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Opportunities for dialogue or compliance with legislation? An investigation into representation and satisfaction levels of submitters to the 2009 New Zealand local government LTCCP consultations

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for a

Masters in Management

at Massey University, Palmerston North

New Zealand

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2012

Abstract

This research examines how the 2009 Long Term Council Community Plan (LTCCP) consultation process helped councils fulfill their purpose as outlined in the Local Government Act 2002. The act instructs councils to “enable democratic local decision-making and action by, and on behalf of, communities”.To identify how councils encouraged participation, ten councils from throughout New Zealand took part through in-depth interviews of council staff. A survey of submitters from participating councils was also used to gauge corresponding consultation effectiveness by revealing who made submissions, what were the barriers and enablers to participation, and what would improve consultation for citizens.

The interviews confirmed councils committed significant resources towards producing a best-effort consultation process with innovative approaches to consultation widely reported. Even so, the findings identified that submitters were not representative of the general population, with the older, the educated, those of European ethnicity, and males dominating submitter ranks. The only finding that deviated from previous research findings was income, which almost mirrored census data by covering all income groups proportionately. However, there was a high proportion of first-time submitters (41.8 percent) and these new submitters were slightly more representative. The first-time submitters identified time constraints and being unsure how to make a submission as the leading barriers to participation for them.

The information and aspects of the LTCCP consultation afforded submitters the most satisfaction. Council/community relationships and decision-making were less satisfying. Many submitters doubted councils listened to submitters, or thought that council decisions did not represent majority opinion.

The research findings have a number of implications for communication specialists and planners. Council consultation practices appear to be improving representation, yet sections of the community remain disengaged. This continuing weakness in the consultation process suggests the tracking of submitter profiles, and the use of an additional and concurrent research-orientated approach (e.g. community panels) to capture representative comment would strengthen the information supporting a council’s final decision.

Innovative, resource-hungry consultation approaches (e.g. road shows, speaker series, expos) undertaken by councils went largely unreported by submitters, but the dissatisfaction over apparent lack of influence and corresponding council decision-making was a key issue. This result demands a rethink of resource allocation and communication emphasis. Published reports and the final feedback letter to submitters would be a prime opportunity for improvement of council consultation processes, allowing submitters to better place themselves in the wider context of submitters' comment and improve understanding of council decisions and priorities.

Acknowledgements

The problem with communication is the *illusion* that it has been accomplished.

George Bernard Shaw

I would like to thank my supervisors Assoc. Prof. Margie Comrie and Dr Marianne Tremaine for their encouragement, guidance and perseverance during the development of this thesis. Margie's gentle feedback and optimism in particular helped me get through times when there were simply not enough hours in the day and petrol in the tank.

Thanks also to the ten councils that took part in the research, and the staff I worked with from each council. Each of you is committed to improving the consultation process, therefore you all benefit your communities. Having worked in Local Government for over a decade, it can be a thankless existence so I hope the findings will steer a path of further growth and improvement, and also provide a researched backing for what many of you know already.

Finally, thanks and much love to my family. To my long-suffering husband Simon, and kids at home Tom, Josh and Alex, thanks for putting up with a wife and mum sitting for endless hours at the computer. To Mum and Dad, Jeremy, my mighty sisters and friends, thanks for supporting me to complete the project simply because it was something I wanted to do.

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Abbreviations

LGA	Local Government Act
LTCCP	Long Term Council Community Plan
RMA	Resource Management Act 1991
SOLGM	Society of Local Government Managers