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Integrating Public Input into Political Leadership and Government

IAP2 Auckland Branch Academic-Practitioner Workshop

The University of Auckland

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Post Workshop Report, 13-02-2013

The workshop was held at The University of Auckland on the 7th February, 2013. There were 67 participants in attendance. Participants included consultation staff working at central and local government, market researchers, local council politicians, and central government politicians¹, academics working in deliberation and political leadership and other practitioners with experience working on consultation from different perspectives such as mediation or specific policy areas. On arrival, participants were separated onto different tables to ensure that there was a mix of different practitioners, academics and politicians on tables to ensure diverse discussion occurred. The tables themselves contained information for attendees, such as photos, questions, quotes and a brief report on what would be asked during the sessions.

Two topics were to be discussed by participants throughout the workshop: the politician's perspective on public input, and making public input usable for political leadership and government. The first session was run in cafe style at tables and group discussion leaders encouraged discussion and note takers wrote down the main points made by participants. In the second session participants were asked to walk around the tables and write down their own comments on post-its and large paper as to how they thought public input should be organised. Both verbal and written comments are summarised in this post workshop report.²

Participants successfully contributed to both sections, and as the report illustrates there was a large amount of information discussed. There were calls for important innovations such as transparency in the PI process; feedback to participations post government decisions; suggestions for PI to be used on an ongoing basis and to build long-term relationships with communities – a very different perspective from the common focus on one-off events or research on a particular issue; and involving decision makers in the interpretation of results. Discussion also showed how difficult it is to move from understanding what is wrong with the current system to working out how to make it more effective; and how to envisage the role of politicians in PI and how PI fits with their representative role. It also reflected the literature in terms of there being a lack of consensus as to who should be asked.

¹ All ministers and Auckland-based MPs from central government ministers were invited, however only two were in attendance.

² All comments were noted anonymously.

It is hoped that more workshops of this nature will be held in the future. For more information in regards to the research, how the workshop was run, or if you are interested in holding your own version and would like to adapt the template, please contact Dr Jennifer Lees-Marshment via j.lees-marshment@auckland.ac.nz.

Topic 1: The Politician's perspective on Public Input

In this topic, participants were asked to look at public input from the view of the politicians. The first topic was discussed in a café style format, allowing people to discuss this issue in an informal and dialogic format. Participants were required to look at problems in current practice that need to be overcome, what we need to understand about the constraints and realities that politicians face and how politicians could utilise public input, making it valuable and useful. This section will be split into these three specific questions, with information detailed beneath each.

A. What are the problems in current practice that we need to overcome?

Questions over value for money spent on consultation

- There is a lot of money spent on PI and we need to question whether it is worthwhile.

Not everyone wants to be consulted or there is too much consultation

- A myth may exist that everyone in New Zealand wants on-going input when in reality many people want to vote and simply be left alone to lead their own lives. Why would they want to be involved when they are 1 person out of 4 million?
- Hard to go out to communities all the time because of overkill. At a certain point even the public say "just make a decision."
- People don't have the time to constantly engage in the decision making process and engagement processes as they are busy living their lives.
- Passive voters who trust representatives. This is a great issue as the electorate size increases.

Consultation takes too long

- There is no quick, fast way to conduct consultation and engagement
- Hard to keep level of excitement up, especially when things can take a long time. Public start believing that their input doesn't count because they are not seeing results quickly enough.
- Also, the issues public profile dissipates and people don't recognise the progress made.

Government makes responding to consultation difficult

- Hard to do things in 3 years. A new politician can come in and change the direction. Thus things don't get done.

Weaknesses in public input collected and method

- People do not have access to information so that they can make an informed decision.
- They often bias the bigger areas as well. This also applies to minorities.
- Problems in regards to which methods need to be used in order to effectively consult with each other. Politicians have a range of demographics in their communities, and different formats work best for each one.
- In the case of consulting with those with mana whenua there are often problems with actually getting the opinions of those other than the leaders/elders. Often everyone feels as

though they must vocally agree with (“back up”) the leaders even if they do not. “The grandparents want to consult with the grandparents and want to leave the parents and the kids out of the conversation.”

- Debate on public issues can often be dominated by interest groups. It becomes difficult to get cross sectional community engagement views past sectional interests.
- We face problems when it comes to the question of what to consult on. There is no strong idea of what the key points to talk and consult over are.
- Problems with linking reality to theory
- There are issues with the feedback loop being missed altogether, and ultimately wasting PI. If what people come up with has no weight, there is really no purpose to looking for PI.
- In regards to participatory democracy: You can spend a lot of time doing it, and not move very far along. This also leads to the danger that elected officials are not making the correct/their own decisions, rather they are looking at interest groups and public opinion and this manipulates their decision
- Disjunction between feedback politicians get and what the people on the ground get, we need to bridge the gap – add trust.

Politicians can't consult all the time

- There are variables such as time and money. For example, on some boards you are paid for 10 hours work a week (even though they do more). Thus they need to get other jobs to support themselves. This creates time constraints on how much consultation they can do. Sometimes that's why they can't be at all events.
- Politician's inherent biases can over-ride what the public has to say a lot of the time – and it worries us as there is something undemocratic about that.

Informal consultation may be more effective than formal

- Issue with engagement being described as formal. More informal interaction is needed as this tends to be more social, and makes it easier to engage more people.
- Current centralised approaches to consultations (e.g. annual plan) are perhaps too formal for genuine consultation.

Politicians still need to lead

- Politicians can go too far when it comes to listening to public input. They can become poll driven, and ultimately lose support by not leading the people.
- Where does PI take precedence over expert opinion?

PI is not transparent enough causing distrust

- Political engagement and consultation is not transparent, leading to distrust.
- Some people in the community regard consultation as a farce, wherein politicians have already made a decision and simply search public input in order to be able to fall back on this later when they are publically questioned

PI is often done after decisions – the timing needs to be thought through

- The DAD model is often assumed – Decide, Announce, Defend. We need to question the stage at which public input was used.
- At what stage do we seek consultation? And at what level – basic, or higher than this?

B. What do we need to understand better about the constraints and realities that politician's face?

Statutory requirements constrain PI

- Statutory requirements need to be adhered to at all levels (national, central, local).

Politicians question PI's bias and accuracy

- Data presented to politicians is often bias. The information they are given is often presented in a manner where "the public" or "the people effected" are grouped into one category without thinking of smaller groups or outliers.
 - This is a problem for politicians whose constituencies hold a vast group of different ethnicities, economic groupings, with vastly different (sometimes apposing) needs and opinions.
- Politicians are concerned about whether they are hearing people correctly. Whereas, participants are worrying about whether they will be heard.
- Politicians are often not given enough information in regards to the public's views to make a decision on their behalf.

Politicians have to make the decision in the end and PI changes the role of a politician as a representative

- How do they choose which opinion and solution to go with?
- Politicians are required to listen to the community and ensure that their needs and perspectives are shown. However, this can mean that what the politician believes is right, and what the public believes is right can contradict one another and in the end they have to make the decision as to what to do. And in the end, he/she is accountable to the community.
- There is a conflict amongst politicians, those who emphasise public input versus those who take the view that they were elected to make decisions and exercise their judgement. Striking this balance is incredibly difficult but is crucial to making the decision.
- Politicians don't feel as though they are representatives of communities sometimes. The process doesn't seem to come from them. The gathering of info is not direct (comes from agencies).
- Often politician's desires and leadership theory which pushes for delegation of power aren't aligned.

The time frame for politicians is short/tied to electoral cycles which hinders PI's usefulness

- Developing ongoing relationships becomes hard as politicians have a limited time frame within which they have to make 'things' happen (electoral cycles), thus an ongoing level of engagement can be highly difficult for a politician to retain due the environment in which they work.
- Politicians needs to hear from people in advance to having to make decisions, so we need to ensure that consultation is done at the right time.

Political realities impact on how politicians can respond to PI

- Politicians also have to deal with the realities of politics. In other words, the politics of politics such as making deals.
- There is friction between differing levels of government.
- Politicians have to deal with the media, and their spin can be highly detrimental to the success of seeking public input. Moreover, the media has an impact on how people view an argument, regardless of the facts behind the scenes

- Budgets are a hard reality and constraint on decisions.
- Politicians have a dependency to varying degrees on their advisors and policy strategists who can act as gatekeepers to PI. Moreover, this becomes detrimental for the public as they feel powerless when non-elected officials are having a heavy weighting on the decision as opposed to the rest of society.
- Politicians are elected on a certain platform, so that is what they try to push through during their term in office.

C. What would make public input valuable and useful for politicians?

- Politicians are meant to make decisions, so they need to help address the decision making process to figure out the role of Public Input and how it can be integrated into this process.

Focus on hard unfixed issues

- Make a base line agreement (we are still doing that).
- Deal with the hardest scenarios first and the smaller problems will be dealt with or they will be easier to fix. Makes things more productivity rate higher.

Conduct PI over the long-term/ in a relationship style

- Solutions, take time, face to face is still important: It's often about relationship development. Can't just dip in and out of communities, they have to form those ongoing relationships.
- Having an informed and empowered community. This way, leaders can look to the public for solutions, and the public feel respected and empowered.

PI makes final decision easier to accept

- Being involved in the decision making process can often make the acceptance of policy and law changes acceptable, even if things don't go the way of participants. When people are engaged they begin to understand the processes, and can see how decisions are being made.

Higher quality PI would make politician's life easier

- Life could be easier for politicians if you put more money into research to get valid information and new information.

Embed PI in existing community groups

- Rather than expect groups to come to the consulting body, we should go to their meetings, and consult when all those in the community can attend and have their views heard. This way politician's are able to hear feedback from a wider range of their constituents.

Do PI at a local level

- Engaging at a local level, as this way politicians are likely to know more about the community and can relate to participants, thus they are more likely to gain high quality public input.

Make the parameters of what is on/off the table clear

- Politicians must outline the parameters at the start, so that the public knows what they are being asked, and can work within the guidelines.

Debate: consult everyone or different groups in different ways

- Targeted and specific consultation and engagement works the best.
- Better to focus on unified focuses groups of interest to get clear responses.
- Using differing methods to engage different groups. I.e. for the young we could use social media as a way to engage.

Develop some mechanism between consultation and politician

- We need a filter between consultation and the minister: e.g. in an executive summary form, this could be more useful and digestible for politicians rather than a large document.

Other comments

- Public consultation and the ultimate usefulness of it depends heavily on how complicated or technical a particular issue is.
- Incorporation of 'civic education' in schools. This will assist in the education of citizens, whilst also helping to engage underrepresented groups.
- We need to make things much more collaborative. Communities and individuals can quickly become experts on matters when they have all of the information, which allows them to provide both input and solutions.

Topic 2: Making Public Input usable for political leadership and government

In this topic, participants were asked to look at how we can make public input usable for political leadership and government. This session was set up on seven tables, and participants were encouraged to wander between all the tables and add information on each of the topics. These topics will be the headings throughout this section of the report with detail and information listed below each one.

Firstly, participants were given this brief:

A sizable budget is spent on public input at all levels of government already. If you were in charge of this, and started again, and designed a Public Input Process from scratch, how would it run? How would you make sure it was more usable for politicians? How might the role of political leaders change in response to this?

With this, participants were asked to design a hypothetical Ministry of Public Input, including an office working on how to develop the public, a Public input team working on selecting participants, the issues and the methods; a unit that processes the results; and a section for developing how politicians respond. The aim was to find solutions, rather than problems. Ideas were given in the pre-workshop research report, and participants were able to comment on, expand, rethink or introduce new ideas throughout the session under each of the Ministries units.

Ministry for Public Input (MPI)

Create a feedback loop between PI and government

- We need to ensure that engagement and public input is an on-going process and that a feedback loop is worked into this process.
- The feedback loop is integral to the process as this gives validation to those taking part. Furthermore, this will encourage a higher quality of participation, and will help to encourage people in continuing to engage in public input processes.
- Feedback must also be timely and personal so people can see their input as part of the overall discussion.

Make PI transparent

- Any public engagement needs to be visible and transparent.

Make PI ongoing not one off

- We need to look for new ideas in regards to gathering public input, and new consultation methods. Gathering Public Input should take a relationship based approach, and be constant and on-going.
- Gathering public input should be a function of all departments and public organisations.

Align PI with government budget and policy processes

- Make sure that public consultation cycles are aligned effectively with budget and policy processes.
- Contextualise policy development.

Invest in PI – people are worth developing

- Invest in intangible and social capital in proportions that are on the same scale as investments in physical capital – build people, not things!

Make rules clear

- The rules around public input need to be evolved and specified before the process begins. It is also important to ensure that the ‘thresholds of relevance’ are decided before, or at the beginning of the engagement process.

Public Development Office (PDO)

Choose who to consult carefully

- Don't take a deficit view of the public to start with. Look for segments; identify groups, subsections of society.
- Focus discussions on issues and not political labels (left, right, liberal, etc).
- Involving different points of view in the public input process enables understanding of why some decisions are difficult and the balance needs to be struck.

Inform the public

- Inform the public about the role of central government/council/local boards. Ensure that the public knows what each institution does, thus ensuring that their input is being submitted to

the right body. A further idea in regards to informing the public was to have a cross-party panel go into schools and explain how Parliament works, councils, etc.

Do smaller scale PI to build up competence

- Use mini consultations (local, personal, interest specific), to build up long term capacity for 'civic' engagement.

Use a range of methods to suit each situation

- Incorporate a range of methods that reach across ethnic, age and further barriers when it comes to consultation.
- Engage with communities first about how they want to be engaged. What is the most appropriate way to do this? (It is likely that this will be different for each issue).

Educate in school

- Re-introduce civics classes back into schools, and make it part of the curriculum. Moreover, we could make schools centres for PDO education.

Do PI at local level

- Go to them; don't expect them to come to you. Better quality engagement comes from a local context.

Ask for solution oriented PI

- Engagement needs to be based on solutions rather than problems. To do this we need to help people make meaningful submissions, show them the costs, and where they need to focus their ideas (e.g. national, council, local board).

Feedback to public

- Ensure that the public can see the results of their public input, this will encourage future input. It also indicates that the government values input, cares about what the public has to say and is credible.
- We need to show how participation in consultation and engagement is relevant to the local community and how it will affect their life.

Issue Selection Strategists: What to ask?

Let the people decide

- Ask the people what they wish to be asked, and what they are interested in.

Either politician or public decide

- Issues need to come from both ways: Sometimes politicians need to know the public's view before spending money. Other times the public needs to raise issues, and then politicians support them.

Impactful issues

- Something that will have an impact on people and the decisions they make.
- Those issues that have been measured and deemed to have value and impact are what warrant consultation. Though as one participant pointed out, how do you do this?
- The more localised the issue – the more targeted the communications can be – therefore what to ask is only relevant to the audience you’re trying to reach.

A range

- Encourage and celebrate diversity of input to achieve a balanced decision at the end.
- Specific questions to generate information. All topics should be up for discussion, especially those that decision makers are grappling with.

What is still left to be decided

- Only ask a question if the public’s input can be used, and ultimately have an impact on the outcome/decision. Don’t exhaust the “willing” by asking something that will have no impact. Moreover, ask what you know you will listen to, and then act on what you hear.

Participation Selection Officers: Who to ask?

Expert issues may need consultation with experts

- Depends on the issue: if it is something that requires expert opinion it may be best to first get professional opinions then take opinions to the community for discussion.

Experts first, then non-experts

- Target engagement on experts to get effective information, and then consult on a lower scale (cost effective) to the rest of the public. There always needs to be a mix of expert and non-expert. This is especially important when making decisions on technical issues, where an expert opinion is vital.

Those who are informed in some way

- People who are actually informed and understand the issues and can thus contribute some expertise rather than just opinion.
- Locals who will have local knowledge on local interests.

Those affected

- Basic and ancient principles of politics – those who are directly affected by a law or policy should have a say in its making, not just through elected officials. Thus we should aim to ask everyone who is impacted by the decision/policy/plan etc. And then look to ask those who are interested.

Those normally less engaged or those who work with them/community leaders

- The people who are rarely spoken to and are least engaged, or alternatively the people that deal with their problems and may recognise them more effectively – such as doctors, teachers, community workers.
- Target leaders in the community, as they can then disseminate views from the public and then back to them. This relies on a conscious effort to build relationships with “feeder people” before, during and after consultation.
- Groups that are under-represented on decision making bodies, and in making submissions.

Anyone

- Anyone – as someone stated: ‘sometimes just run and ad and see who turns up.’

Demographic representative sample

- All demographics count on each issue. We need to make sure that participatory engagement does not take the path of least resistance, and tackles the complexities (and plurality) of the demographics.
- Use representative sample surveys to gauge public opinion accurately.

Organised groups

- When trying to reach a large number of people, look to specific organised groups.
- Acknowledge appropriate scale of communities and ask accordingly – though as someone pointed out, this may not work in New Zealand as mana whenua have larger weighting here.
- We should ask interest groups. This would also see us asking the business community, especially small businesses who are also affected by these communities, and can be a hub in the community.

Public Input Event Designers: How to ask?

Positive solution oriented approach

- What is the best case scenario? What would we need to do to achieve this? What are you prepared to do? How high a priority is this against others?
- Ask for solutions, not simply what problems there are.
- Come from a strength perspective rather than a negative position. Look at current knowledge and build on strengths that already exist.
- What is working? What isn’t? Why? How is it working and how isn’t it working? I.e. the process as well as the content.

Treat them as responsible partners

- Be respectful and take people seriously. It is important to know your audience and tailor your questions for them.
- Empower participants – ask them to partner with you on issue solutions rather than just ask their opinion – encourages ownership and heightened engagement.

- With a cheque book, or other commensurate medium that clearly shows mutual benefit of participation.

Include the constraints and trade offs

- Ensure that when asking a question you present the decision that needs to be made, and make trade-offs apparent. Also, important that the public know about constraints and realities of government before asking questions (e.g. budgets, policy process).
- Tell people how much you can take their views into account. Explain the constraints and possible outcomes, ask how these decisions would affect them.
- Provide different outcomes and possibilities from the outset and provide pros and cons of each option.

Needs not wants

- What do you/your community need, not want?

Face to face and other methods

- A good mix of 'in-person' and other written/media channels. In-person being workshops that must contain a variety of views so that people learn each other's perspectives before then formalising their feedback (in writing). Also using advertising, marketing, direct mail and email.
- Having the right events – physical, digital and virtual.

Use existing community events

- Use events that are already drawing in large crowds so you don't have to formalise an event that people won't come to. E.g. festivals, sports events.
- Go to 'them' - attend community group meetings rather than expecting groups/individuals to come to you (i.e. public meeting). Make it convenient for them, engaging and after asking, feedback the outcome, even if it's not what they may have hoped for.
- Conversationally, don't rely on public meetings, chat on the street and over coffee.

Make sure it is comprehensible

- Make questions simple and concise so that people can understand what they are being asked.

Inform them

- Provide information to the public before asking, so that when you do ask they feel like they can make a valuable and informed decision.

Avoid repetition

- Don't ask the same question twice. Sometimes the question has been asked before, multiple times just for a different purpose. Mine through all sources of feedback already help – old

interview scripts, letters to local community papers, letters to council, research reports etc. as a starting point.

Series or ongoing PI

- A series of events, rather than a one size fits all model.

Be open/brainstorm

- Include brainstorming and blue sky thinking, and then ask about specific proposals for policy or action.

Range of methods

- Work with the grain of the people/groups being engaged. What approaches techniques will work best?
- Use focus groups to get a quick overview of issues and a range of opinions.
- Use quantitative research (a professional research firm) to conduct a survey (large scale) to quantify the issues and public preferences. And also report people's stories to accompany the quantified findings, and keep it real and grounded back to people's experiences.
- Remember that this is not a one size fits all process.

Public Input Processing Team (PIPT)

Make it transparent

- Make sure that a transparent process has been used.

Implement quality control measures to ensure process is valid

- Ensure that planning and quality control measures are in place from end to end, e.g. design, data collection and reporting.

Develop repeatable effective frameworks for analysis

- Set up proven and tested frameworks for analysis that can be repeated again and again and verified.

Make timelines quick but achievable

- Achievable timelines. However we need to bear in mind that it takes time to analyse and disseminate information
- Don't let the perfect get in the way of the 'good'. Move fast, make sense of what people are saying, feedback your understanding, keep the conversation going

Analysis PI against existing government strategies

- Analyse whether and how the ideas advance existing overall strategies and also where they put forward a legitimate challenge or existing strategies and mindsets

Prioritise new ideas

- Bright new ideas to be recorded and analysed as a priority.

Report all views not just majority

- Ensure that all views count – if one group of people agree and one group disagrees that does not equal no position – it equals two positions.

Collate PI results to allow learning over time

- Shared data so that people can see what has previously been submitted.
- Aggregate data and information from a range of consultation processes (vs treating each transactionally)

Involve decision makings in interpretation of results

- Need good staff to process and distil input to make it accessible to politicians.
- Present results in a meaningful way, and involve decision makers in interpreting the results directly.

Communicate findings and acknowledge contributors

- Communicate the implications of the responses/feedback as well as what they said.
- Celebrate and acknowledge contributions.

Politicians Response Unit (PRU)

Involve the politicians in the PI process

- Politicians need to be involved in the decision making processes. They need to be involved in determining the level of influence that a process or feedback will have on the end outcome.
- Relate back to politicians. What do they gain? (Public Image, polls, better rep for making good decisions)
- Attempt to offer politicians experiences of the issues that they are discussing, this could mean they ride the bus, or go to the water treatment plant.
- Make sure that there is a direct link between politicians and the public

Communicate PI and politician's response

- Decisions need to be fed back to the public so they can see where they had influence.
- Recreate the 'Tony Blair PR Machine' he used for electioneering. But re-calibrate it to measure public input on issues for use of politicians.

Explain politician's response

- Be prepared to explain why you didn't listen and act on public input.
- Make it a two way street – let people know what you need. Accept their input and then go back to them for solutions to any problems their input presents to politicians.