

# introduction

This booklet has been developed by the Department of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Policy and Development on the basis of advice from an Aboriginal Working Party. It is a guide to Queensland Government officers who at some time need to consult with Queensland Aboriginal individuals, groups and/or communities. The information provided is intended to be useful in a variety of settings - urban, rural and remote.

Although, some general principles are provided as guidelines to officers to apply in particular situations this document is not intended to be prescriptive and it is up to individual agencies to establish detailed consultative arrangements. You may find that you deal with one community in a certain way and with another community in a totally different way.

***Therefore, this booklet does not provide an answer to everything. There are some problems that have more than one answer. Other problems have no readily apparent answer.***

It is important to emphasise that there is no single Aboriginal culture (see History Sections 1-1.2). Government officers need to have some understanding and appreciation of Aboriginal history, culture, customs and their relationship with governments for effective communication and negotiation.

In many cases how officers deal with situations will depend on what they already know about

Aboriginal people and their cultures and what knowledge they can acquire. The section on *Significant Issues (2)* provides further insight into a variety of issues affecting Aboriginal people.

This booklet is intended to complement the experience and knowledge officers already have and cover basic information that officers dealing with Aboriginal people for the first time may not have.

It is important to be aware that Aboriginal people and communities have definite expectations of government officers. It is expected that government officers will know enough about their unit/branch and their department (including the government generally) to be able to assist Aboriginal people. There is an expectation that government officers have enough understanding about the situations and opinions of Aboriginal people to be able to represent their views in other, non-Aboriginal forums.

The section relating to *Aboriginality (3)* highlights a range of issues regarding who is an Aboriginal person and who is not in the "black" community.

The sections relating to *Consultation and Negotiation (4)* are arranged twofold. Firstly *Community Visits (4.1)* which identifies issues to think about prior to meetings and secondly the *Formal Meeting Section (4.2)* provide practical advice for the actual meeting.

Obviously, taking the initiative to involve Aboriginal people (as with any client) at the beginning of a project, program or the development of a policy will allow direct identification of their needs and increase the effectiveness, relevance and acceptance of policies or services. Creative solutions can be developed when the government and community work in partnership. Evaluation of policies and services requires consultation with affected and interested groups to receive feedback and this is dealt with in the *Providing Feedback (5) and Evaluation (6)* Sections.

It is crucial to the success of government programs if consultation *and* negotiation occurs. Too often in the past Aboriginal people have felt that only token consultation has been carried out by governments and that this “consultation” has occurred merely to “back up” a foregone Government decision. However, when consultation *and* negotiation occur a more equal relationship develops.

### Consultation:

- “Consultation is an essential component of the policy making process;
- Effective consultation should occur early and throughout the decision making process;
- Each consultation needs to be designed to meet the unique demands of the situation and to identify and define clearly the issues considered and allow for adequate time to conduct the consultation process;

- Effective consultation requires openness about why people are being consulted, how they will be consulted and how much influence they will have over decisions made;
- Those consulted need to be provided with comprehensive, balanced and accurate information;
- All interested parties should have access to the consultation process; and
- All participants should be treated with dignity and respect.”<sup>1</sup>

Naturally, it important to keep all these factors in mind when consulting with Aboriginal people. It is also important, however, to remember that Aboriginal people have often felt consultation left them powerless to affect government decision making and for this reason prefer the term “negotiation” to “consultation”. “Negotiation” suggests a more equal relationship where parties work through any conflict, finding areas of agreement and agreeing to disagree if areas of conflict cannot be resolved.

<sup>1</sup> Office of the Cabinet, Queensland, *Consultation: A Resource Document For The Queensland Public Sector*, (p.30), 1993, (P.1) GOPRINT, Brisbane.