Handout 6: Consultation

While consultation is a process that should be used through the entire process of developing policy it is crucial at this stage that consultation is structured into the process.

Now that the best option has been identified and the method of implementing it chosen (policy instrument) it is smart policy making to consult with those people who are going to be affected by the policy. Additionally, it could be a requirement of government legislation that consultation is part of the process.

There are many examples where decision makers have talked about consultations with other stakeholders but this turns out to be no more than the decision makers telling others that this is what we are going to do which is more like informing. Such processes only serve to discredit the consultation process.

True consultation, is asking and taking on the Management Committee other’s opinions while still remaining in charge of the agenda and outcome.

Consultation also draws all the different views and by its acceptance the policy then has legitimacy. Those affected by the policy are more likely to accept a piece of policy if they have ownership of it.

Consultation can have its costs. It is time consuming and can be expensive if wide consultation is required. Additionally there is the potential for a dominate voice to railroad the process. However consultation in the community services industry is a reflection of the industry values of participation, democratic principles, to be open and transparent.

An appropriate consultation plan is developed and implemented to test and review draft policies.

Policy implementation issues including monitoring and evaluation processes are discussed with relevant personnel and the policy modified as appropriate.

Changes to policy are notified to those affected in time to take remedial action.

Some of the methods of consultation will include:

- Focus groups
- Public hearings
- Community information campaigns
- Surveying key stakeholders
- Circulating the proposal for comment
- Setting up an advisory committee
- Holding interest group meetings.
To lessen the pitfalls of consulting, discussed earlier, the process must have defined
processes with clearly articulated terms of reference, time lines and expected
outcomes. This keeps the discussions focused and sets the agenda for those attending.

The way that the consultation process is carried out will depend on a number of
factors. These will include:

1. **The purpose of consultation is to:**
   - Provide access to information so thereby improve the quality of the policy
decision
   - Ensure the policy is understood and accepted by all to maximise its legitimacy
   - Promote consensus about policy choices
   - Confront the dissident voice who may challenge the policy process by being
   - Open and transparent accountable and offer opportunities for participation.

2. **The method of consultation** for example:

   The resources and expenses that the agency has to spend on consultation will
reflect the significance of the problem, the importance of the policy and the
time it has to adopt the policy.

   To ensure that as wide a consultation occurs as possible and to limit any bias
that can occur through only concentrating on one method it is usual to select
more than one of the above methods of consultation.

3. **Identifying those who have an interest in the policy** for example:

   While there will be the obvious stakeholders who have an interest in the policy
any consultation chosen must take into account other players who may
identify as being interested.

   The mix of consultation methods must consider access and equity issues by
ensuring those who have language barriers, physical disability and poor
literacy skills are not denied the opportunity to participate.

   Advertising the consultation process will ensure wider distribution even
though there may be many who will not take part.

4. **Starting the Consultation** for example:

   - Start the process early so that any feedback can allow for suggested
alternatives
   - Ensure the consultation is clear and open
   - All the issues and the impact of the proposed policy must be made aware to
those who will be affected by the policy
   - The objectives and limits of the consultation process should be clear. For
example the purpose, and process needs to have previously been determined.
1. Communicating With All Concerned:

- Identify the main stakeholders to get their views on the draft policy. The purpose for meeting with them should be given in advance and what type of information you may want to have ready for the meeting.
- To ensure that the consultation process does not become too unwieldy consider circulating written proposals or public meetings to gather responses.
- While consultation is important it is also important not to go overboard with too much consulting with groups or individuals who have little or no interest in the effects of the policy. Therefore be clear about who to consult and set up times to do so.
- If representatives of different organisations affected by your policy have to take it back for their members feedback, ensure your consultation process has the time for this built in.
- As community services agencies are always busy and strapped for time consider concise written information that shows clearly the issues identified for them to comment on, rather than trying to find time to meet.

2. Now You Have Finished the Consultation:

- Make sure you acknowledge the feedback as soon as possible.
- To develop trust and ensure people know their input has been valuable let all those who contributed know how their input has been used.
- Give stakeholders and others in the community who have contributed a summary of the views and data collected and what the likely proposal or action will be. This process can then be used for comment.
- Comments back from those with an interest in the policy allows for identifying any inherent problems with the policy proposal and for continual improvement of the policy.

Issues to be Aware of in the Consultation Process

Make sure that a particular group does not dominate the consultation process. This is more likely to happen if the issues are complex or technical which may be a problem for other groups e.g. those with English as a second language.

Make sure that representatives of groups can speak on behalf of the group. This must be made clear.

Those with the professional interest in the policy and have expertise in the area are likely to provide useful feedback.