

August 2025

The monthly summary of  
consultation matters by  
Consultation Guru –

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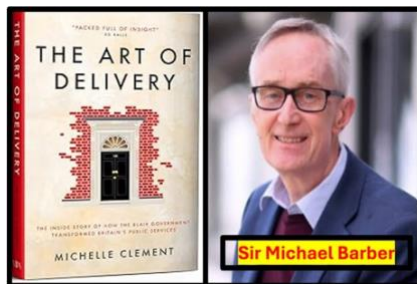
# Consultation Catch-up



Over the summer, I have taken several flights to the continent, and lost count of the number of times I've been asked about my experience. Ryanair and Booking.com have gathered a lot of data about my levels of satisfaction. But am I being consulted? Barely! The data certainly helps them determine if their operational performance in aggregate falls within their planned parameters. But there is no dialogue, nor any obvious attempt to use the data to influence policies or products. There *could* be, but to be effective consultation, they'd need to do rather more. Satisfaction research has much in common with consultation but is intrinsically different. All consultation involves data gathering. But not all data gathered forms part of a meaningful consultation!

## Best of the Blogs

### Memo to Sir Michael Barber: consult more and DELIVER even better. (Blog 107)



As citizens we all have an interest in Governments that DELIVER. They all talk about it but the man credited with having made the best fist of it was **Sir Michael Barber** who ran the 'PM's Delivery Unit' for Tony Blair twenty years ago! It was the time of the 4 hour A & E waiting target – and many others. Now he's back in 10 Downing Street to help Keir Starmer deliver his 'missions' and it coincides with a book that tells the story of his previous stint in the job. I've read Michelle Clements' account in **THE ART OF DELIVERY** (See brief review overleaf) and tried to

identify some lessons that might apply this time around. 'Guess what? Top-down diktats – no matter how well delivered – are no substitute for genuine dialogue and consultation with those whose lives and interests are most affected.

### Why Universal in Bedford may face fewer 'blockers'? And why others will ....! (Blog 106)



Roll up ... Roll up ... for the first rides at UNIVERSAL's brand new Theme Park in Bedford – opening in 2031. Experience the roller-coaster ride of the Government's new planning process as it accelerates towards record-breaking consents. Book now for 'Nuke the NIMBYs', 'Batter the BLOCKERS' and innovative new rides as part of the **PURSUIT of GROWTH** challenge. This Blog wonders what will

happen to the 780 projects just published in the new infrastructure project pipeline when they lack the lure of the theme park and the public support that goes with it. The **Planning and Infrastructure Bill** seeks to weaken community rights to express their views, and Ministers risk imposing unpopular or unacceptable projects on the unconsulted. It's a great way to lose votes!

### What might frustrate the Ten-year Infrastructure Strategy?



(Blog 105). I've been reading the **Ten-Year Infrastructure Strategy**. All 100+ pages ... and even though it's not as green as some would like; not as financially credible as others might want, it looks and feels to me about right. EXCEPT for one thing; I'm not sure if it doesn't smack a little too much of top-down "We know what's needed" and "We know how to build it..." At least there's a willingness to consider *where* to build. Or is there?

**On Page 2** this month, how climate change continues to prevent a major roadbuilding scheme in N Ireland, reflections on the Cunliffe review of Water, local government reorganisation and AI.

The book review is "The Art of DELIVERY"

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## Instant insights

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- From Northern Ireland comes a High Court judgment of significant potential impact – not just on consultation law, but on the application of [Climate change legislation](#). In the case of [Alternative A5 Alliance](#), objectors to a new dual carriageway linking the north-west (Londonderry/Derry and Donegal) with Dublin, Government plans were quashed once again. ‘Once again’ because this project was first announced 18 years ago and has been prevented by a succession of successful legal challenges. This time around, they won the argument as to whether the Stormont administration had complied with the complex provisions of the **2022 Climate Change Act** for N Ireland. The claimants are a group of residents, landowners and farmers who believe that the road cannot be built without breaching the Act. Judge McAlinden ruled that there had been an *"inadequacy of information for the purpose of lawful decision making."* In essence, there had been a failure to meet requirements *"in respect of placing the new environmental information in the form of the updated GHG emissions estimates out for public consultation and scrutiny."* In Keir Starmer’s language – yet another victory for the ‘blockers’ which, in this case was also to the dismay of road safety campaigners responding to a horrific history of road accidents on the current route. But look at the details, and the problem is little to do with consultation – and everything to do with politicians passing laws without thinking through the consequences.
- Even well-run consultations can’t make up for poor policy. Among the woes of the **water industry**, perfectly exposed by the [Cunliffe Review](#) in July, there is little that can be directly attributed to a failure to consult. Indeed, **OfWAT**, like most Regulators, consulted often, as have organisations with overlapping responsibilities such as the Environment Agency (EA), Natural England and DEFRA. No better example exists other than the clutch of unremarkable **river basin management** consultations run by the EA. The disconnect between *consultee* input on the poor state of our rivers (including trout streams of international ecological importance) and the inadequate response of the water industry shows that **it’s not always the consultation itself that’s the problem.. but what happens to its output!** Just like a sewage treatment plant, maybe.

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## Straws in the wind

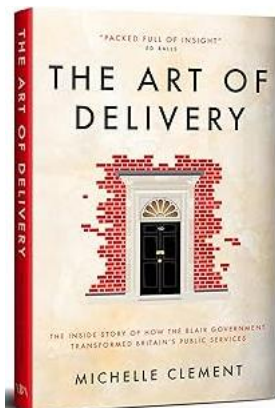
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- We are becoming used to enthusiastic reports of AI being a game-changer for public consultations. The latest is from [Cambridge city/S Cambridgeshire](#)’s planning teams. They quote 320 submissions from three consultations that took over 60 hours to log and summarise using conventional methods – but being fully analysed and a report being generated by AI in 16 minutes. Something to ponder!
- There is a lot being published right now about the challenges of the structural upheaval in English local government, especially with the publication of the **English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill**. Probably the [most useful summary](#) comes from the Local Government Association (LGA). And the most interesting commentary is from **New Local**, and focused on [‘the art of the possible’](#). It advocates imaginative ways to deliver the ‘effective neighbourhood governance’ required in the legislation. Hear Hear! And about time too ....!

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## The Reading List

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[Michelle Clement’s day-by-day account](#) of Sir Michael Barber’s leadership of Tony Blair’s PM Delivery Unit (See Blog 107) is certainly comprehensive, if a touch uncritical. The main takeaway is the need to work with the Treasury – which was a tough task when Gordon Brown and Blair were pulling in opposite directions. It does, however, illustrate the difficulty of wading through the Whitehall treacle – which I suspect is as glutinous now as it was 20 years ago. My regret is that nowhere does it seem to occur to those involved that better engagement with relevant stakeholders and a greater willingness to consult might make the delivery of complex, multi-faceted policies more deliverable. As Barber seeks to repeat the trick for the current PM, he has a chance to try it.

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