

Interacting with our Community a Community Interaction Policy for Waitakere City Council

BACKGROUND AND PURPOSE

Waitakere City adopted Agenda 21 as a basis for its policy development and operations in 1993. Agenda 21 was the outcome of the "Earth Summit" held in 1992 to address the serious problems of environmental degradation and social inequity on a global basis. It is an agenda for the 21st century.

Agenda 21 is not just about what should be done to address these problems - it is also about how things should be done. While it has an international perspective, it is focused on changes that can be implemented at a community level, and recognises local government as the level of government closest to communities. Key points of Agenda 21 are:

- providing a vision for the future
- taking a holistic approach to sustainable development, including recognising the links between people, the environment and the economy
- encouraging community led initiatives in the areas of economic and social development, environmental protection, and community involvement in decision making
- providing for partnerships - both between and within different sectors of society
- having a long-term view - considering the impacts of current actions on future generations

In line with Agenda 21, Waitakere City became an Eco-city in 1993, adopting the following mission, goals and principles:

Waitakere Eco-city

Sustainable
Dynamic
Just

open honest communication
responsiveness
accountability
partnership
innovation
excellence
integrity

Council then developed its own local Agenda 21 plan known as the Greenprint, which sets out the City's own agenda for the 21st century - the agenda for becoming an Eco-city.

As well as outlining the actions that the r with its community must take the Greenpn int talks about partnerships, community led Council, together initiatives and the need to work together both within the city and across the region, the country and the globe in order to achieve those desired outcomes. The Greenprint recognises that Council is limited in the things it can influence directly, and that a key way to achieve results is to work with citizens, other stakeholders and participants - businesses, other local and central government agencies, iwi, social sector groups, and the community in general.

This makes interacting effectively with its community a key priority for Waitakere City Council. In order to achieve the strategic objectives it has set, Council must encourage the community to take decisions and actions that move the city towards those objectives.

This Community Interaction Policy sets out:

- the principles on which the Council will base its interaction with its community,
- the approach it will take to community involvement in decision making,
- and a range of community interaction types which will guide Council in selecting interaction tools,

The policy will be accompanied by a detailed set of Community Interaction Guidelines that set out:

- how to locate each specific community interaction type on the range,
- the communication methods available and how they relate to the range of interaction types,
- and a checklist for ensuring that Council's community interaction principles are taken account of in each individual project or process.

Together, these documents will guide staff on Council's community interaction expectations for projects and operational activities as well as being a useful "how to" guide on interacting with the community.

Council's approach

The Greenprint commits the Council to:

- help the City's diverse communities to contribute to the development of an eco-city
- act in partnership with the community to give voice to community hopes and aspirations
- recognise that Council power comes from the community and that the Council is answerable to the community for what it does
- listen to the community and be willing to change in response to community needs
- mediate between conflicting interests for the public good

These commitments represent a range of relationships that Council has with its community - from service provider to advocate on the national stage, from representative organisation to regulator and from actor in society to a leader of the community. In deciding how it will interact with its community, Council must bear all of these different relationships in mind. Each different relationship will place different demands on Council, and will require different approaches to, and types of, interaction.

Council recognises that it is on a continual process of learning and trying to improve its ability to respond to the community. The overall approach and principles set out below are intended to shift Council further along the learning process.

Council's approach is based on the following key tenets:

Community Interaction is a part of the Democratic Process

Communicating and interacting effectively is an essential part of local government and democracy in today's environment. Council recognises that its mandate to act comes from the community, and that community interaction processes are key to identifying community needs and aspirations.

Modern communities are extremely diverse, and the way people receive information is equally diverse, demanding that local government use a range of methods to inform residents of its actions, and to engage them in its decision making processes and initiatives in order to build more cohesive, healthy and peaceful communities.

Council also recognises the value of community interaction in its own right and in terms of its contribution to democracy. Providing the community with information and opportunities to participate leads to a greater understanding of how the democratic process works. This leads to citizens identifying more closely with democratic institutions, a higher level of participation in those institutions and generally a more healthy community.

Community Interaction is reliant on people being able to participate

Council cannot assume that the majority of the population read the daily newspaper, or even vote. To inform them of Council actions and invite them to participate in Council decision making processes and activities requires comprehensive communications strategies drawing on a wide range of methods and techniques. Innovation is key in achieving a high level of involvement. Council must look to utilising methods that are in tune with its ever-changing community. This will include a range of traditional methods such as meetings, surveys, mailouts and brochures, together with new and developing methods including emerging electronic media and public facilitation techniques, and a shift away from giving emphasis to the written word.

It is important that the Council endeavours to engage its citizens on their terms and in a way they are comfortable with, in order to increase participation. This means responding to requests by the community, and participating in their networks and processes.

COMMUNITY INTERACTION LEADS TO EFFECTIVE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE CITY'S GOALS

Effective community interaction also makes good practical sense. A community that feels involved will become unified and motivated to further the City's strategic objectives, reducing impediments to achieving goals and completing successful projects. This in turn is likely to be more cost effective. The greater the effort put in to trying to hear and resolve peoples concerns and issues at the beginning of a process, the less likely it is that there will be vociferous objections borne out of lack of understanding as the process progresses. Effective community interaction also increases the opportunities for communities to take actions themselves to create a sustainable city.

COMMUNITY INTERACTION PROVIDES A COMMUNITY RESOURCE

Another benefit that occurs through effective community interaction is the identification and utilisation of resources that exist in the community. Members of the community possess skills and knowledge that can be drawn on by the Council to improve its own knowledge or implement different parts of projects or strategies. The community also performs work that in some cases the Council already knows about and relies on. Without effective interaction, Council could be duplicating this work or not assisting it as far as it could. Extensive networks are also prevalent within certain areas of the community that can be used to interact more effectively with that sector. This is certainly the case in Waitakere, particularly in the social sector and the Maori community where groups are closer to the community than Council. Another example of this is in the coastal and rural communities where residents have a store of local knowledge that can be, and has been, used to make a valuable contribution to improved environmental management (e.g. the Karekare Shellfish Rahui).

COUNCIL NEEDS TO SUPPORT AND RESPOND TO ITS COMMUNITY

In addition to Council proactively seeking interaction, the community will often initiate interaction with Council, either in response to some Council initiative or as part of a community initiative. Council needs to have the ability to respond to these approaches in a measured way. This may be a low key response initially due to Annual Plan constraints, with a more detailed response (possibly projects, partnerships or other initiatives) being worked into the Council's future work programme.

Council needs to be able and willing to listen to unsolicited feedback from the community rather than limiting interaction to more formal processes and mechanisms. Councils need to meet the community on their terms and where they are.

COUNCIL INTERACTS WITH ITS COMMUNITY AT SEVERAL DIFFERENT LEVELS

Council must be, and be perceived as, a good corporate citizen, working to become closer to the community and recognising that the full range of interactions it conducts with its residents contribute toward building an ongoing relationship (or damaging a relationship if it gets some of them wrong).

This means that alongside clearly identified "communication" or "partnership" projects and activities, priority must also be given to getting other interactions right. These include things such as day to day customer service dealings, making accessible and understandable advice and information relating to the Council, and being responsive to difficulties the community experiences in accessing Council's services. This requires Council to equip all staff with the appropriate skills and knowledge to be able to contribute positively to Council's community interactions and that processes are tailored to the community's needs rather than the Council's. The Chief Executive is charged with examining the organisation on an ongoing basis in order to ensure staff are appropriately equipped and trained and that processes are developed with a customer (community) focus.

Council's approach then is to effectively interact with its community to:

- enable local communities to influence city direction and to better provide for their own wellbeing
- enhance decision making and community input into it
- identify the needs and aspirations of the community
- provide services (including being an advocate) that better meet residents needs and aspirations
- communicate and achieve the City's strategic objectives
- improve implementation of city projects

BROAD PRINCIPLES

The principles that will direct Council's approach to community interaction are:

Being inclusive

This means that:

- Interaction processes set up by the Council will be run in a way that encourages participation by, or provides information to, those who have an interest or are affected by the particular activity or project.
- Efforts will be made to identify all those who may have an interest and devise the most appropriate interaction methods to reach them.

- Specific focus will be given to reaching groups that have traditionally not been involved.
- Council will recognise that many people are restricted in their ability to participate because of the busy lifestyles in today's society. Attention will be given to this when designing processes for interaction.
- A focus will also be placed upon selecting methods and places most suitable for those people or groups who have not traditionally communicated with the Council.
- Council will respond to approaches from all parts of its community and try to tailor its response in the most appropriate way for the section of the community concerned.
- Council will shift away from giving emphasis to the written word in community interaction processes.

Being open, honest and responsive

This means that:

- Community interaction processes will be transparent.
- Council will listen to all views put before it.
- Council will be clear about the opportunities for input and the process for any decision making.
- Council recognises the need to set clear expectations to the community about what they are able to influence and what decisions have been made and what other issues and considerations the Council must take into account.
- Participants will be informed about the information gathered in the particular process and any decisions taken based on that information.
- Processes will be devised in order to be as flexible and responsive as possible to the needs of participants.
- Diverse points of view will be heard and respected.
- Interaction processes will be integral to decision making rather than just an add on. Council will be genuine in its dealings with the community.
- Where Council is responding to the community it will be honest and clear about what it is prepared to do. It will make clear on what basis and to what extent it is prepared to work with the community.

- Council will set about changing its own processes so that it is better able to respond to the community.
- Council will bring its own issues to the interaction process if it has any, recognising that it is often a stakeholder itself rather than just an impartial decision-maker.

Timely processes

This means that:

- Council will endeavour to allow sufficient time in its community interaction processes for people to receive and absorb information, as well as adequate time to become involved in those processes and respond or participate.
- Where Council has been approached by the community, it will respond as soon as it is able to.

Interacting with a clear purpose

This means that:

- Council will clearly state in relation to each community interaction process, the subject matter of the process, what the aim of the exercise is, what outcomes are being sought and the role of both the Council and the participants in the project.

Providing sufficient information to allow citizens to participate to the level they desire

This means that:

- Information for community interaction processes will be accurate, user friendly and accessible.
- As much information as possible will be made available in various forms and levels of complexity to suit participant's level of interest, prior knowledge and understanding.
- Information will be made available before opinions are sought and decisions made.

Meeting obligations under the Treaty of Waitangi

- Council recognises that as an agent of the Crown it has obligations as a Treaty partner under the Treaty of Waitangi. In meeting these obligations, Council has formed partnerships with iwi and pan-tribal groups to acknowledge their special role under the Treaty and as defined in legislation such as the Resource Management Act.
- Council views interaction and consultation with Maori as an expression of partnership in terms of the Treaty rather than communication with stakeholders in the city. However, involving Maori in Council processes in ways that suit them is not only a Treaty obligation, but is also reflective of Council's whole approach to community interaction.
- The Council will look to further develop existing partnerships with iwi and pan-tribal groups in the community as well as forming new ones.
- Interaction processes will be developed in conjunction with the groups involved.
- Council will be proactive in looking at opportunities for interaction and will not just rest at meeting statutory obligations.

Te Taumata Runanga, including iwi, (the Standing Committee of Council that deals with Maori Issues) has produced a set of principles for consultation with the Maori community. These are set out below.

Being innovative in its approach to community interaction

This means that:

- The Council will look to use new ways of communicating with its community as appropriate to complement traditional methods and try to break through to audiences not usually reached.
- It will be flexible in accepting feedback from people in forms that suit them rather than those that suit the Council.

Meeting statutory requirements

The Council will follow statutory processes for consultation and community interaction where these are set down. The Council will use statutory processes as bottom lines and will endeavour, where it does not compromise the statutory process, to use additional methods and processes. However, information may be withheld from community interaction processes where there is reason to do so under the Privacy Act 1993 or the Local Government and Official Information Act 1987 (for example where it is commercially sensitive).

Taking a practical approach

- The Council will interact with the community when the community asks for it, where community input is valuable to provide direction or advice or where it is necessary to progress a project or activity that is legally required.
- The City and Council are bound by resource constraints and will try to target resources to community interaction in the most effective and efficient manner. Costs and benefits will be analysed and presented to Council in deciding whether to undertake community interaction processes and the scope and extent thereof.

Learning and improving processes via experience

This means that:

- The Council will endeavour to learn from interaction processes it has been involved in and use this knowledge to improve future processes.
- The Council will look to use benchmarking to record how successful particular processes are and build a profile of what methods and tools are more likely to be successful with particular audiences.
- Council's aim is to provide an empirical guide to selecting the best tools and methods for the best results and the most efficient and effective use of resources.

CONSULTATION WITH THE MAORI COMMUNITY

The following are consultation principles which have been drawn together to enable effective consultation with the Maori community. These are consistent with and add to the broad principles previously discussed.

Kanohi to kanohi (face to face)

The Maori community's preferred method of consultation is direct face to face contact. Processes need to allow for the informal exchange of views and clarification of key issues. Interaction processes need to recognise the value of individuals, provide for a non-threatening environment and allow community groups and individuals to determine their own level of involvement. This approach demonstrates to the community a genuine interest on the part of Council in issues of concern to the Maori community.

Meaningful consultation

Contact with the community needs to occur at the early stages of a project rather than when many key issues have been determined. Sufficient time needs to be provided throughout interaction and consultation processes for a response. This is to allow for Marae meetings, Hui and other community liaison to occur.

Information

Information provided during community interaction processes needs to be accessible and easy to understand and free of jargon. Information should explore the relevance of issues to the Maori community and be presented using illustrations and graphics (meaning pictures rather than graphs).

Consensus

The aim of consultation processes should be to reach a consensus view on projects and issues. It is important to resolve grievances or conflict before progressing projects. The community view is that reaching consensus is a true measure of a consultation process. The Maori community will judge the extent to which meaningful consultation has taken place based on whether consensus has been reached.

Council takes Consensus to mean common agreement to as greater degree as possible between all of the parties involved in a community interaction or decision making process. Where agreement is not possible Council will still have a decision making function to carry out.

Flexible

Processes need to be flexible to recognise the dynamic nature and ever-changing needs of the Maori community.

Annual review

Consultation principles and processes in place for the Maori community should be reviewed annually by Te Taumata Runanga.

Recognition of the value of alternative mechanisms

Council recognises the value of alternative medium for consultation and community interaction that are appropriate to the Maori community.

Support of existing processes and structures

Council will provide assistance and support to existing organisations and structures in the community in order to reach the community. Existing organisations will be supported to locate and identify groups who may not currently have a direct relationship with Council.

RESOURCING OF COMMUNITIES

Participation in Council processes brings with it costs. These can be in the form of time spent, travel costs and resources used in communicating, holding meetings or organising events. Costs can often fall on a small number of people in the community.

There are a number of issues involved when looking at resourcing communities to participate. Participation in the democratic process is one of the rights of citizenship, similar to the exercise of voting. People are encouraged to exercise these rights but traditionally are not paid to do so. Conversely, people can often face barriers to participation that cost them either financially or in other ways. Reasonable steps should be taken to minimise these barriers where possible.

Payment for participation also raises questions of impartiality. If Council were to pay a community member for work done in relation to a process, that payment could be seen as carrying with it obligations of an employer/employee or principal/consultant relationship. Other members of the community might question the impartiality of the community member or the process.

There is still a need however for Council to ensure that community participation is not prohibited by cost. In the past people have not been able to participate in community interaction processes because of travel costs or not being able to afford child-care while a parent attends a meeting. Council needs to make sure that processes are setup in such a way as to minimise barriers to participation.

Council will resource community participation on the following basis:

- Council will resource community interaction on a project by project basis. Specific projects or processes that have community interaction components will be examined through the communications planning process to see what level (if any) of community resourcing is required. Council will determine the level of resourcing through the Annual Plan.
- Where it has made provision in the Annual Plan, Council will provide resources for processes in a range of ways:
 - paying for venues for meetings,
 - providing refreshments at meetings,
 - Provision of equipment necessary for the project or process,
 - printing and distributing materials associated with the project or process (including those generated by the community) and
 - paying for use of community newsletters,
 - providing childcare facilities where appropriate,

- reimbursing costs of travel to specific meetings where such costs in the opinion of the Chief Executive or nominee are frequent, and a barrier to participation,
- other reasonable costs associated with a project or process as determined by the Chief Executive or nominee.
- Council will not pay community members for their input into a process or project.
- Council will consider requests for resourcing from the community.

TYPES OF COMMUNITY INTERACTION

Council has all manner of different contact and interactions with its community ranging from enquiries made at the customer service counter to statutory consultation processes and formalised partnership arrangements. The types of interaction and the levels of communication, as well as opportunities for community involvement and participation can be set out and described as a spectrum of community interactions. Below is a range of community interaction types that would be likely to be used for different project and activities at different times in Waitakere, based on the city's Agenda 21 approach.

Community Interaction Range Community Interaction Types:

Less interactive (one way)

More interactive (two way)

Information	Improving understanding	Discussion	Consultation	Participation	Devolution
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As a result of the community interaction types above, the community gains the following:

Gain Awareness	Gain understanding	Opportunity to provide input	Provide viewpoint and opinion	Become involved or take action	Make choices or decisions
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It is likely that community interaction types at the right hand side of the range will use a number of the methods of community interaction associated with the community interaction types on the left of the range.

Information - This is typically one way communication where information is presented or provided and little or no comment or debate is sought. The Council talks and communities are able to listen if they wish. Useful where the Council wants to let communities know something is happening or keep them informed in respect of specific issues. Information is often provided in conjunction with other types of interaction as well. It is important that information provided deals with issues honestly and is not propaganda.

Improving Understanding - An extension of information; improving understanding usually involves more detailed information designed to lead to changes in behaviour. Information is provided and there can be an interactive exchange of questions and further information.

Discussion - This is two way communication where information is presented and/or questions are asked and comment is requested. It is often investigative and designed to gather information for a project or activity. Council asks for limited input with no substantial debate. The Council listens to the feedback it receives and may or may not make changes. Intended as a way to enhance Council decision making, discussion is useful at the start of an interaction exercise or throughout an ongoing process. It is important that community expectations are not raised too high so that participants think their input will be acted upon solely.

Consultation - Consultation is a genuine, active two-way communication that presents information, identifies issues and options to participants, and allows sufficient time and opportunity for a response. Council may have draft proposals already formulated but listens to input and is genuinely willing to change existing proposals. The whole consultation process is undertaken with a view to gathering community feedback and ideas and incorporating those into Council's decision-making process. Consultation is often part of a legal process and has been the subject of judicial definition which states that "consulting involves the statement of a proposal not yet finally decided upon, listening to what others have to say, considering their responses and deciding what will be done." (McGechan J, Wellington Airport v Air New Zealand, High Court, 1983)

Participation - This is two-way active interaction between Council and its communities. Communities are involved in the process right from the conceptual and issue identification stages. Communities are empowered to a certain extent and are able to advise on what they want. Council and communities resolve issues together. Participation can involve resourcing communities to run parts of the interaction process themselves and can also involve liaison groups and partnership agreements. Partnership can be either a formal contractual agreement relating to shared responsibility and/or funding for a specific project, or an agreement to work together in less formal ways on a project or to achieve common ends.

Devolution - This is where decision making is carried out by the community with Council's support. The community is often the initiator of a particular process or issue and has a high degree of ownership and involvement in the resolution of issues. Council resources the community so that they are able to input and undertake the involvement necessary to run a process, make decisions or manage projects depending on the particular issue. This can also involve partnership arrangements. Council will look to hand over management or decision making as well as responsibility to communities where this is appropriate. Responsibility for outcomes, processes and decisions goes hand in hand with the concept of devolution.

GUIDING INTERACTION PROCESSES

The Council's principles and approach to community interaction have now been set out. The next step is ensuring that the processes Council initiates adhere to these.

The steps to achieving this will be contained in the accompanying document, *Community Interaction Guidelines*. This set of guidelines will set out the interaction methods that are available. It will provide a model for locating a particular project on the range of interaction types. The guidelines will also set out methods that may be appropriate for each type of interaction. Within these guidelines, Council's bottom line requirements for interaction processes will be stated and which interaction processes will need to be met in order to proceed. The guidelines will also provide a checklist for use in preparing a communications plans to ensure that all of Council's principles have been considered and applied to a specific process or project.

