

Engaging with the community

Community engagement occurs when councils involve communities in the prioritisation and development of services in their area. Community engagement includes community consultation, but also includes the more active processes in which communities can formulate plans or influence local developments.

Consultation is a process requiring elected members to consider proposals with an open mind. Consultation involves seeking views on a proposal not yet decided on.

The purpose is for a council and its community to exchange information on decisions and issues of concern. While councils have statutory duties to consult in certain circumstances, consultation also makes practical sense. Some of the benefits of consultation include:

- more information about the nature of community problems
- feedback on the costs and benefits of proposals and their chance of success
- a sense of ownership and buy-in to decisions made on the basis of community consultation
- greater goodwill and inclusiveness
- an improved likelihood of successful implementation.

Consultation helps elected members, as decision-makers promoting well-being, understand better the nature of the issues and problems which councils and communities face and assess the solutions that might be acceptable.

So how does a small council with a district population of 18,000, just 45 full-time equivalent staff and limited resources manage to engage the community and fully engage it in the consultation process?



Case study: Kaipara District Council

Kaipara District Council believes it has found the answer by streamlining its engagement and consultative processes into community roadshows. The mayor, councillors and senior managers hold bi-annual roadshows that cover almost all the issues for consultation for the coming year and any other issues the community wants to raise.

Communications and Services Manager Claire Lichtwark-McInnes says the challenge was to do more than just the bare minimum of engagement and consultation within limited resources, without reducing the local community's access to the council.

The council's streamlined consultation processes have evolved over the past six years and now consist of two main rounds of consultation. The first in October is a pre-annual plan consultation and the second in March is held for formal consultation on the draft annual plan. In parallel to this process the council holds consultation hui with the two local iwi at their main marae.

During both rounds of consultation the council takes a roadshow out to the 12 communities in its district, setting up in the local hall and holding open forums for people to see what is being proposed. The days and times of the forum are designed to suit the needs of each community. For example, one of the larger areas has a non-resident population during the week so their forum is held 9am-5pm Saturday.

The October round of roadshows focuses on the key issues that have emerged from the council's asset management plans, staff recommendations and any past projects which may be up for re-consideration.

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Instead of holding traditional meetings the council sets up displays in the local hall, sends along the ward councillors, either the Mayor or Deputy Mayor and three senior managers. In the bigger areas all the senior managers will attend. The hall is open for a half day or day for people to talk with councillors or council staff about current issues, give their feedback and raise any other issues.

In recognition that people give feedback in different ways there are options to give verbal feedback, fill out a submission form or spend some time outlining ideas on a suggestion form. People can comment on all the issues raised at once, or simply pick out the one or two issues they are interested in responding to.

In addition, all community groups are written to and asked if they would like someone from the council to attend their meeting and outline what the key issues are and provide a forum for feedback for these groups within the walls of their own meeting.

Feedback from the October round of consultation feeds into the draft annual plan. In March the council takes a draft annual plan roadshow back to the community. This is the time for formal submissions and people are encouraged to make submissions whether they are in support or opposition so the council can form a view of public opinion.

The council also sends out invitations to previous attendees and submitters as well as flyers encouraging people to come along.

All councillors and senior managers attend the hui at two nominated marae during the roadshow timeframes. Representatives from outlying marae attend and give their input. The council has entered into a Memorandum of Understanding with Te Uri O Hau. The document was developed with the iwi to suit its needs and as a result, is a fairly informal document that

relies on good working relationships with the council. The council uses the same process for working with Te Roroa although no Memorandum of Understanding is in place.

So is it possible to hold all a council's consultations within two rounds of roadshow consultations a year? Kaipara District Council says there will always be one or two that can't be put into the roadshow rounds due to statutory time requirements, and additional consultation is held on these.

Ms Lichtwark-McInnes says that in the first couple of years the council failed to put all its consultations into the bi-annual roadshows, but once the organisation fully embraced the concept staff began planning their consultations to coincide with the roadshows.

The council believes it has benefited from this process by staff and councillors having a much clearer understanding of community needs, wants, desires and aspirations. It also believes the resources it pours into the roadshows result in savings in other areas.

The roadshows cut down on the numbers of phone calls and complaints as people know they have the opportunity to discuss issues at the roadshows or at their own group meetings if they have invited the council to come along.

Ms Lichtwark-McInnes says the community has more trust in the council and knows that council staff are being upfront with them about issues that arise. They also know that the council responds to correspondence raising issues and ideas by going out and meeting the people to discuss the issues. One of the biggest positives has been the ability to engage with young Maori who following the hui tend to ring in with ideas they want to meet up with and discuss, she says.

