

Community engagement

Council Partnership Charters

A member of the public recently told **David Hammond** that council consultation, is more like ‘insultation’. David calls for councils to adopt a new model to better engage with their communities.

Here’s a conundrum – the local government sector’s performance is improving, but its reputation lags that improvement in performance. In LGNZ’s 2014 survey, the public scored local government’s overall reputation at just 29 out of 100.

Breaking that score down, although the public reported being kept informed was their top priority, only 32 in every 100 respondents thought local government had a reputation for good communication and interaction.

Something is wrong here. It’s true that our reputations are only as good as our next failures. We know we can never achieve 100 percent satisfaction. But a reputation for detachment and bureaucracy as poor as the one local government in New Zealand has should give us serious pause for thought.

Looking through a localist, community-empowerment lens, this vote of no confidence reflects a widespread cultural change. New Zealanders now expect to be engaged and involved in decision-making over choices which affect them and their communities.

Tahunanui cycleway

This point can be illustrated by using the example of a council which did nothing wrong. In June 2017, Nelson City Council brought years of work, including extensive community consultation, on the proposed route for a Tahunanui Cycleway, to its Infrastructure Committee.

To the shock of staff and elected members alike, the well-consulted recommended route was rejected by the very community that originally called for it. Tahunanui neighbourhood residents filled the public gallery of the meeting to reinforce their “No”.

The committee concluded, “After hearing from the community in the public forum and much discussion around the table, we have decided not to pursue the previous recommended route at this time.”

Australia

The same trend has shaken councils across the Tasman, causing many Australian local governments to invest effort in changing the balance of power between council and community.

In 2017 Dr Mike Reid of LGNZ and myself were part of a Trans-Tasman team which gave input into a “localism declaration” for Victorian local government. The declaration has been adopted by that state’s local governments and contains four statements which also hold true for New Zealand:

- This declaration rests on a belief that the state of the nation and the health of our society depend on community-driven action in the neighbourhood, not just decisions made in parliaments or boardrooms.
- Our present ways of thinking and governing are neither coping with the pace of change nor meeting citizens’ expectations. There is an urgent need for a fresh approach and responsive leadership.
- It’s time to explore a new model of governance, one based on a re-energised civil society that draws on the strength and resourcefulness of people working together in diverse local and regional communities – a localist response.
- To make a difference and help ‘reinvent the future’ local government must be ‘bold and brave for change’.

The Partner Journey

Local government consultant David Hammond says he asks two questions of all staff before beginning any project, programme, policy or strategy:

1 Who are my partners?

2 What is council’s role and why do I believe that?

“When we can do this consistently across council the results are transformative with communities and iwi.”



Community co-design

Responding to the reaction of the Tahunanui neighbourhood to the proposed cycleway route, Nelson City Council followed the consultation guidance in its Significance and Engagement Policy. After applying the professional evaluation methods detailed in the policy, the resultant route made complete sense to both the community and council.

In August 2017 Nelson City staff reshaped the cycleway process to one of community co-design. They state, “Based on the clear message from the previous public submissions the new approach places much stronger emphasis on including key stakeholders and the community in developing the final outcome of a preferred route for the cycleway.”

Chris Allen of Bicycle Nelson Bays spoke to the *Nelson Mail* about his appreciation for the co-design model, saying, “To stand back at the last minute and say, ‘actually, I think we could do this better’, is a very good outcome for everyone.”

Guidance

But the goalposts of community expectation have moved – in Nelson City as elsewhere. What used to be acceptable in community engagement or consultation is no longer guaranteed to still be tolerable.

And despite Nelson’s positive experience, the guidance provided on community engagement by Significance and Engagement Policies across the sector is widely irrelevant.

The demand for co-design with communities is growing. So too is the appreciation for councils that show they value their community’s expertise and knowledge.

Michael Kemp, president of the Thames Lions Club, captured this when commenting on the Thames-Coromandel District Council process to co-design a new destination playground in Thames.

“It’s always been in the past that, ‘we do what we want and the end user just accepts what we’ve built’. But to find that the council was interested enough to involve the community in the designs – I was very, very impressed.”

These are the moments that build local government

Nine principles

Local governments need to commit to the following nine principles when creating Council Partnership Charters:

- 1 Treaty of Waitangi** A basis for partnership with communities and iwi.
- 2 Localism** Decisions, policies, programmes and projects that affect citizens and communities should be made as close as possible to the people affected.
- 3 Communities and citizens as partners** Citizens are partners with councils in developing sustainable and resilient communities.
- 4 Early involvement** Citizens are invited to help set priorities and shape policies, programmes and projects from the outset.
- 5 Building relationships and community capacity** Every policy, programme or project is an opportunity to grow community capacity to engage, and develop knowledge and community leadership.
- 6 Inclusiveness and equity** Processes and engagement will respect a range of values and interests, and the knowledge of those involved.
- 7 Good quality process design and timeliness** Community engagement processes will meet the principles of the charter, be adaptive, and information will be provided in a timely manner.
- 8 Transparency** Decision-making processes will be accessible, open, honest and understandable.
- 9 Accountability** Civic leaders and staff are jointly accountable for upholding the charter.

reputation and drag it up from 29 out of 100. Change in neighbourhoods like Tahunanui is happening faster than many in the local government sector appreciate. The speed of this cultural change has made traditional council engagement methods problematic. Council staff and elected members need to challenge the council’s role in every project at the outset.

Using the Tahunanui example, are cycleways still the domain of a council’s land transport network and a staff-led process? Or are they community infrastructure, to be co-designed with the community?

A council senior manager, Alec, recently said to me, “We can change to being more partner orientated in what we do but we just don’t have those skills in the teams. So if we’re going to do this consistently we have to make a big change right across council.”

Alec is right. Reconnecting with communities in 2018 is not just a task to give to the communications staff or the community engagement team. It requires the whole of council, including elected members and community boards, to initiate a journey with community partners.

The task to raise the 29 out of 100 reputation score and close the ‘community gap’ rests with council leadership, since these people set the tone for everyone else.

Partnership charters

The journey with community partners starts with the development of a Council Partnership Charter. Partnership Charters are common internationally, especially in the United States, but are not well-known to council staff in New Zealand. They lay out community engagement principles which are to be unilaterally and consistently locked-in across the council.

The adoption of a Partnership Charter ensures the council stays in touch with the rapidly-changing expectations of communities, and that its actions are accountable. (See box story *Nine principles*.)

New Zealand does not need either more councils or fewer councils in order to practise effective local government which enriches the lives of us all. Instead, we should work to empower our communities with the councils we currently have.

If our consultation in action is being seen as ‘insultation’ by a public clamouring for more control over their own communities, we need to change our own model of council-led processes.

We need to embark on a journey with our communities where we let them know we are ready and willing to partner with them for the benefit of all. **LG**

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