

# Community Consultation – A Guide

It seems strange that at a time when many people feel at their most powerless regarding the big issues – war, terrorism, mounting racism, globalisation, the environment – consultation on the smaller, local issues has become something of a fetish. Does consultation matter? Can it change anything? **b:RAP believes consultation can make a difference – but only when it’s done well, done right and with clear aims in sight.**

But we must be clear about what consultation is – and what it isn’t. Consultation – seeking the views or opinions of people or groups – is not the same as ‘democracy’, nor should it be mistakenly seen as a replacement for democracy.

Nor is consultation the same as ‘representation’. It is one thing to be asked for *your* views, but it is something else entirely to be asked to *represent* the views of others. This has happened all too often in the past – especially in black and minority communities, where ‘community elders’ or particular faith groups have been seen to speak on behalf of entire communities. b:RAP does not believe that an individual or organisation should speak on your behalf, just because they are ‘black’ or a ‘white’, or rich, or powerful or influential.

**We believe that people’s opinions should be sought because of what they know or what they do – the things they care about, the things they have a legitimate interest in – rather than because they are a particular ‘colour’ or faith. In Birmingham, we have been there and it doesn’t work.**

Put simply, b:RAP believes that we need a new kind of consultation – one that engages with people based on their experience and knowledge, one that doesn’t confuse *consultation* with *representation*. Consultation should do what it says – it should create a space within which the widest range of views can be sought, no matter how messy or inconvenient those views may turn out to be. How often institutions and politicians at all levels say they “celebrate diversity” but then ignore that very diversity – of class, gender, age, life experience, background – because it’s too messy, not neat enough!

While we do of course believe that the forces that exclude people must be fought and must be defeated, we do not believe this can be done by making ever finer distinctions between people on the grounds of ‘race’ or culture. This can only serve to divide communities and we are more interested in what people have in common.

For too long society has attempted to relate to black and minority communities by making ever finer distinctions between them – as if ‘race’ is the only thing that makes up a person’s identity. b:RAP is committed to bringing together people based on the issues that matter to them rather than the colour of their skin. That way lies ‘separatism’.

b:RAP has experimented with doing away with the whole idea of ‘representation’, getting people together as ‘advocates’ to speak on behalf of particular *issues* – health or education, for instance, or the criminal justice system – rather than on behalf of some notional *community*. This has worked well and we shall continue to develop this approach.

**Consultation – does it matter?**

**Consult me for my experience not for my ‘colour’!**

**‘Diversity’ – it’s more diverse than you think!**

**Issues not skin colour**

**‘Advocates’ on issues**

As 'localisation' – getting more people involved in the renewal of their neighbourhoods, or helping to decide how best local services should be provided – becomes more established in Birmingham, it will become increasingly important that people can think outside of their own narrow personal or community interests.

**This is a vital change, because in the past, the tendency has been to get people to try and *represent* their communities – and consequently, whether intended or not, to fight for the interests of those communities. This has not always been in the wider interest. In future, what the Government calls 'cross-community working' will be crucial. We will desperately need people who can think 'outside of the box', who can take the wider view – who can help our communities stick together rather than cause them to come apart.**

Government – and other local agencies too – still believe that voluntary and community organisations can be an important way of reaching people whose voices might otherwise be unheard, whose views might otherwise remain unknown.

While we agree that voluntary and community groups can and do play an important role in local consultation – as well, of course, as providing a whole range of other necessary services – the same qualifications apply here as to individuals. It is important not to mistake their voice for that *of the* community and essential to look closely at the kind of people they say they can assist in reaching. It is important too to look at the kinds of issues or activities groups are involved in – to look at their experience – rather than to assume that simply because they seem to be mainly black or Asian or indeed from any minority community, that they represent local people in all their diversity. This has proven not to be the case.

Consultation, then, has an important role to play, but it is vital that we – or those acting on our behalf – do not repeat the mistakes of the past. Communities are far more diverse than many understand and even with the best of intentions it is easy to *appear* to be consulting while missing out on the real views of women, or older people, or youth.

So, a few key pointers to keep in mind about consultation:

- Consultation *does* matter, but it has to be done well and done right.
- It is **not** the same thing as representation.
- Organisations and individuals should be consulted for their experience, not their skin colour.
- It is very rarely that individuals, particular faith groups or leaders, or voluntary organisations can speak authoritatively on behalf of entire communities.
- It is vital that our new age of consultation should not repeat the mistakes of the past.
- The purpose of consultation is to gather a range of views, not to gather together a number of 'representatives'.

**Beyond our own community- or self- interest**

**Voluntary organisations can play a part – but shouldn't be mistaken for the community**

**Consultation – not the *appearance* of consultation**

**Key pointers...**