

Navigating our course, March 202

Debrief

May 2021

PURPOSE OF REPORT

The purpose of the report is to provide a debrief on the Navigating Our Course engagement programme to guide the design of future public consultations and, more generally, inform the organisation's approach to engagement.

These questions were posed to those staff members who participated in Navigating Our Course, and their responses inform this report.

- Did we achieve our objectives?
- What went well and what didn't go so well?
- What opportunities for improvement did we identify and implement?
- What lessons have we learned and what recommendations can we make, based on the experience, to support the new "up and out" priority for the organisation?

BACKGROUND

In March 2021 we embarked on the most ambitious programme of engagement Council has ever staged. Navigating Our Course drew together four separate projects that were interdependent in one way or another. Of these, only one was a statutory consultation – the Long Term Plan 2021-31. The other three were pre-cursors to statutory consultations and, whilst "informal" in nature, the outcomes of the engagement would have impact on the project's progression. Arguably this has already been seen in the recent Extraordinary Council Meeting decision to establish Māori Wards (an "informal" question under the Representation Review).

We designed and implemented a multi-channel campaign, structured around a roadshow that gave us physical presence in four key locations (Kawakawa, Kerikeri, Kaikohe and Kaitaia) supported by "satellite" events at markets, a marae and town halls. The extensive digital campaign facilitated easy online engagement. In total we hosted 22 events in 19 townships.

Coherent story

We crafted a narrative to ensure the public could understand the projects in their own right, but also in the context of a bigger journey to *He Whenua Rangatira – A district of sustainable prosperity and wellbeing*. This was communicated with support of an illustrator (League of Live Illustrators) and Council's Communications team. We made use of Council channels (rates newsletter, email, the Weekender) and advertising in all local newspapers throughout the duration of the campaign.

Cross-organisation collaboration

The Engagement Team led the programme, with full collaboration of the Tier 3 Managers in charge of each project. It was a cross-organisation effort, with appeal to the project teams and people leaders to encourage their staff to get involved in the engagement.

Risks

The risks we identified are listed below. These risks (apart from Covid-19 risk) did emerge at low levels, but not enough to outweigh the opportunities and benefits. This report explores aspects of these risks.

1. A single issue will dominate the combined consultation caused by the controversial nature of some issues we are consulting on. This may compromise the engagement opportunities for co-projects.
2. Public may object to consultation on so many projects at one time which may result in people disengaging from the process, citing confusion or a sense of being overwhelmed.
3. Staff are overstretched to deliver on projects which may mean that they are not able to fully support the consultation.
4. Our partners and key strategic stakeholders feel they have not been either involved in the projects or given sufficient notice to review prior to general public consultation
5. Community cases of Covid-19 causing a local, regional or national lockdown will impact the ability to do a roadtrip or attend physical locations.
6. Elected members not engaged/advocating will limit ability to connect with public positively on big issues.
7. Lack of continuity or alignment between our planning
8. Overlap with consultation from other agencies e.g. NRC

DID WE ACHIEVE OUR OBJECTIVES?

1) *Don't confuse the public*

Strong collateral, consistent messaging and clear ways of providing feedback meant that the risk of confusing the public with four big projects was minimised.

Events were well-managed and consistent. Staff were briefed and informed enough to respond to questions on most topics.

2) *Enable political advocacy and elected member engagement with public*

On the whole, elected member participation was excellent, with some going over and above what was hoped for. Every event had some elected member presence.

3) *Don't dilute individual statutory processes*

It is possible that feedback numbers on individual projects might have been higher if we were not consulting on so many projects at once, but this must be balanced with fact we could not have resourced such a visible presence on those individual projects.

4) *Genuine engagement: Make it easy for the public to understand the issues and have their say whichever way suits them so they feel they have had the opportunity to actively participate in the decision-making process*

Collateral designed to support people to provide feedback in any way that suited. This included verbal/oral submissions taken by members of staff, or staff supporting public to use online survey on iPads at sessions, or meeting notes from public events (Rawene/Broadwood).

5) *Capture feedback in a way that is analysable, reportable and enduring*

By using Open Forms (via website) and a single email inbox submissions@fndc.govt.nz and – critically – staffing this incoming stream of information with a dedicated team member minimised the risk of confusion or of “missing” feedback.

Analysis still underway.

- 6) Reach beyond our usual submitting audience – demographics and locations

Need to compare results with historic information. Not yet complete.

- 7) Contribute measurably to each individual project so that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

The story we told of Navigating Our Course is perhaps more compelling to us, than our audience. The most important thing was that we were visible and available to engage.

- 8) Avert crisis between rates increases and SNAs that instigates another “Can the Plan”

Much of this is outside the control of the programme of engagement. It is still to play out.

WHAT WORKED...

Multiple projects

The broad approach provided opportunity for people to engage with elected members and Council staff on matters that were important to them. Having multiple feedback “buckets” meant there was a home for everything.

Visible and present – go to the people

This was the most extensive roadshow we have undertaken as a Council. Being located on the street or at markets allowed us to capture people who otherwise might not engage with us. Some communities we visited weren’t happy, often the conversations were hard but, regardless, members of the community appreciated our presence. We reached most communities who wanted us to visit, and we listened. Many people who would not ordinarily have participated in Council processes made submissions on things that are important to them.

What emerged was that if we want to know our communities, to understand their issues and build trust in Council, we should be doing this kind of engagement *all the time*.

“This type of community engagement (i.e. going to markets, giving people the opportunity to informally chat, ask questions etc.), physically out and about within our communities should be something we incorporate into BAU. It is hard! But regular visibility in our communities will help with big systemic challenges that Council faces within our communities such as distrust, accusations of a lack of transparency, and common misconceptions/untruths. It also gives people the opportunity to engage with us informally on their terms by us going to them, not just expecting them to come to us.”

Consideration

Information on proposed funding in next Long Term Plan could be organised by towns and wards, rather than just by activity, so communities can take overview of Council work in their area.

Make community engagement part of business-as-usual, on a cyclical schedule (non-specific, place-based) as well as more support for in-person engagement on key activities and projects.

An in-principle policy to always investigate how to “go to the people” before settling on other forms of engagement – email, digital mechanisms. For some areas of the organisation this is a default – and built into their function – e.g. Community Development Team. Often this team end up doing the work for others who are less equipped to go to the community.

Drop-in venues

A “home base” allowed communities to schedule time to come to talk to us when it suited them. It also allowed word to spread, and for people to revisit if they had further questions. A venue where members of the public could sit down with both staff and elected members added tremendous value in terms of quality dialogue.

Additionally, the drop-in venues supported staff – they were able to attend to BAU (connectivity) whilst being available to talk with public as required.

Te Hononga was too far off street to capture daily foot traffic, but a beautiful venue!

Kerikeri's Ngāti Rēhia base afforded great street frontage and supported good dialogue with a broad section of the community. Sharing the space wasn't always straightforward, but it was a great opportunity for collaboration with one of our valued partners.

Kaikohe's Te Wā suited a more central set up which supported group conversation. This model was replicated in Kaiatāia's Digital Hub, out of staff and elected member choice.

Staff, elected members and community aligned

A number of participants observed that it was a positive experience to work with other Council staff with whom they wouldn't usually cross paths. Through these interactions, we gained a broader understanding of how Council works, built new relationships and felt more engaged with Council.

Also, many staff appreciated the opportunity to talk directly with the public:

"...it was a valuable experience to talk to our communities that our actions directly affect. Often, we can become disconnected from our people ... in our day to day work behind a computer, and we don't always realise the impact our work has."

Many volunteers enjoyed working more closely, and in a less formal setting, with elected members. There was value in the ability to interact in this public, shared space in which you have someone articulating a community need/issue, the decision makers who can advocate for that person, and also the operational people who might give insight or learn from that interaction. Often, a case of feeling heard was the biggest win. We cannot measure the value this added, other than anecdotally.

An observation made by Mayor Carter was that potentially we reduced the number of submissions we received on the Long Term Plan because people's queries were dealt with during the consultation process so they didn't feel they needed to make a submission.

WHAT DIDN'T WORK

Multiple projects

For some people, engaging on four different projects at the same time was an impediment.

"This criticism was only ... received from very engaged ... members of the community who will submit on all projects regardless. Most members of the community appreciated the opportunity to submit across different projects at the same time or would just engage on the kaupapa they were interested in."

...not enough time

The time factor, when combined with the import of what we were seeking feedback on, was a significant criticism. The reality of the rates proposal did not land until later in the consultation, at which point public perception was that we were trying to fast track a complex issue through a process without adequate time for people to digest the impact of the changes. It could also be argued that rather than "not enough time" we simply put too much into the rate package without sufficient educational work in the lead-up to help people understand.

Strategic approach to engaging with our partners and key stakeholders

By design, the Navigating Our Course programme was a grass roots approach. It did not actively engage the political and executive channels.

While we introduced the concept to project teams and elected members at an early stage, we did not identify and plan for specific approaches to strategic partners, apart from at a high level (letter from Mayor to iwi chairs).

The process revealed the lack of good understanding of the status of our relationships, who “owns” them, and our obligations to partners and stakeholder agencies, and the most appropriate channels to leverage for engagement.

Consideration

Activate the strategic partners/relationship register by connecting it to a programme of work. Then prioritise and resource it adequately so that it is understood, visible and maintained.

Rural Māori engagement

Navigating Our Course was intended to be an all-inclusive programme, with the agility to adapt to our audiences as required – from market, to town hall to marae. This succeeded in many areas, but it did not advantage rural areas, with less connection to our “serviced” centres and often poor broadband (and with that, an increased expectation to be able to engage in person). Communities in these remote rural areas feel disenfranchised and lacking power or influence in Council decision-making processes.

While many members of Far North Māori communities made use of the accessibility and visibility of our drop-in venues, others felt they had been disregarded. This could have been avoided through better understanding of these communities – who to talk to, how to reach them. Elected members contributed to our knowledge-base through the design process, but it was challenging as there is no established process around identifying and capturing that knowledge - no central database or CRM.

Furthermore, cultural competency in many areas of Council is low. Those who have inclination to participate in community engagement aren’t necessarily the ones best equipped with understanding of tikanga Māori. This left staff feeling vulnerable and communities feeling we were not making the effort to engage on their terms.

Consideration

Consider building Te Ao Māori / Tikanga Māori competency programme into staff training options.

Never assume digital will suffice. Always be ready for physical/print.

DIGITAL ENGAGEMENT

We created a digital hub on the Council website, which hosted all the material available via the roadshow. This meant online users could access all the relevant information and provide feedback at their convenience. We opened up a discussion forum on most project pages to encourage dialogue or respond to questions about the feedback process. Each project page allows users to subscribe so they receive updates when new information is added.

Website analytics

During the Navigating Our Course engagement period (01 March-06 April 2021) there were:

- **17,321** page views of the section www.fndc.govt.nz/yoursay (total page-views of fndc.govt.nz during this period were 195,105).
- **13,866** were unique page views (total unique page views on site during this period were 148,867).

This is almost a 1000% increase in action on this page compared the previous period (Jan/Feb 2020) and over 3000% increase on this same time the previous year. Unfortunately, we cannot compare to the 2018-28 Long Term Plan consultation as it was hosted on a different platform for which we do not have statistics.

Of these views:

- 1773 went no further than the main landing page /yoursay and 8163 are attributed to the Long Term Plan pages.
- 1800 page views of the District Plan during this period (bearing in mind they have another platform sharing the traffic).
- Representation Review had over 1000 page views
- Far North 2100 received slightly more than 600.

The average time on the page for this area of Council's website during this period was three minutes, with the Representation Review and the Draft District Plan was five minutes. The Long Term Plan kept people for three minutes on its initial page, and then longer when they drilled down – four minutes on the sample rates database page. The average time spent on Council's site during this period was 01:17.

Social media insights

Facebook/Instagram activity period 01 March to 06 April

- Page posts 31
- People reach 45,000 with 3200 "engaged users" (clicked etc.)
- Combined, the posts received a total of 700 likes, 254 comments and were shared 167 times.
- Video stats:
 - 9.8k reach
 - 4.8k minutes viewed
 - 252 reactions (likes etc.) of which only one angry face
 - 82 comments and 67 shares.
- Paid advertising: 28,316 people reached and 401 link clicks.

On Linked In (01 March to 06 April period):

- 10 page
- 9555 impressions, 5019 of which were unique
- 851 click throughs
- 170 likes
- 14 shares

CONCLUSION

Never stop learning.