, and planning for continuity. Some open up major, wide-angle areas such as visions for the future, others seek small detail such as dust-bin collection routes.

Together these constitute a consultation culture, which may include

- scenario planning, strategic planning, and search processes
- information giving and public education
- values clarification and conflict resolution
- social, organisational and demographic research
- investigative journalism, social history and local sociology research
- advertising, promotion and media releases.

Some methods consult individuals, others focus on interaction in small or large groups. Large-scale methods seek results that are representative of the whole or of a sub-section of the population, others are purpose-built without necessarily reflecting wider opinion or preference. Some methods seek quantitative data, others explore rich subjective meanings through life-stories or experience narratives. Some techniques are labour-intensive, others use the speed, accuracy and economy of computers and the internet.

Putting these together we can construct a framework of six categories of consultation methods. The categories and 31 methods are laid out in Matrix 2.

Matrix 2. Classification of Consultation Methods

	Large No. of people	Small No. of people
One-Off Methods with Individuals	Referenda, Resident Surveys, User Surveys, Informal surveys, Letters	Customer Feedback Forms, Interviews and Case Studies, Diaries
One-Off Methods Using Group Interaction	Open Days, Exhibitions and Street Stalls Roadshows	Public Meetings, Public Education Seminars, Community Workshops and Visioning Exercises, Club or Organisational Briefings or Presentations, Ward Forums, Focus Groups, Nominal Groups, Delphi Processes
Ongoing Committee and Panel Methods	Council Website, Complaints Monitoring System, Systematic Observation	Advisory Committees, User Groups, Informal Reference Groups, Working Parties, Inter-jurisdictional Task Groups, Citizens' Panels, Citizen's Juries, Elected Community Committees, Mystery Shoppers

Examples of each method are found in Matrix 3, which builds on and adapts for our purposes the Exeter County Council's matrix of consultation methods³

³ Exeter County Council, UK, 'Best Practice in Consultation' Guide, <www.exeter.gov.uk>

Matrix 3: Methods of Consultation: Uses, Advantages, Disadvantages

Method	When Used	Advantages	Disadvantages
ALL METHODS	To disseminate, collect or exchange information between Council and Community.	Builds more informed and cohesive community, better Council decisions, stronger backing from community.	Requires Council openness, initiative and resources. Requires community collaboration.
One-Off Methods with Individuals - Large Numbers of People	To canvass broad community opinion. To determine differences between different population sectors.	Can document diversity, yet achieve prioritisation.	Costs of analysis limit degree of detail it is feasible to process.
Referenda Polls of all those eligible to vote on a specific topic.	To get clear mandate (depending on response) for particular action Useful for accessing whole voting populations views on major policy options. Good if level of feedback required is limited to yes/no answers.	Representative of voting age population. Can give a good response alongside other methods such as roadshows, information campaigns, public meetings. Can improve electoral turnout if a very hot topic.	Excludes those below voting age. Can elicit knee jerk reaction if carried out as poll alone. Expensive, cheaper if run alongside existing election. Return rate enhanced by wide promotion.
Residents' Surveys Survey samples represent all the Council's residents. Surveys can be conducted by interview, post, phone and electronically	Where detailed, accurate data is required from a large number of respondents. To establish or assess services, attitudes, preferences and priorities.	Good response rates. With careful sampling can avoid bias. Produce huge amounts of data. Works well if used in conjunction with focus groups to add depth to findings.	Allow only a snapshot of people's views at one point in time Relatively expensive. Data can be superficial.
User Surveys Systematic collection of information from correctly sampled users. Can be conducted by internet, interview, post, phone.	When a survey representative of all users is required.	Good for identifying areas of concern, customer satisfaction, perceptions and attitudes. Works well in conjunction with user groups or focus groups.	Cannot identify needs of non users and may bias service development towards needs of existing users, adding to social exclusion.

Method	When Used	Advantages	Disadvantages
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<p>Informal Surveys carried out via media ads or feature articles, letterbox drop, 'Town Talk', special publication, or Council website.</p>	<p>Where a high level of interest is anticipated, only a small budget is available, or in conjunction with other methods.</p>	<p>Low marginal costs, main costs are collection and analysis. Feature articles often stimulate creativity and historical reminiscences.</p>	<p>Bias in samples. Low return rates.</p>
<p>Letters These usually involve sending information to affected households and asking for written or emailed replies.</p>	<p>When detailed written responses are required for more complex issues, e.g. proposed road, facility or service changes.</p>	<p>Main cost is in the preparation of the document for consultation Plain English, alternative formats and good distribution can help broaden appeal</p>	<p>Bias towards middle class interest groups, and against those with literacy and language problems and those with disabilities.</p>
<p>One-Off Methods with Individuals - Small Numbers of People</p>	<p>To secure information on how people experience Council or neighbourhood. To build stronger relationships.</p>	<p>Give detailed experience data. Build understanding. Increase likelihood that people will volunteer for neighbourhood roles/tasks.</p>	<p>Expensive in staff time. Do not reflect broad community. Trade-off breadth for depth.</p>
<p>Customer Feedback Forms (both in hard copy and on website).</p>	<p>Used to establish detailed opinion on standards of service performance from customers.</p>	<p>Fairly low cost. Main costs associated with printing and time to analyse results.</p>	<p>Bias in samples. Return rate varies according to amount of promotion.</p>
<p>Interviews and Case Studies In depth investigations of individuals or organisations using interviews, observation and existing data.</p>	<p>Used to bring out individual voices, stories and experience reports. Used when detailed analysis of a limited section of the community is sought.</p>	<p>Gives depth to survey data. Yields oral history life narratives and best practice studies.</p>	<p>Cannot be used to generalise about other people in similar situations.</p>
<p>Diaries A sample of people are asked to keep a record of their experience and action on an issue for perhaps one week.</p>	<p>When ascertaining accurate experiences or behaviour is important, and where the topic is of compelling interest to participants.</p>	<p>Works well in conjunction with other methods. Gives very specific information.</p>	<p>People's motivation to keep such records varies. Cannot be used to generalise unless a large number of diaries kept.</p>

Method	When Used	Advantages	Disadvantages
One-Off Methods using Group Interaction - Large Numbers.	To bring key Council matters to the public in vivid and creative ways.	Many witness the presentations, become informed and exchange views with Council staff.	Building and staffing the displays is costly. Not all see them.
Open days Council opens its doors to the public with exhibitions and staffed desks.	When consulting on a range of less technical issues. To involve public in a non-formal environment.	Give opportunities to engage people's interest. Stimulate residents to attend Council meetings.	Staff time in preparing and manning can be high if held out of usual office hours.
Exhibitions and Street Stalls	Where the consultation material is primarily visual (eg plans, maps). Where there are a number of options to consult on.	Provide opportunity to discuss plans. Good where written material is less attractive. Get street information. Canvasses popular mood.	Bias in attenders. May appear that it is a marketing exercise. Staff need to respond to a large variety of questions.
Roadshows	To enable issues and proposals of broad interest to be displayed visually with technical backup and explanation from staff.	Good for people for whom written material is less attractive. Good if venue and timing are well known.	Bias in people attending unless targeted at specific groups of people in popular venues.
One-Off Methods Using Group Interaction - Small Numbers	When opinions are fashioned in a process of dialogue, the interaction is a valuable resource.	Information and viewpoints are balanced against those of others. Issues get worked through as well as aired.	These methods are painstaking and costly. Individuals can be swamped and lost in groups.
Public Meetings, called by Council or the community, usually organised for 1 - 3 hours.	To get a feel for public opinion, explore Council's position on an issue, or protest against a proposed development.	Opportunities for frank exchange. Cheap and easy to organise. Work well if convenient timing, venue and format are advertised.	Bias in type of people attending. May be subject to boycott. If insensitively handled may be eruptive.
Public Education Seminars Meetings or courses, often with several speakers.	To raise and explore community awareness. To gather different viewpoints in community.	Relatively cheap and easy to organise. Dialogue brings out nuances and obstacles to action.	Tend to be limited in numbers. Bias towards those already involved.

Method	When Used	Advantages	Disadvantages
Community Workshops/Visioning Exercises	To involve the community in shaping policy. To establish good continuing partnerships.	Encourage people to work alongside staff and councillors in shaping the future. Decentralises.	Time commitments tend to bias the type of person participating.
Club or Organisational Briefings or Presentations	When requested by community member, club, or organisation.	Clarifies issues, policies, plans, community directions and feelings.	Expensive of staff time.
Ward Forums Area-based meetings when the public meet with their councillors to discuss neighbourhood issues.	To carry out regular consultation on a variety of issues of a local nature. Manly Council holds monthly 'precinct forum meetings' ⁴	Good for bringing together a range of agencies, clubs and residents for detailed dialogue. Strengthens identification with local area.	Bias towards regular participants. Need lots of publicity to get people to attend.
Focus groups 8-12 people explore a contentious or poorly-understood topic. Usually taped and a discussion report produced.	To gain qualitative views from key audiences, to explore complex issues, experiences held in common, or community controversies.	Yield data from various perspectives. Quick method of obtaining a feel for an issue before a survey to fine tune questions, or after a survey to clarify issues arising.	Not representative, require skilled facilitator, analysis and interpretation, can be expensive, can be dominated by one person or clique.
Nominal Groups Council initiates a very structured and controlled group process with selected individuals.	To explore an ambiguous, contentious or crucial issue, often arising from conflicts of values, or scarcity of resources.	Can define and balance the perspectives of rival groups. Can prioritise and rank approaches in preferred order.	Requires trained groupworker to use strict operational criteria.
Delphi Processes Council gives feedback on prior consultation work, and seeks further fine-tuning responses.	Survey or interactive group meeting outcomes are written up and circulated to participants for amendment or further comment.	Good way of checking accuracy of reports. Stimulates further reflection and comment. Builds trust and confidence in Council processes.	Can elicit significant new material. Often pushes against project deadline.

⁴ Manly City Council, PO Box 82, Manly, NSW 1655, <www.manly.gov.au>

Method	When Used	Advantages	Disadvantages
Ongoing Committee and Panel Methods - Large Numbers of People.	To build engaging, sustainable channels of communication and relationship between Council and community.	Ground the Council's informal status in the community. Provides known communication points. Aids quality assurance.	Community uptake is variable and the instruments yield arguable outcomes.
Council Website Speedy, comprehensive information delivery system. Can elicit feedback.	To keep people abreast of Council's breaking news, Minutes of meetings, forthcoming events etc.	Dissemination is cheap. Gets into homes unobtrusively. Method appeals to youth.	Excludes non-technologically equipped population.
Complaints Monitoring Systems	Used as alternative to customer feedback where relationships need improving.	Can be productive if well publicised and easy to use. Can identify issues for further exploration. Good for operations with large numbers of customers.	Relies on public initiative to complain. Over-represents the minority willing to complain.
Systematic Observation Looks at behaviour rather than opinions.	Used as a general indicator of issues arising from human actions. Useful in situations where interviews are not appropriate.	Good for groups such as young children using play equipment, how people use reception areas, or when need to change environment or procedures.	No interaction. Needs a systematic timescale and recording method, and trained impartial observers. Subject to wide interpretive variation.
Ongoing Committee and Panel Methods - Small Numbers of People.	With recurrent or developmental issues. To build continuity in working relationships.	Reinforces with the community that Council values their participation. Engages people and builds social capital.	Mechanisms need ongoing organisational maintenance.
Advisory Committees Based on the needs of a specific group e.g. youth, seniors, ward issues, volunteers, business, sporting, environment.	To discuss general and specific issues of relevance to particular groups as part of a wider consultation process, or as a standing forum for information exchange.	Work well to balance general consultation methods which can bias against socially excluded, and with small budgets. Stimulate engagement and volunteering.	Unless membership is periodically renewed, Advisory Committee members become less representative of their group.

Method	When Used	Advantages	Disadvantages
<p>User Groups Groups formed from Staff, Councillors, and up to ten users of a service or facility.</p>	Used where detailed consultation responses and close cooperation between Council and users are sought.	Work well when used alongside annual user surveys and other user meetings, especially where budget is modest.	As time goes on, the members of the group become less representative of general users.
<p>Informal Reference Groups Leaders of community organisations meet periodically or are canvassed by email.</p>	To gauge extent and depth of community opinion and feeling over potential plans and upcoming events.	Give feedback to CEO. Community organisation leaders can trawl extensive networks. These balance individual views.	Counter-perspectives of non-organisational people may remain unheard. In time will need fresh input.
<p>Working Parties Groups of technical experts who advance a specific Council-Community project.</p>	When complex technical issues with significant outcomes for the community need to be resolved.	Gain community participation and support. Produce well-argued rationales and sound outcomes.	May devolve into unresolvable arguments and generate bad feeling.
<p>Inter-jurisdictional Task Groups Representatives of different statutory agencies with a common concern.</p>	When the authority to address a community problem spans different levels or departments of government, or different councils.	Lay foundations for ongoing collaboration. Strengthen the framework of community authority. Lead to creative, best-practice outcomes.	Must often overcome turf suspicions and differing priorities and procedures.
<p>Citizens' Panels Councils form representative sample panels which are regularly surveyed by post or phone. Panel members can also form focus groups on specific issues.</p>	<p>To gain views of the representative population and track views over time.</p> <p>To encourage widespread community involvement.</p> <p>To provide quick consultation responses when panels are up and running.</p>	Representative of the voting population. Provide a base for an annual survey. Cost effective as several surveys carried out but only one set of recruitment costs. Good for general services such as council tax, refuse collection, crime and the environment.	Panels need to be continuously refreshed to sustain representativeness. Require staff skills in sampling, recruitment, questionnaire design, analysis, and interpretation.

Method	When Used	Advantages	Disadvantages
<p>Citizens' Juries 16 members of the public reflect local opinion on Council-set topics. The jury meets for four days, calls witnesses who give evidence and are cross-examined. It then debates the evidence and formulates a plan of action for Council.</p>	<p>To involve people in detailed consideration of a key proposal or issue, as an aid to decision making, to produce a final decision/ recommendation, or to find an objective way through a tangle of competing interests or values.</p>	<p>Good for challenging perceptions and allowing debate. Can produce some very high quality recommendations.</p>	<p>High cost. Only reaches a small number of people, is not representative. Can be very time-consuming as the amount of preparation is large.</p>
<p>Elected Community Committees Some Councils have taken the approach of holding elections for their community committees so that as well as councillors and officers there are elected street representatives, who do not belong to political parties. The committees usually have their own budgets.</p>	<p>Used when a representative view of the population is required Can be used to track views over a continuous period of time.</p>	<p>If organised well these can increase democratic participation particularly in communities with low turnouts. Can give a real sense of community ownership of decisions.</p>	<p>Expensive to organise and run elections for. May be seen as threatening to the role of elected members.</p>
<p>Mystery Shoppers Systematic approach to evaluating services through use of independent people posing as customers.</p>	<p>Used to test front-line operations where it is important to assess whether customers are being treated courteously and quickly and are being given the correct information.</p>	<p>Can be reasonably cheap if conducted on a reciprocal basis with another council. Useful for benchmarking if carried out with a group of councils.</p>	<p>Can be resented by staff as spying unless carefully explained and staff are involved in the process. Time intensive in planning the process.</p>

Objective 2: Linking Methods to Problems/Issues

Proposition

The optimum method/issue fit is more strongly determined by the outcome sought than by the method chosen

After exploring the linkages between consultation methods and six recurrent situations in Local Government, the City Council of Moreland, Victoria, developed a matrix detailing which consultation methods it most commonly used for assessing the situations⁵

Moreland's six situations for consultation are:

Site Specific

Matters about a particular site, such as a change in use.

Area Improvement

Matters that affect people in a neighbourhood, suburb or strip shopping centre (eg traffic management).

Service Planning

To develop or improve a service, which could have an impact on the whole municipality.

Policy Development

To develop or improve policies for Council's position on particular matters. Policies may affect the whole municipality.

Major Projects/ Strategic Issues

Projects of such size that they impact on the finances or future of the whole municipality

When dealing with these six situations, Moreland uses twelve consultation methods, and the situations and methods are cross-classified in Matrix 4. Five of the Moreland methods are bundled together under 'informal surveys' in Matrix 3.

⁵ www.moreland.gov.au

Matrix 4. Which Method is Used When?

(Moreland City Council)

	Site Specific	Area Improvement	Service Planning	Policy Development	Major Projects	Strategic Plans
Write a Letter	1	1	2	2	4	4
Survey	4	2	2	2	2	3
Letter Drop	3	2	4	2	2	2
Council Newsletter	5	3	1	1	1	1
Special Newspaper	5	3	3	2	3	1
Ads in Newspapers	3	2	1	1	1	1
Media	4	1	1	1	1	1
Community Leaders	3	2	1	1	1	1
Personal Briefing(s)	2	1	2	3	3	4
Focus Groups	5	4	1	2	1	3
Community-called Meeting	1	1	1	1	1	1
Public Meeting	2	2	2	1	1	1

Matrix 4, which is a guide rather than a prescription, rates methods from 1 - 5 according to the frequency of method use. Methods rated 1 will be used every time, while those rated 5 will rarely be used.

A similar matrix could be developed putting Claremont's Key Result Areas on the top axis and selected methods drawn from Matrix 3 on the side axis.

Purpose

Integral to the issue of which methods are most likely to throw light on Key Result Area dilemmas is the purpose of the consultation. The purpose and the outcome Council seeks by conducting the consultation implicitly intervene between the issue and the method. Outcomes sought are suggested in the 'When Used' and 'Advantages' columns of Matrix 3, and lie behind the method selection process presupposed by Matrix 4.

If the goal is information, for example, one of the several sorts of survey questionnaire is indicated. If the purpose is to explore the roots and branches of conflicting perspectives, a more intensive, interactive process is needed.

If Council is not clear in its purpose for holding a consultation, or if the consultation is a compromise between poorly-articulated, conflicting purposes, the results are likely to be indecisive.

A prime, cost-cutting measure available to Council, then, is to fashion an agreed and uncontested purpose for each consultation event.

This point is elaborated under Objective 3, the criteria for determining the best fit.

Objective 3: Criteria for Determining the Best Fit

Proposition

The best fit is obtained via transparent, unconflicted purpose, valid instrumentation, managerial quality control and demonstrated value-for-money

Three major criteria guide the choice of issue/method fit:

- Purpose: which method is most likely to achieve the purposes and yield the outcomes sought from the consultation?
- Effectiveness: is the proposed method technically equipped to give valid answers to the questions posed?
- Economy: Will a successful outcome justify the cost?
Does this method give the best value-for-money?

Purpose

Consultation efforts have the greatest clarity and credibility when they are demonstrably related to Council's Strategic Plans and Key Result areas. Purposes that stray far from core business are more likely to lose both staff and community support.

Council may have two or more purposes in any particular consultation effort, e.g. seeking information on a specific proposal, and a sub-text desire to empower citizens to make meaningful inputs into Council's decision-making. The greater the number of purposes, the greater the complexity of the investigative task, and the greater the likelihood that ambiguity will creep into the wording of questions or the framing of the whole exercise.

Sometimes a hoped-for outcome is not realisable within a consultation. A Council's long-term purpose, for example, may be to build a base of successful consultation with socially isolated people, not only for the articulation of previously-unheard voices, but also to lay a foundation of positive experience to encourage future re-consultations. The latter purpose cannot be evaluated within the consultation.

Consultations on contentious issues are especially vulnerable to clashes of purpose, e.g. the interchanges over development vs heritage values. The greater the stake in the outcome of these debates, the greater the force with which perspectives are promoted.

Conflicts of interest are often resolvable by negotiated trade-off. Conflicts of value, however, tend to be less amenable to such compromises⁶ and thus demand superior consultative skill.

⁶ Aubert, Vilhelm, 'Competition and Dissensus: Two Types of Conflict and of Conflict Resolution', The Journal of Conflict Resolution, 1963, Vol. VII, 26-42.

Where different staff and Councillors are at cross-purposes in the desired outcome of a consultation, a trade-off is likely. The greater the number of trade-offs, the more confusing will be the consultation task, to both the consulters and the consultees. Unclear messages reduce valid response rates, Council credibility and survey effectiveness. Credibility, both of the consultation effort and of the Council's standing in its community, is strongly and directly related to the perceived ethicality of the consultative process.

Purpose is less discussed in the literature than many other aspects of consultation, yet it often determines effectiveness.

A bridge between purpose and effectiveness is holding clear objectives and defining a process that is clear both to the officers conducting the consultation and the consultees.

Effectiveness

Two sub-criteria of effectiveness are validity and consultation management.

Confidence in the **validity** of a consultation can be increased by:

- limiting the scope and objectives of the consultation
- seeking responses that are measurable, or, in the case of qualitative inquiries, reflect the lived experience of respondents in ways that link the narratives coherently to their contexts
- pilot-testing instruments and processes and fine-tuning them in the light of experience
- choosing methods that are well-suited to target groups such as non-English speaking residents, those with disabilities, renters, night-shift workers, children, and people who are very busy. These and other groups of people may require specially-tailored consultation processes, including adapting the information in exhibitions or displays of plans or neighbourhood agendas
- sampling procedures must be clearly pre-defined if representativeness is desired, including equal likelihood of being selected to take part
- measures to increase response rates should be carefully studied and implemented, particularly in large surveys
- more than one method may be necessary to ensure that Council gives a voice to those who traditionally do not get much of a say
- some topics may require two waves of consultation, the first seeking a yes/no mandate for a particular direction, and the second seeking qualitative responses to, or suggestions of, defined proposals
- evaluative feedback and quality control mechanisms reinforce validity
- observing the norms of social research enhances both technical and political validity.

Achieving higher degrees of validity is a painstaking process, which is strengthened by advanced research and consultation training, experience and practice wisdom..

Effective consultation process **management** criteria include:

- the skill of persons managing say public meetings on controversial topics will affect the success of those meetings, particularly where the audience is a mix of young and old and those that vary significantly on a range of characteristics. This holds true for all facilitated, interactive consultations
- creating and meeting realistic timelines is crucial for managerial effectiveness. Consultation processes, which include all the steps on the Flowchart, including analysis, interpretation and report-writing, usually take longer than one expects
- feedback sessions or reports are vital for long-term effective management and for building Council's reputation of holding faith with its people. This is particularly the case for 'special groups' who may be over-consulted or who may not receive the findings of the consultation or research in a form comprehensible to them
- effective management could well include the compilation of a database across consultations so that a cumulative record is built over time. This could substantially increase research acuity in a small area like the Town of Claremont.

When broken down into components, both the validity and management meanings of effectiveness add substantially to criteria useable for finding the best fit between issue and method. They can also point to areas for future investigation.

Economy

Interactive methods, which usually depend on one or more staff members being intimately involved in the design, conduct and analysis of group meetings, are much more expensive than methods which collect information. Managing the volume of output from qualitative, interactive methods can be a daunting task. A three-hour focus group, for example, can yield a 50-page transcript record.

The cheapest methods are electronically mediated⁷ surveys that ask closed-ended, categorical questions (tick the box). Open-ended questions cannot be machine-scored, but require coding, recording and interpreting. This shifts the method towards labour-intensivity. Consequently there is incentive to develop methods appropriate for computer response and processing.

When the question objectives, wording, and response categories are very clear, much can be achieved by tick-the-box questions. Poorly-constructed instruments, though, waste time and money. Those that use double-barrelled questions, for example, often receive ambiguous, uninterpretable answers.

Marginal costs for additional questions added to existing surveys tend to be low, as set-up costs (design, pre-testing, writing the scoring protocols etc) absorb the bulk of the budget.

⁷ A study of relative costs in banking found that an over-the-counter transaction typically cost \$1. The same transaction by internet cost 20¢.

More definitive information can emerge from more expertly designed interactive interventions. Nominal group techniques, for example, can in a short space of time democratise procedures, collect a wide range of individual opinions, and rank them in terms of voted group priorities⁸.

At the end of the day, clear purpose, valid measurement instruments and tightly-managed execution strategies will provide the best value for Council's consultation dollar.

⁸ Delbecq, Andre L., Andrew H. Van de Ven, and David H. Gustafson, Group Techniques For Program Planning: A Guide to Nominal Group and Delphi Processes, Glenview, Ill., Scott Foresman, 1975.

Objective 4 : Structures (and Processes) for Implementing Consultation Methods

Proposition

The vitality and sustainability of a consultation culture is a function of the quality of consultation infrastructure integrated into Council's official systems.

Structures can be within and external to the Council.

Within the Council

Four suggested structures can provide a consultation infrastructure: a research unit, a field officer, standing council/community committees, and ad hoc committees.

1. A research unit/officer could be charged with six functions:

- keeping in touch with the Census, Centrelink, the Department of Local Government, other councils, and other official data-collecting agencies,
- organising consultation instruments such as surveys, preparing questions, analysing responses, displaying data and writing reports, perhaps in collaboration with external consultants,
- conducting Council's consultations,
- providing feedback to the CEO, the consultees, and Council on the results of the consultations,
- designing, building and maintaining a database, and an archive of Council's consultations, including the evaluations (which should include assessments of the value to the Council of the exercises), and the cost structure.
- Some less expensive and less onerous methods could yield more valuable insights and make greater contributions than some more elaborate and expensive studies,
- educating/training other Council staff, Councillors, and, where relevant, the public, on the meanings, interpretations and uses of the consultations and the database.

2. The Community Group held the view that an **Officer-at-large or Field Officer** could be commissioned to be the Council's antenna in the community, picking up sticky points, fulfilling a public education role, and keeping in contact with the less vocal majority. This role could be combined with

- community development, focussing on partnership between the community and the Council,
- staff training and capacity building, so that every staff member who deals with the public could become aware of methods of exchanging information with the community, which could become part of their ongoing mission.
- The Field Officer could recruit, train and maintain volunteers such as retired seniors who may be interested in contributing some of their energies and wisdom to Council-

community activities. When residents recognise that Council is not just darting in and out of the community, but is building ongoing partnerships and keeping the dialogue alive, more people are likely to volunteer for informal roles in Council activities, either on a one-off or an ongoing basis.

As foreshadowed above, however, all staff can contribute what they notice happening in the community, and can be agents, through the delivery of their day-to-day service, of Council's listening ear and dialogue exchange. So also can all Councillors.

In addition, the email to ToC can collect afterthoughts, contrary opinions and additional information. This is potentially a very useful dialogue-developing service. In the light of the Community Group's observations,

- the name of a staff member who reads the emails could be attached to the address
- he/she could send a return reply saying that the email has been received and will be responded to by the appropriate person,
- he/she then directs the contents of the email to the appropriate staff person who deals with it and replies to the originator.

A member of the Councillor Group mentioned the possibility of collecting anonymous or identified feedback via an interactive noticeboard or kiosk strategically and protectively located in the Town.

3. A range of **Standing Committees** such as those listed in Matrix 3 under Ongoing Community Panels or Committees, including Advisory Committees for youth, seniors or business development, could:

- establish and sustain dialogue with important community sectors,
- increase the quality and texture of community life within in their own spheres,
- provide important access points for community members to have their say,
- provide a longitudinal perspective, including changes in community mood or preference over the years
- bring researched and perhaps trialled recommendations to Council,
- develop neighbourhood identity and cohesion at Ward level.

4. Ad hoc committees, for special one-off purposes, could:

- garner cross-sectional community opinion and feedback,
- sort out specific issues, and
- explore particular proposals.

These four structures are compatible with each other and could operate collaboratively.

External to Council

When are external consultants useful?

In-house structures and processes are best for ongoing development and recurrent information-gathering and dialogue.

External consultants may have a role with regard to:

- identifying directions and strategies at points of major change or transition, as occurred in Western Valley, Nova Scotia. When politico-economic factors brought an end to the dominant economy, the Council brought in external consultants who helped it to make the change to a Smart (i.e. electronic) community
- specialist, technical issues may require expert opinion - eg in engineering, accountancy or environmental design, or specialist services such as questionnaire design and layout, or focus group facilitation, analysis and interpretation.
- When the cross-pressures of interest groups are very strong, the cooler heads of external people who have no intrinsic interest in the outcome may be useful, although alliances between external consultants and a party to a dispute may occur.
- Credibility is lost when a Council uses an external consultant as an instrument for defining community needs and opinions in terms of Council imperatives, or for enforcing its will. What is often needed is wider transparency, and independence.
- Transparency is safeguarded by public scrutiny of the design, procedures, results, analyses and especially interpretations of investigative studies.

A mix of internal and external consultation services often provides the optimum pathway. External help may be bought in for specialist areas, and their work strategically situated within Council's wider consultation system.

Objective 5: Estimated Implementation, Time and Resources

Costs

The statement on costs included under Objective 3 (Economy, page 20) deals with the relative costs of different consultation methods. The main cost, however, is infrastructural. A permanent full-time staff member charged with undertaking the roles suggested under the Research unit/Officer section of Objective 4 (page 21), with associated support costs such as computing etc, would involve a \$100,000 p. a. outlay. The non-labour costs of the consultations, such as free-post, printing, hire of halls etc, are additional. The design, analysis and report-writing costs are included in the research/consultation officer's job description, although external advice, and advanced training are not.

A Field Officer could be packaged for half that cost, but unless there is a homebase unit for grounding the work in the Council's ongoing program, the role could degenerate into a public relations function. A more effective alternative is for many staff to have antennae, and to feed viable proposals and addressable criticisms to either the appropriate line manager or to the research/consultation officer. This function could be coalesced with the ToC email/letter function.

An additional budget for consultation processes could fund the various structures that link the Council with the community, as suggested in Objective 4. These can be modest in a small Town, as voluntary energies are likely to provide the human input.

Staff training in community dialogue and integration necessitate additional expenditure, although if conducted in-house, these costs may be marginal.

Time

Each consultation exercise must include:

- lead time to prepare the community, notify them of the consultation, give information/education about the issues, and indicate what they will be asked to vote on, comment on, or discuss.
- In the case of focus and other small, intensive groups, recruiting and screening appropriate members takes time, as also does exchanging feedback with members, and incorporating feedback into the final report.
- Lead time to prepare instruments may require a validity audit, pre-testing with a community segment, constructing a rigorous sampling frame, and so on. These are painstaking tasks.
- In addition, a time buffer should be included for unschedulable breakdowns in technology or humanity.

- Analysis, interpretation and report-writing are notoriously lengthy procedures when the issue is complex.
- Any involvement of external consultants is additional, although external consultants doing the whole job typically complete in less time than internal teams.
- Ethical screening of research/consultation sampling, instruments and data take time.
- Measures to protect the integrity of the data merit reconsideration for each consultation.

These include: The Privacy Act and confidentiality provisions relative to the raw data, how it is stored, who can have access to it and in what form, and the archival destination of the information after completion of the consultation.

Implementation

Implementing a consolidated research and consultation system and strategy depends primarily on Council purposes and resource-base.

What does Council require? How can consultation efforts further the Town of Claremont's Strategic Plan and Key Result Areas?

The Rolls Royce solution is to put the consultation presence onto an infrastructural basis. Although doing this will take a large commitment of time and budget, it will position the Town well for the long-term future.

Criteria for a dedicated unit with appointed, seconded, or shared officers include:

- institutional recognisability within the Town's system with appropriate title and clearly-articulated authority, responsibilities and accountability to the CEO
- ongoing base budgeting provision for the unit, including database management costs; plus provision for recurrent surveys and other processes, and special investigations. An entrepreneurial focus would also be possible via a mandate to apply for grants to the range of funding bodies which have an interest in local issues and to accept Council-relevant commissions from external sources
- norms of scientific acuity in the structuring, analysis, interpretation and reporting of investigations, and in evaluating their effectiveness (the research focus)
- a mandate for community development, including strengthening Council's relationships with grass-root organisations and working through community concerns and conflicts (the consultation focus)
- framing research and consultative activities within an increasingly prominent dimension of information collection and management, namely the ethical and legal parameters of Australian law, liability, and canons of best practice.

Because infrastructure costs are so high, Council may decide to investigate cost-sharing possibilities, such as a Western Suburbs collaborative information gathering, storing and analysis unit, or a proposal to the Department for Local Government and Regional

Development to fund or subsidise a local government research and consultation presence, which could include training programs for officers of other Councils.

Another aspect of implementation is what Council does with the results of particular investigations. Council's standing in its community, among its peers, in the public eye, and with government is influenced by the integrity with which it deals with recommendations and follows them through. Reports that gather dust are dispiriting for the investigators and the investigated alike.

Where Council declines to accept or act on consultation report recommendations, it strengthens its relationships by clearly explaining its position. Absence of transparent, stated positions leaves an Authority open to rumour, innuendo, disaffection and distrust.

Discussion and Conclusion

Critique

Many of the consultation methods presented in Matrix 3 have been drawn from large Local Government Authority practice. Counties in England, where there is no State level of government, often have millions of people and relatively substantial budgets. These economies of scale permit the appointment of permanent research and consultation staff. Their focus on detailed consultation, and structures like citizen's panels and juries, and elected community committees, are implementing the grass-roots democracy designs developed in the Blair Government's approach and legislation.

Australian examples, such as Manly and Moreland, are from cities within this country's two largest conurbations, and also enjoy considerable scale and resourcing.

Claremont is a Town, and a small one at that. It is also a unique town - situated in the heart of Perth's Western Suburbs, along Perth's premier status line, the Swan River, accommodating some of Western Australia's most prestigious educational institutions. With the low rates base of 4,000 households and a business strip, it is unlikely to easily muster the resources to add significantly to staffing levels. Focussing staff attention on this issue, though, can stimulate creative ways of strengthening its existing consultation culture and presence.

Yet there is much to learn from the bigger units. This survey has shown the immense range of methods in use, and case-studies of successful consultative interventions will illustrate how human ingenuity has resolved intractable problems and collaboratively established relationship bases in formerly antagonised and fractured communities.

Limits to Consultation

Consultation has its risks. Risks include the fatigue that arises from over-consultation, consulting the wrong people (perhaps by overlooking the detailed and relevant experience of Council staff), or unbalanced representation in the responses collected.

For example youth views may remain poorly articulated, while the views of politically aware, time and experience-rich over 55s, who constituted 27% of Claremont's population in the 1996 Census, were responsible for 58% of responses to the 2000 Survey, where the overall response rate was 25%.

These risks can be managed by careful design planning and execution.

Less predictable risks may lie around the corner. Good consultation opens doors. While opening doors gives access to community engagement, the door may also be to Pandora's

Box, and formerly-suppressed conflicts may erupt. These are less likely where ear-to-the-ground staff have their antennae tuned to shifts in community sentiment.

To achieve consultation's desired outcomes, debate over report strategies must of necessity negotiate the swirling currents of the community pressure groups that fashion the micro-politics of local government.

Good consultation can provide information, build relationships, surface and work through conflicts, and formulate strategies.

Yet decisions are Council's. Leadership from the top is most effective if it uses the results of research and consultative efforts to shape sustainable, forward-moving, consensually validated action plans congruent with the published Strategic Plan.

Strategies

Given Claremont's relatively well-developed history and culture of consultation, its demographic profile, high levels of education and participation, and its size-constrained resource base, we recommend seven directions for future development:

- Expand the job description of the CEO to specifically provide authorisation, quality control measures and staff training for all Council's consultation activities.
- Increase the use of computer/internet consultative methods. In general, computer-based surveys are the cheapest and most easily arranged, and have significant data collection, classification, storage, retrieval and analysis benefits. The limit to this is the significant sections of the population that currently remain without access.

Yet this too could be addressed - terminals in public places (such as the Library, shopping centre etc) focussed on Council information, could lessen the distance between Council and its non-electronic community segments, and also provide a training bridge or taster to this new world.

In addition, the number and proportion of people becoming computer users and owners continues to increase sharply. Technology is not itself a method, but it is a vehicle through which some of the methods in Matrix 3 can be expedited.

The Council website has made an excellent start, and the ToC/CEO's emailing systems have the potential to grow in responsiveness and scope. In particular, an additional initiative to attract youth interaction with the Council, and with each other, could be facilitated by electronic methods.

- Purposefully build Councillor and staff awareness of the philosophy and craft of community development, including keeping open ears close to the ground in their dealings with community members and institutions. This would be a cheaper and,

where it worked well, more effective alternative to the Community Group-suggested appointment of a roving officer to keep a finger on the pulse of the community.

Not all Staff and Councillors necessarily see this as their role, and their ability to respond (and the Council's ability to respond) has limits. Nevertheless openness, relationship-building and responsiveness by staff are key attitudinal characteristics for sustaining the momentum and richness of the consultation culture.

Doing this would provide consultation horses for issue or target-group courses via a relatively easily-managed platform of face-to-face interaction, the expressed preference of older people in the Community Group. Some ongoing and one-off structures, such as user groups, organisational briefings, and Ward Committees, would complement this.

- Collaboratively build more effective structural connections with the youth of Claremont. The schools and colleges in the Town represent a massive latent resource for creative engagement in Council-relevant activities. A set of partnerships linking the educational institutions with strategic planning and areas of joint interest could give an enormous boost to community activity and knowledge, and could support the institutions in the community outreach components of their mission, in local research and in data-base utilisation.
 - A similar initiative could occur with seniors' organisations. Who knows where the stored wisdoms of older people, harnessed to public-interest tasks, could lead the Town of Claremont?
6. Decentralise neighbourhood or precinct-level dialogue and debate to Ward level. This could engage more community support, including the potentially rewarding domain of volunteer endeavour. People volunteer for tasks which they regard as worthwhile. Sustaining the perception of 'worthwhileness' requires, in most cases, Council support. Council invitations to partnership in areas of local concern could open new vectors of collaborative action and celebration.
 7. Discuss with other councils the cost-sharing possibilities for establishing a local government research, data archive, and consultation presence on a firmer, rationalised basis. Linking this with a network of Western Suburbs educational institutions could lead to an imaginative evolution in the Smart Community tradition.

The underlying connections between this project's five objectives, the Flowchart, the four Matrices and the seven recommendations, taken together, provide the logic that we commend to the Town of Claremont.

Denis Ladbrook and Heather Deighan,
The University of Western Australia.
April 26, 2002

Appendices

Report on Community Group Discussion on Council's Consultation Processes

Held at the Town of Claremont on November 20, 2001.

Membership

The CEO issued invitations to fifteen people, randomly selected from the Town of Claremont's ratepayer roll, and also invited a small number of people from an informal reference group of ratepayers.

Five people accepted the invitation and met for 2 ½ hours in the morning. All came from the ratepayer reference group. One randomly-invited person had accepted, but was unable to attend.

Questionnaire

A short questionnaire was issued with the invitation. Asked whether they favoured individual or interactive methods of consultation, four of the five preferred interactive, except on issues of minor concern, where four preferred individual methods.

Contentious issues involving major changes to the status quo require widespread, interactive consultation. Such issues include: restructuring the Drive-in and Swanbourne School sites, access to the foreshore, Council amalgamation, Town Centre development and housing density and building height changes. Yet Councillors are elected to act and should not cede decision-making totally to the community. Council must avoid the danger of 'paralysis by analysis'.

Group Process

After an introduction from the CEO and a short statement on the purposes of consultation and where it fits within Council's broader communication system and its Strategic Plan Key Result Areas, participants were asked three inter-related questions:

1. What has been your experience of consultation by the Town of Claremont, and where do you think it could be used more effectively?
2. What consultation methods do you consider would be appropriate in our situation?
3. What are the barriers to effective dialogue?

The discussion, which ranged across all questions, is organized thematically rather than chronologically, and is reported largely in terms of general, consensual opinions.

Discussion Themes

Town of Claremont's Communication and Consultation Processes

Participants considered that Council had consulted well on major, contentious issues such as underground power and shopping precinct development. Council's website is excellent, particularly the speed at which Council meeting Minutes are posted. The openness of fortnightly Council meetings is also appreciated. Participants expressed pride in living in Claremont, and general satisfaction with relationships with staff.

Yet there were also dissatisfactions:

- Participants considered that Council staff were not always responsive to non-routine inquiries.

In particular the email system directed to TOC was seen to be impersonal, and issues raised in such emails seemed to become buried in the bowels of the bureaucracy. Participants considered that a human face, represented by a name, with an initial acknowledgement of the incoming email, and a subsequent addressing of the issue, would improve Council's standing with its residents.

'Town Talk' was seen to be reactive, reporting happenings but not outlining future plans and events. Also, it didn't offer a dialogue opportunity for public discussion of issues. It could thus broaden its applicability and liveliness.

- A further communication suggestion designed to increase Council visibility and community participation was that of placing noticeboards in accessible places, such as the centre of Claremont shopping precinct and the railway station, on which Council activities are regularly notified in advance to the public. The noticeboard in the Library is a good board, but is seen only by the few who use the Library. In addition, user-friendly boxes for communicating with the Council could be situated both at the Library and on the Stirling Highway level.

Consultation Techniques

The group acknowledged a trade-off between securing and transmitting adequate information, and information overload. Simple methods were strongly preferred, and overconsultation on minor issues was irritating and costly.

Participants considered it important to have a known mechanism in place for when an issue arises, a clear point of contact. This could be either the local Councillor, or an Officer of the Administration.

As a broad conclusion, participants considered that Claremont's consultation processes were in good shape, but overall effectiveness could be increased by two measures, more community responsiveness, which in turn could be achieved by

greater emphasis on Ward-level activity.

Devolving Dialogue and Decision-making to Ward Level

Though Councillors are elected in wards, Council discussions are currently centralized. The grassroots participation arising from neighbourhood energy, however, is likely to dissipate if Ward issues are invisibilised by more general concerns. Furthermore, while the Mayor is well-known, councillors are much less known, even in their own constituencies.

Participants proposed some measures to address this.

- Elected councillors could hold periodic Ward meetings - perhaps by Council reducing the number of its meetings and giving the Ward meetings official status. At Ward meetings, residents could engage with Councillors in the expression of concerns, suggest approaches to problems, and garner organisational or voluntary support for action.

This devolution of democracy is likely to engage more people and their ideas and energies in community development and enhance Council credibility at neighbourhood level.

Ward websites with dot-point notifications of important developments could be linked to the Council website.

The group discussed ways of increasing Councillor visibility and influence in their electorates. These focused on increased interaction with community members and organizations, and could include:

- scheduled coffee-and-chat meetings, similar to those recently held in Claremont by the elected Member of the House of Representatives
- informal policeman-on-the-beat style sessions in shopping centers, youth or senior citizens venues, and the like
- participation in local organizational meetings where a Council-related issue has been raised
- Councillor training in community building.

These measures would give Council a 'listening ear' for detailed community issues, reduce apparent resident apathy, increase the use of communication resources already in place, and shift the focus of the Councillor role towards engaging more fully with constituency concerns. Such an emphasis might also, in time, expand the pool of people offering to stand for election to Council.

Addressing Problematic Community Situations

Two emergent issues sparked vibrant discussion. We include them here as they point to a potential future direction for improving Council effectiveness and resident satisfaction.

- TransPerth bus frequency along Shenton Road has more than doubled in recent times, including the re-routing of 72 from Stirling Highway. Most of the buses were reported to be largely empty. This increase in what is perceived as redundant heavy traffic has infringed the quality of life of some West Ward residents, who have protested to TransPerth.

Is this a Council issue? The matter was raised as to whether Council could 'back residents up' in their dealings with TransPerth as a way of improving neighbourhood quality in terms of child safety, road decongestion and resident satisfaction.

- Ambulatory movement across parks and streets in South Ward in the wee hours of Saturday – Monday mornings by apparently inebriated persons has been disruptive in terms of awakening noise, vandalism and endangering actions – e.g. a group shifting a concrete bench onto public road space.

Is this a Council issue? Participants suggested that responsibility is shared between the perpetrators, the local community, the entertainment premises where drinking occurs, the Police, and the Council. Some of these are already taking some action, e.g. a local hotel continues to provide complimentary buses to take people home at evening's end, despite the buses having been seriously vandalized on a number of occasions. All agreed that this is not a situation resolvable by one party alone.

Resolving both the bus and the behaviour issues implicates Council's inter-institutional relationships. Four directions for addressing such issues are:

- (1) Creating ad hoc committees of community representatives (including the Claremont Business Association) to discuss, promote and implement action towards enhancing community awareness and desired behaviour change on the specific issue
- (2) an ongoing Liaison Committee of relevant agencies to deal with inter-jurisdictional issues
- (3) a Council 'Customer Service' Officer be appointed to manage Council's responsiveness to community concerns. The duties would include:
 - referring residents to appropriate Council Officers and other services
 - clarify with residents the degree to which Council can become involved in bringing community problems to resolution
 - explore fruitful avenues residents can take to improve their communities
 - build community capacity to undertake action on issues of collective concern.

Limitations of this Group Process

- There were only five participants out of the Claremont population of more than six thousand adults.
- As the meeting was held in the morning, only one person, a business proprietor, reported being in the active workforce. This leaves unstated the views of the majority of adults in the labour force.
- All participants were over 30, and three were over 50, so no expression of youth views (the 34% of Claremont's people who are under 25) is represented here. For example, this group strongly preferred more face-to-face interaction in its dealings with Council, and generally did not favour greater reliance on technology. Would younger cohorts, who become computer-literate in their school days, have the same stance?
- The views of the 37% of Claremont's 3664 households who rent are not represented here.
- Apart from some reference to Ward issues, no differences of opinion according to where in Claremont people live are recorded here.
- Four of the five were long-term Western Suburbs residents who understood the history of Claremont. More recent arrivals may have different experiences and aspirations to report. For example, some have experienced 'lack of neighbourliness' in Claremont Village.

Denis Ladbrook

Heather Deighan

December 4, 2001

Town of Claremont Consultation Project

Report on Councillor Consultation

Held on November 28, 2001.

The CEO issued invitations to the mayor and nine councillors. Five accepted and met for three hours in the evening, and another sent an apology.

After an introduction from the CEO and a short statement on the purposes of consultation, and where it fits within Council's broader communication system and Strategic Plan Key Result Areas, the consultants introduced themselves.

Each councillor then spoke of their experience in the Town of Claremont, giving everyone a feel for the depth and breadth of lived experience represented by the five elected members.

From the circulated agenda three inter-related questions were explored:

Q1. Since you became a Claremont Councillor, have the demands on your role changed, and if so how?

Q2. What information would you like from residents when making decisions?

Q3. What mechanisms do you favour for the community giving their views?

Q1. Since you became a Claremont Councillor, have the demands on your role changed, and if so how?

- The Local Government Act of 1997 was the trigger for a big change in consultation and engagement processes.

“The new Act changed the things that we’re here to talk about tonight.”

- The members affirmed the contributions of Council and Councillors prior to 1997, and noted changes occurring at global, national and local levels. Prior to 1997 many Councils were not identifying all the issues on the streets, and consultation was problematic.

“The makeup of Council changed through councillor resignations and the new legislation changed obligations and responsibilities. A quantum leap in the level of professionalism has taken place since 1997, including a new CEO who helped bring everything together. Professionalism undergirds Council hierarchy, processes and procedures.”

- Councillors by nature are reactive... . Someone with a bee in the bonnet presents an issue at Council and you’ve got to do something about it. But it’s become less reactive to crisis and more acting to get things done than it used to be.
- Knee jerk reactions are past, and Council strives to keep ahead of issues, considering how they fit with strategic planning. Its the Mission statement that directs ongoing

proactive communication and strategic planning fosters increasing capacity and capabilities to face and cope with change

“we are less threatened by change and more willing to look at it and have a go at being smart in consultation”

- But becoming more strategic does not mean losing touch with the community, for grass roots issues continue to be the most important issues. The consensual view is that within the Town of Claremont the community reflects an ongoing awareness of where the Council sees its energies being directed.
- I see my role as identifying and enhancing those issues that give us the common fabric.
- We wish to build a system where the credibility of the Council is strong because what we are doing is creating a purposeful and imaginative environment, we've got vision and drive.

Q2. What information would you like from residents when making decisions?

Members regarded the social fabric of Town of Claremont as consisting of three different communities and sub-cultures, with differing styles of communication.

- A framework for consultation and dialogue is in place with mechanisms for review.
- We need more information, though, on how to inform all sections of the community appropriately.

“Our community is well educated, have a fairly good grasp, and are articulate people. An informed community can respond more easily, and give objective feedback to guide Council.”

- But do our communications reach all sub-cultures and sectors of community?
- Is the level of detail sufficient for the purpose, or is there information overload?
- We seek to foster objective responses from across the community.
- We would like to balance planning between development and heritage.
- A hindrance to communication is technical jargon.

“I would suggest that as high as 90% of the Town of Claremont population don't know much about the jargon of town planning. We have a real danger in using this jargon and thinking the community picks up on it.”

- Does the message get lost in jargon? If so, how do we best simplify information with a balance of technical and plain language?

Q3 What mechanisms do you favour for the community giving their views?

- A firmly held commitment to continuous improvement and effective communication, consultation and engagement, with mechanisms of dialogue that ensure a two-way flow.
- Emotionality can be an issue
 - “Quite often in a group meeting the emotion gets up such a surge that all rational decisions go out the door and people vote with their hands so they can finish the meeting to go home, so we need ways of securing objective responses from inclusive participation, also, how to assess the impact of a vocal rent-a-crowd.”
- Making sure that we know that they’ve had the opportunity, they’ve seen the advertisement, and received the invitation.
 - “I’d knock on every door it I have to. As long as everyone has an opportunity for practical - pragmatic forms of appropriate communication.”
- Planning is often a contentious issue. To inform the community a statement of policy and procedures could be placed on the website and in hard copy at Library with opportunity for engagement on questions arising with a designated Council officer.

Suggestions

- Perhaps we can provide a central point where community members know they can go if they wish to have a say, or we could decentralise information flow
- an electronic suggestion box using the internet or e-mail
- interactive notice boards
- councillor kiosk.

Limitations of the Process

There were only 5 out of 9 councillors. This leaves unstated the views of the others.

Denis Ladbrook

Heather Deighan

Tuesday, February 19, 2002

Town of Claremont Consultation Project

Senior Officers Workshop on Council's Consultation Processes

Held on November 22, 2001

Chair: Mr. A, Kyron.

Participants: Six Senior Officers of the Town of Claremont

Agenda

Mr. Kyron introduced the topic with a short statement on the purposes of consultation and where it fits within Council's broader communication system and its Strategic Plan Key Result Areas.

Consultation is one of Council's recognized strategic processes designed:

- To build systematic dialogue and stronger relationships between the Council and the community
- To engage community ideas and energies to improve the quality of Council decisions, services and plans
- To strengthen information about and support for Council plans, services and decisions

Consultation is defined for this discussion as

'Ongoing and specific processes of dialogue that lead to broad-based decision-making.'

Staff members were asked five inter-related questions:

1. What has been your experience of consultation by the Town of Claremont, and where do you think it could be used more effectively?
2. How can conflicts be resolved most effectively?
3. Do you consider that residents and staff suffer from Consultation Fatigue?
4. Do you think some long-term consultation structures would be useful in Claremont?
5. Are you being consulted enough, and are there ways that Council staff could engage in mini-consultation dialogues during their daily work?

Discussion

Question 1: What has been your experience of consultation by the Town of Claremont, and where do you think it could be used more effectively?

- In many public meetings and workshops, people come to speak rather than listen. Yet group processes moderate extremist views.
- A street 'walk around' or 'community bus-around' can be very valuable where contentious issues arise, as on-site observation adds local detail, which is often complex. Location consultations could help engage people and find effective solutions to site-specific or street-specific situations.
- Although Claremont's voting rates and survey response rates are comparatively good, how does Council know what broad community opinion actually is? Would non-respondents have the same views as respondents? Does non-response mean 'Yes'? Even in a house-to-house door-knock survey, does the spokesperson really speak for the whole household, or do some householders' views remain unexpressed?

In addressing this, staff suggested that where there is a known dearth of responses, e.g. among young people, renters, or in some localities, targeted surveys or group meetings could be held to canvass opinion.

- Council meeting forums can be intimidating for those unfamiliar with official processes. Less formal, local meetings are more comfortable for many residents.
- The outcomes of Community Committees are sometimes overly influenced by personal agendas and minority views. Their recommendations are frequently challenged. How can Council deal with this? Is the expression of views enough? Council can't please all people. Perhaps wider discussion of Community Committee reports would increase transparency, give opportunities for others to have balancing or countervailing input, and move from a more restricted to a more global view.
- Often the cost implications of decisions are not spelled out in proposals, yet the cost of new facilities or services is of great importance to many residents. Transparency includes disclosing cost estimates where actual plans are being discussed.
- Staff considered that customised measures for identifying problems and reaching towards solutions, particularly over site-specific issues, would be worth adding to the consultation toolkit.
- Council's webpage may be used more imaginatively and effectively for both information delivery and exchange. This could increase transparency and dialogue in an anonymous, non-threatening way.

Question 2. How can conflicts be resolved most effectively?

- The long-term integrity and credibility of Council, its staff and processes is the foundation-stone for addressing rifts in community fabric and conflicts between interest groups.
- Council members are elected to make decisions and must do this. Yet the information base on which decisions are to be made must be comprehensive and balanced, with Council's strategic objectives pointing the direction.
- Controversial issues bring community sentiments to the fore. Careful methods are very important. For example, any survey's objectives and wording should be crystal-clear and broken down into manageable parts. In addition, the community can be divided into age-groups (or other groups based on their position relative to the controversy) and consulted separately. Their voices will be clearer, and the overall view formulated will be more representative.
- Councillors may be lobbied by people who stand to gain or lose from a particular course of action. Yet Council must make its decisions and act for the overall benefit of the Town.
- External facilitators/consultants have a more impartial role where conflict is intense, with much at stake, as long as they have no vested interest.
- The outcome reports should be written in action-language and widely circulated. This is vital for Councillors, staff and residents to get to know their community and to be aware of the changes occurring in it. Council should act on the report's recommendations. Unacted-on reports reduce credibility.
- The outcome needs to be commensurate with the input of time and resources. Otherwise discontent increases.

Question 3. Do you consider that residents and staff suffer from Consultation Fatigue?

- There is a danger of over-consultation. Decision-making should not be delegated to the community.
- Staff consider they are often asked questions that should be addressed to Councillors, and are also asked to respond to resident queries on behalf of Councillors. This role ambiguity is worth sorting out, as resident queries may be left unanswered, or misanswered.
- The 'job description' of Councillors, with respect to their role in connecting at a detail level with the community, is currently poorly specified and merits attention. So also do

Councillor-Staff relationships, and the flow of information to Councillors. How do they know when they are representing broad community views?

- Many residents don't know their Councillors well. A map, with Councillors' photos attached to the streets where they live, or wards they represent, could help familiarise community members.

Question 4. Do you think some long-term consultation structures would be useful in Claremont?

- Residents' Panels for general issues and Reference Groups for specific issues can provide rich sources of information to Council. Yet how do we ensure that they are representative of the community? Even if the composition is balanced between community segments and age-groups, not all members come to all meetings. This waters down the democracy. Perhaps reports, as well as minutes, should include a listing of who attended which meetings.
- Similarly, staff working groups are often dominated by the same active staff, leaving swathes of staff opinion unrepresented.
- One or more on-line reference groups could provide rapid consultative feedback to the Town without any scheduled meetings or absences. In a time-pressured environment this possibility is worth working up. Yet issues of response consistency and representativeness remain.

Question 5. Are you being consulted enough, and are there ways that Council staff could engage in mini-consultation dialogues during their daily work?

- Our views are sought at staff meetings and in staff working groups. It would be useful to us if the surveys for residents were also sent to us. We would then know what and how they're being asked, and would have the opportunity to have input ourselves. Often our experience can give extra angles and nuances.
- We consider consultation within the organisation to be very important. It values our views. Being overlooked damages our feelings about the degree to which our employer values us. One person said: 'I have emotional attachment to Claremont. We spend a lot of time here, more than at home.'
- Where our work is directly involved in the issue under consideration, we would like to be consulted on the design, content and process of the study or survey in the construction phase, even where external consultants are commissioned to do the work.
- Staff do carry out mini-consultations during the course of our work, though only line-of-command or informal channels currently exist for feeding this information into the wider system. Time is nearly always a constraint. A Suggestion Box in the staff room, or, preferably, an electronic postbox, might help here.

Statement compiled by Denis Ladbrook on February 16, 2002.