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**Integrating citizens' agendas in  
New Zealand local government  
environmental planning and decision-making:  
An examination of two wastewater planning processes  
and implications for deliberative democracy**

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## **Abstract**

This research considers the problem of ensuring citizens having meaningful opportunities to provide input in local government environmental planning and decision-making. Planning processes are often as much a product of uncertain human behaviours as they are the result of rational activity and formal institutional arrangements. Both the conduct and outcomes of these processes are heavily influenced by conflicts between actors' underlying perspectives, yet these perspectives are hard to define and their influence is very poorly understood by researchers. Instead, local government research focuses almost exclusively on institutional arrangements and substantive debates over physical resources.

This research focuses on the influence of epistemological and procedural dimensions of actors' perspectives on the integration of citizens' agendas in environmental planning and decision-making in New Zealand local government. From a deliberative democratic perspective, I examine obstacles to the conduct of an *effective integrative process* and consider possible practical and theoretical responses.

The research studies two local government wastewater planning processes. It combines Q-methodology with interviews, observation and documentary analysis. This approach allows me to identify actors' subjective perspectives and to consider their influence on planning and decision-making. This combination of methods has not previously been used in local government research in New Zealand.

The research shows that while conflicts between actors' perspectives pose significant barriers to the integration of citizens' agendas, they can also offer opportunities for addressing those barriers. Integration is clearly limited by a positivist, rationalist perspective that privileges objectivity in knowledge and planning practices. Integration is further limited by a competitive adversarial perspective. Nevertheless, there is also *potential* where deliberative perspectives are present that are more value-critical and that seek intersubjective understanding of actors' inputs. Such compromise-seeking perspectives contribute to more communicatively rational planning and more legitimate and durable decisions.

The thesis argues that councils should foster a change among actors towards a more deliberative perspective and should champion such behaviour themselves. Such change is often obstructed by the tacit, unacknowledged, yet persistent, nature of most

actors' perspectives. The thesis concludes that while transformation of perspectives is unrealistic, a more communicatively rational planning approach is achievable as a basis for legitimate decisions that more effectively integrate citizens' agendas.

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## List of Abbreviations

AEE	Assessment of Environmental Effects
CLG	Community Liaison Group
ERMA	Environmental Risk Management Authority
GM	Genetic modification
HEC	Human Ethics Committee
LBED	Land based effluent disposal
LGA 1974	Local Government Act 1974
LGA 2002	Local Government Act 2002
LGNZ	Local Government New Zealand
LTCCP	Long Term Council Community Plan
MfE	Ministry for the Environment
MoRST	Ministry of Research, Science and Technology
NIMBY	Not In My Back Yard
pers.comm.	Personal communication
PCE	Parliamentary Commissioner for the Environment
PN	Palmerston North
PNCC	Palmerston North City Council
RCGM	Royal Commission on Genetic Modification
RMA	Resource Management Act 1991
s.	Section
WDC	Wanganui District Council
WWWP	Waste Water Working Party

## **Glossary of Terms**

### **Technical terms**

Discretionary activity	An activity provided for by a rule in a plan, which requires a resource consent, and which may specify restrictions on the exercise of that activity
Milliscreen	A fine mechanical screening device for wastewater treatment
Separated/separation	Separate pipe systems for sewage and stormwater
Sewage	Same as wastewater
Sewer	Pipe for conveying sewage
Sewerage/sewerage system	Same as wastewater system
Stormwater	Run-off from roofs, roads, yards, etc.
Tradewaste	Liquid wastes discharged by industries
Wastewater	Mix of domestic sewage and industrial wastewater (tradewaste)
Wastewater system	The system of pipes, pump stations, treatment and disposal facilities which convey wastewater

### **Māori Terms**

Hapu	Group of several whanau
Iwi	Group of several hapu
Kaitiaki	Guardians, guardianship
Kaitiakitanga	The exercise of guardianship
Mauri	Life force
Runanga	Tribal council
Tangata whenua	The iwi or hapu that holds mana whenua over an area
Wahi tapu	A place sacred to Māori in a traditional, spiritual or mythological sense