

Why ‘good’ consultation is key

The importance of public consultation, especially in the local government arena, can not be underestimated – but it often is. Politicians on a national and local level can survive or fail based on the effectiveness of this process, as **John Tizard** explains

Consultation is and should always be a core activity in any modern democracy.

Public bodies should constantly listen to and engage in dialogue with citizens, customers, service users, staff and other stakeholders. Local government has statutory duties to consult on many aspects of policy and even operational decisions. Many in local government do this well, but regrettably, this is not universal.

Public consultation by public bodies, including local authorities, cannot and should not be divorced from politics. Politicians who fail to consult effectively and specifically those who fail to explain their intended actions well and/or, subsequently, do not listen to the responses, deserve to lose office. The astute politician at national and local level will understand this.

However, my experience is of too many politicians (including council leaders) who fail to see the importance of effective consultation and allow their organisations to consult badly or not to consult when they should.

Of course, the same imperatives apply to senior public officials but ultimately, in central and local government, the responsibility and accountability for effective consultation rests firmly with political leaders.

So what makes for effective consultation and how can it enhance, or even derail political decisions or embarrass politicians?

Nine years ago, Rhion Jones and Elizabeth Gammell from the Consultation Institute wrote *The Art of Consultation*. This was an excellent book, which vividly described how public consultation can be effective, how it can fall short of being useful and at worst, can be a disaster.

In this first book, Gammell and Jones paid less attention to the politics of consultation and the role of politicians than I would have liked. Consequently, given the political importance and relevance of consultation, the publication of their new book *The Politics of Consultation* is much to be welcomed.

Gammell and Jones describe how politics and politicians are far from being as trusted and respected as they would wish to be. They describe the consequences of the rise in ‘fake news’, the growth of irresponsible media outlets and an increasing misuse of social media for the political process. And, they seek to set out how effective public consultation can play a role to redress these negative yet impactful stains on the political system.

The authors claim their book is about the relationship between the world of politics and the process of consultation. Perhaps so, although in my view, consultation should be core to the ‘world of politics’ – not



something alongside it. They do, however, rightly report that there is much confusion and uncertainty in the ways politicians and senior public officials see the contribution of consultation and how they should handle it.

That said there are times, when reading this book, when one wonders whether the authors’ unquestionable enthusiasm for consultation may mean they miss some political nuances and underplay the pressures on political leaders, especially as a consequence of austerity.

The book sets out why politicians should consult and ensure their organisations consult.

Effective consultation can lead to better informed decision-making, better understanding of potential reactions to decisions and greater chances of stakeholder ‘buy in’ to decisions. It can also make tough and potentially unpopular decisions easier to make.

Above all, when done well, it provides an opportunity for many outside the political and senior official cadres to propose solutions. It has the potential to and should improve public confidence in political decision-making and public bodies. It can enhance democratic governance.

Of course, and as the book states, when done badly, so-called ‘consultation processes’ can sour politics, make decisions both harder to make and harder to explain and sell and lead to even greater public cynicism.

Gammell and Jones draw on their vast personal experience and expertise and that of the Consultation Institute to show case examples of excellence and some lessons where consultation has not been so effective – alongside which their commentary is insightful and comprehensive.

It would be fair to report that they find local government generally more understanding of and better at consulting than other parts of the public sector. The reader will be able to glean both strategic and operational reasons why this is the case and advice on how to improve their own approach.

In local government, consultation can play an important role in both executive and scrutiny activities. It can be used to challenge and question what other agencies may be doing and their wider impact on place and local citizens.

Despite austerity and cuts, it remains vital that local authorities adequately resource

consultations – deploying the latest and most appropriate means of consulting, including social media and online systems.

They must ensure consultations are properly informed with data, evidence and well-argued proposals. The scope and the boundaries must be clearly defined – as must any ‘red lines’ resulting from statutory, operational, financial or political constraints or commitments.

Two topical areas for good consultation would, in my opinion, be on local authority budget choices and whenever any consideration is being given to outsourcing services. I would call for mandatory consultation on the ‘make or buy’ decision and any consequential business case for outsourcing, before any procurement is permissible.

Consultees must be enabled to understand what will happen to the results of the consultation, who will make final decisions and how those responsible will account for their ultimate decisions. Therefore, how the consultation will contribute to the political process should be explained and transparent, as should the political consideration of the consultation results.

Public bodies should never consult in a cynical fashion, when the final action has been pre-determined. Nothing will fuel public cynicism in politics and the political process more.

Similarly, a functionary ‘consultation’ carried out for public relations purposes only or simply because the law requires but when the consulting body has demonstrably no enthusiasm or interest in the exercise, it should be avoided.

Personally, I would like to have seen more in the book about how consultation can be used effectively by political parties at the national and local level to develop policy, test ideas and proposals, and engage stakeholders, including the electorate.

It would also have been interesting and beneficial for the authors to have interviewed some politicians, including council leaders on how they see consultation both as a benefit and the potential political risks associated with it.

In 2009, I was pleased to recommend *The Art of Consultation* to local government leaders, councillors and senior officers – and their colleagues across the public sector. Nine years later, I heartily recommend that they now read *The Politics of Consultation*. ■

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***The Politics of Consultation* by Rhion Jones and Elizabeth Gammell, The Consultation Institute, 2018**