

Better public policy through community engagement



Why does community engagement matter when creating policy, and how do we make sure it's done well? Across the public sector, we recognise that community engagement is no longer an optional extra. It's also not enough to put a discussion document online and glance through the submissions received before finalising advice. But while there's a sense that community engagement is important, New Zealand hasn't previously had clear guidance on how to do it well, and practice has varied.

Recently, we in the Policy Project completed work on the Third Open Government Partnership National Action Plan – contributing to Commitment 5:

“To develop a deeper and more consistent understanding within the New Zealand public sector of what good engagement with the public means.”

We've prepared a suite of [engagement resources](#) to help agencies develop a principled and deliberate approach to community engagement. Most recently, we've summarised the [survey results](#) that helped inform our resources.

The consensus from the survey was that:

- government needs to make a cultural shift by recognising the value of engagement in creating policy
- engagement processes and capability need to be improved, both within agencies and across government
- government should prioritise more inclusive engagement – ensuring that engagement represents communities affected by a policy issue.

As we developed the resources, it became clear these were mutually reinforcing planks which together form a solid foundation for effective community engagement.

Recognising the value of engagement for quality policy advice

Done well, community engagement helps policy practitioners understand problems, issues, and risks at the outset of the policy process. This includes engaging with communities to ask them what their priorities are and identify areas that could benefit from further policy work.

Open and collaborative processes lead to more credible decisions and help identify and 'stress-test' preferred policy options to ensure these are likely to have the intended effect.

Community participation in policy making is also important for legitimacy – particularly where contested issues arise.

Effective facilitation of engagement can bring people together (in person or online) and help bridge the divide between different perspectives. This can improve community cohesion while resolving policy disagreement. Community engagement is therefore especially important when hard choices must be made, or when significant change may occur.

Improving capability and processes across government

Government agencies already know that enthusiasm for community engagement isn't enough. Effective engagement needs dedicated resources, specialised engagement capability, and genuine relationships with affected communities. Underpinning this, agencies need to create systems for refining engagement processes and retaining institutional knowledge.

Many community organisations also emphasised that a joined-up approach across government would make it easier to participate, particularly where issues overlap. Agencies should explore potential for shared engagement and consider time commitments required from different groups and communities when planning engagement.

Prioritising inclusive engagement

Our system of government has long provided both formal and informal opportunities for

public input – such as select committee submissions and public meetings.

However, without designing for inclusive engagement, there's a risk that the voices heard will skew towards some groups and not others. When some groups are over-represented and others are under-represented, the results of engagement will not be an accurate or robust basis for informing policy. Inclusive engagement is necessary to ensure policy decisions are based on representative input from a range of communities.

Making sure engagement is inclusive requires both a shift in attitude, and adequate resourcing and capacity. For example, consultation through an online survey is one of the least resource-intensive options – but it risks excluding people who don't have access to the internet, aren't computer literate, or are unlikely to see online advertising. It's important to emphasise that if engagement is not inclusive, the results will not be reliable. Like engagement itself, inclusivity is fundamental to quality policy processes.

Where to from here?

The fourth Open Government Partnership National Action Plan is currently being developed. We're optimistic that the direction of travel will continue to be will continue to be towards better government engagement with communities – so that together we can 'achieve better policy outcomes'.

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