PUBLIC CONSULTATION

Running Effective Consultation Processes

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Consultation documents, survey tools, and other submissions allow your project to receive targeted and constructive feedback from key stakeholders. Running online and written consultation processes rather than in-person consultation requires different considerations and skills. This guide contains the must-knows of effective consultation.

Common pitfalls in consultation

Consultation processes can run into various issues. Often, the biggest stumbling block organisations find is that key stakeholders and communities are not brought into the process early enough.

Another issue is the accessibility of the consultation documents themselves. Many consultation documents are overly complex, with too many questions, questions that are too long, and confusing or jargon-laden language that is not accessible for stakeholders. When this happens, the organisation will often find that the questions they have asked did not deliver the answers they were hoping for.

A third challenge is when the expectations of the organisation undertaking the consultation conflicts with the perspectives actually gathered during the consultation process. Organisations may become closed-minded when the opinions gathered from the public do not align with the expectations and wants of the project. This can lead to the possibility of organisations ignoring the points raised by stakeholders.

Steps to the consultation process

There are four steps to the consultation process. Each step will be explained in more detail below.

1	Planning.
2	Writing.
3	Collecting.
4	Analysing.

STEP 1:

Planning

Part of planning a consultation is understanding why you are carrying out a consultation process.

You may be running a consultation because of statutory or legislative requirements, or because the project is significant to the community and you want to hear their views on it.

Before you begin to draft your consultation document, you should identify who your key stakeholders are. This could include local iwi, local council, or members of the community who will be particularly affected by this project. Consider whether your stakeholders will be involved in the drafting stage to help co-design the consultation document.

One of the biggest issues that arises during the drafting stage is that stakeholders see the consultation document draft and feel that they have not had enough input during the early stages. Co-designing your draft with key stakeholders allows community voices to be heard early, and prevents stakeholders from seeing the draft as an already done deal.

Co-designing your draft with key stakeholders allows community voices to be heard early

Building relationships

Hopefully, you will already have existing relationships with the communities you wish to consult with on your project. If you do not, then focus on building these relationships as early as possible – beyond the purpose of consultation. Fostering relationships with your community only when consultation is required comes across as transactional. This is especially relevant when undertaking consultation with tangata whenua. Even if you don't think your project is relevant to Māori, that is not your call to make. It is always better to reach out to see whether tangata whenua want to be consulted with on your project than to assume for them.on your project than to assume for them.

For more advice on building stronger relationships with tangata whenua, check out our webinar, Top 10 Tips to Improve Your Engagement with Māori:

10 tips to improve your engagement with maori video

When engaging with communities that you do not have an existing relationship with, you need to be proactive and targeted in your approach. For example, many people find it challenging to engage with rangatahi/youth, which is where proactivity is key: for example, you could identify youth representation groups that might be relevant for you to consult with, and utilise social media to facilitate outreach. You could also bring in a representative to serve as an intermediary between you and the community you are trying to reach – for example, the leader of a youth group can be more influential on achieving engagement than trying to reach out directly.

Hard-to-reach communities

Another factor to collecting data is considering how you will engage with communities that are physically hard to reach – for example, some rural or elderly stakeholders may not have access to a computer to complete consultation documents online. If you have identified such communities in your planning stage, consider conducting in-person consultation with these stakeholders, or mailing out physical copies of your consultation document to these communities. Organising workshops, webinars, or focus groups are also a way to facilitate more meaningful engagement with these groups.

Timing

Once you have identified who your key stakeholders are and you are in the process of drafting your consultation document, pay careful consideration to the timing of your consultation process.

There are several ways to do this successfully:

1 Work backwards from when your final strategy is due and build a strong consultation process into your timeline.

It is essential that you give your stakeholders enough time to consider your content and provide meaningful feedback. A minimum consultation period is six weeks, and it is a good idea to clearly communicate this deadline to your stakeholders – while late submissions and requests for extensions are almost always inevitable, allowing a generous amount of time for the consultation period and being clear on deadlines mitigates this risk.

2 Keep in mind that different communities may take different lengths of time to consult with, and factor this into your timing.

Your designated consultation period may not be long enough for hard-to-reach communities, as communication may take longer and be filtered through multiple channels before it reaches the relevant stakeholders. Also keep in mind that a lot of community groups, especially local iwi, are often over-consulted with and may be dealing with multiple requests at the same time. Furthermore, consultation with companies, organisations, or local councils may require consideration of sign-out processes; sometimes feedback will need to be approved and signed off by different teams, managers, or boards.

3 Be strategic in your timing and consider extenuating circumstances.

Related to allowing enough time for a thorough consultation process is being strategic in your timing. Consider the extenuating circumstances that may be affecting your stakeholder groups – for rangatahi, is it school holidays or exam season? For local government, are elections coming up? If you are engaging with companies or organisations, is it coming to the end of the financial or calendar year? These factors can impact stakeholders' ability to participate thoroughly in the consultation process. While it is impossible to cater to every stakeholder's needs when you have a deadline, being strategic in choosing when to carry out your consultation helps to maximise engagement.

STEP 1: Planning

Putting it all together

When putting your plan into action, think about the desired outcomes of your consultation or the desired end product. How are you going to effectively communicate all the feedback and ideas that you have received from your stakeholders?

Think about whether your team has the capacity to compile all of this feedback, or whether you will need to outsource. If you choose to outsource, try to bring those people in as soon as possible – they can help you to craft your consultation questions and work alongside you to help improve your process.

When engaging with communities that you do not have an existing relationship with, you need to be proactive and targeted in your approach

STEP 2:

Writing a consultation document

Another setback for effective consultation is the accessibility of the consultation document itself.

Expecting stakeholders to read over an entire project document, which can be hundreds of pages long, is unlikely to lead to thoughtful feedback. With that in mind, the following tips outline how you can make your consultation document as accessible as possible:

1

Make sure the document is written in plain English.

While it may be easy for you to understand, consider whether the same could be said for someone with low literacy or someone who does not have the same background context as you do.

2

Rather than expecting stakeholders to read through an entire strategy document, consider creating a shorter document that signposts specific areas that you want your stakeholders to focus on.

3

Give an indication of how long it will take for stakeholders to read and fill out the questions, so that they can plan their time.

4

It is good practice to have two sets of questions in your consultation document – one shorter set of 5-10 questions that quickly cover key points, and one extensive set of questions for those with more time and interest in the project.

5

List your questions in order of importance, beginning with the most important questions. Then, if stakeholders abandon the survey midway through, at least you will have gathered the most valuable information

STEP 2:

Writing a consultation document

6 Use a mix of closed questions and open questions in your survey to glean both qualitative and quantitative data

7 Add captions to any infographics or graphs included in your document.

8 **Allow submitters flexibility in how they can respond** – for example, some community members may find it easier to provide their submissions in video rather than written form.

9 Consider whether your document may need to be translated into different languages.

While it may not be possible to implement all of these tips into your consultation document, the key takeaway is to be clear and concise so that everyone can understand the content of your document.

STEP 3:

Collecting feedback

The points above for creating an accessible consultation document inform how you should collect your data.

While using a variety of questions and presenting your information in various and creative ways opens opportunities to glean more comprehensive data, beware that implementing this approach with stakeholders who are already over-consulted can be overwhelming and lead to consultation fatigue.

Additionally, be aware that quantitative data can often be unreliable, as the answers given to closed questions often contradict the responses to open-ended questions, which will need to be factored into your analysis. With that said, the risk of not using a variety of questions in your survey is that the data you collect will not be as rich and accurate.

Bias

It is critical to account for bias when collecting your information. The nature of consultation means that responses will inherently be influenced from your stakeholders' personal circumstances. You will need to caveat that in your report.

Be pragmatic with the realities of consultation. Stakeholders may deviate from the intended survey format and submit their answers in their own form, adding extra time to your analysis. People may leave submissions to the last minute or submit late. While these realities are often unavoidable, these challenges can be minimised by ensuring your consultation document is as accessible as possible. It can be a good idea to ask someone from outside your project to proof your document for you, to see whether your project is easy to understand for someone who does not have the same context as you do.

STEP 4:

Analysing

The nature of consultations means that you will not be able to produce an analysis and submissions report as soon as the consultation period closes, so you will need to factor that into your overall project timeline.

You also need to think about who the audience of your final report is going to be. What information do they need to see? How much detail do they need? Do you need to publish and report on your feedback back to the public? It is important to keep these questions in mind when planning your consultation, as this can help you craft the best questions to glean the information you need.

In Summary: top tips for effective consultation

1. Be strategic and targeted in your approach, especially when consulting with unfamiliar or hard-to-reach communities.

2. Ensure your documents are in plain English and accessible to all stakeholders.

3. Keep consultation documents brief – do not expect stakeholders to read through a document that is hundreds of pages long.

4. Bring community stakeholders into the process early by fostering relationships with the community, co-designing your draft with stakeholders, and being mindful of communities that are over-consulted with, such as local iwi.