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CONSULTATION CONUNDRUMS

Consultation with the community can be a challenging and rewarding process. It can leave you overwhelmed with hundreds of responses or leave you wondering whether it was all worth it for that one lonely submission. Whether you are running a council process or simply going that extra mile to consult before you lodge a complex planning application there are some techniques that can maximise the benefits of your consultation.

This article discusses some of the steps the Greater Wellington Regional Council used to ensure a good consultation process in the development of the Wairarapa Coastal Strategy' (the Strategy) and illustrates how our approach lead to good community buy-in to the development and implementation of this non-statutory document.

COMMITTING TO CONSULTATION

Whether you are working on a small one-off project or one that stretches for several years and includes many organisations, it is important to come up with an agreed and consistent approach to consultation for that project. Some councils (see Box 1) do this by having a *Consultation Charter* or *Consultation Policy*. These documents outline the standards or principles that underlie all their public consultation. The benefit of this is that it clearly sets out to the public, staff and consultants involved in the project, how, why and when consultation will occur.

While the Wairarapa Coastal Strategy Group (the Group) did not have a specific policy or charter on consultation it did have a strong commitment to getting buy-in from landowners and the wider community, and saw a thorough and transparent consultation process as a way to ensure this happened.

CONSULTATION CAN BE ABOUT MORE THAN JUST CONTENT

For many projects the "consultation phase" kicks in towards the end of the process when a draft is released for comment or a development is notified. This approach does not give the

community a chance to help shape or fully contribute to the project so it is important that you recognise the purpose and outcomes you want to achieve from consulting.

To avoid inadvertently sidelining the community you should decide at the beginning of any project what you want to gain from public consultation. Do you want to simply provide information; consult on specific issues; involve the community; work together to make decisions; or to enable the community to make the decision themselves? This spectrum of public participation is explained on the *Good Practice Participate* website (see Box 1) and deciding where your project sits on the spectrum will help you choose what type of consultation process you should undertake. It also enables you to convey to the community why you are consulting with them and helps manage their expectations of what their feedback can achieve.

In developing a strategy for the Wairarapa Coast, the Group recognised that public consultation would have to move beyond mere information sharing. It achieved this by asking key stakeholders and the wider community to be involved in determining whether a strategy was a

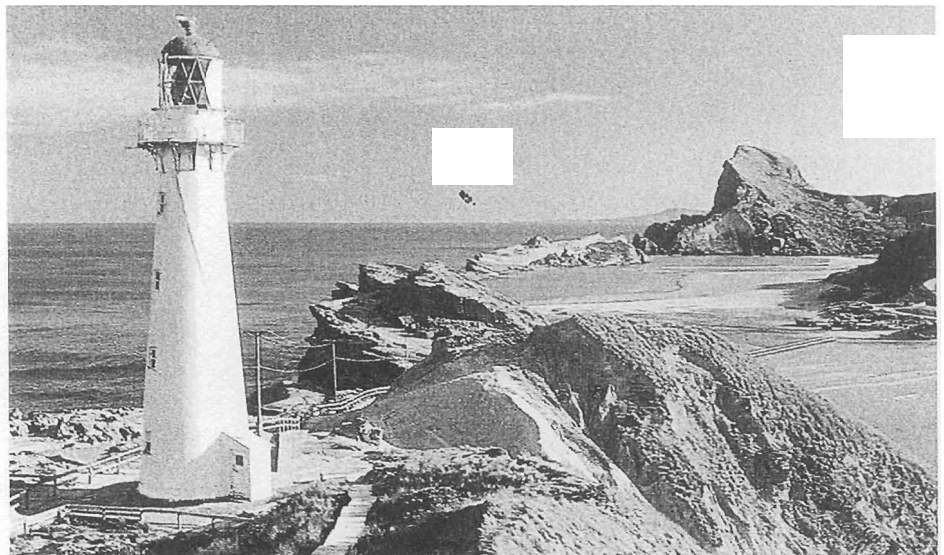
good idea; what the vision of the Strategy should be; and what the process to develop the Strategy should be - including what opportunities there should be for public input.

CONSULTING IS NOT JUST A PLANNING PROCESS

To ensure that you are on the right track and will get the most from your consultation you should turn to people who are "in the know". Be willing to call on people with skills, knowledge and experience in the various aspects of consultation - from communication officers, to designers and advertising staff. Just because you have experience with planning processes does not mean you will have all the ideas about public consultation.

Treat the consultation process as a project in itself and get help to outline both an overall consultation strategy and the specifics for each step along the way. But remember, whichever specialists you work make sure you convey to them the principles underlying your consultation process, what you are trying to achieve by consulting, and who your audience is.

With a commitment to effective consultation,



Left: Castlepoint Lighthouse. Photo property of Greater Wellington. Right: View to Turakirae Head from Putangirua Strear. Photo by Rachel Hornsby.

the Wairarapa Coastal Strategy Group established an overall process that included several discrete steps for seeking the views of

The following websites provide a handy starting point to exploring the techniques listed in this article.

Councils that have Consultation Policies, Principles, Charters or Frameworks

- Wellington City Council www.wcc.govt.nz
- City of Monash (Australia) www.monash.vic.gov.au
- London Borough of Hackney (UK) www.hackney.gov.uk
- Leicestershire County Council (UK) www.leics.gov.uk

Information on Public Participation and Consultation

- Good practice Participate www.goodpracticeparticipate.govt.nz
- Quality Planning Website www.qp.org.nz
- International Association for Public Participation www.iap2.org

Tools for Consultation

- Citizen Science Toolbox www.coastal.crc.org.au/toolbox/index.asp

key stakeholders and the wider public (see Box 2). For each step the advice of our communications staff was sought to outline what the consultation could entail and how we needed to go about making it happen. Seeking advice was particularly useful when our budget for consultation was reduced, as their knowledge and experience helped us ensure we got the "best bang for our buck".

FIND THE RIGHT TOOLS FOR THE JOB

An advertisement in the public notices section of the local newspaper may meet your legal obligations, but if you want to really involve the community in the consultation process you will probably have to think about other ways to encourage their feedback. An excellent place to start is with the *Citizen Science Toolbox* (see Box 1). This website enables you to enter in the variables relating to your consultation including the purpose of the consultation; your budget; the number of people you want to target; the type of organisation (community, government or industry) and so on. The toolbox then provides a list of suitable consultation tools, gives the strengths and weakness for each tool, and provides a case study of where the tool has been used. Take time to find out about

consultation tools and think about the audience you are trying to reach, it can save you a lot of time and energy by avoiding dead-end consultation processes.

The community consultation tools used in developing the Strategy ranged from public meetings, to brochure drops, information sheets, newsletter updates, beach surveys, and good old-fashioned chats over cups of tea. The Group recognised that the consultation tools they used had to reflect the way the community wanted to be consulted. The success of using the right consultation tool evident as over 300 submissions were received and there was positive comment from members of the public who said how much they appreciated the opportunity to talk about issues face to face.

MAKE IT A TWO WAY STREET

Effective consultation involves not only collecting information from the public but feeding back to them what you found out and how you used that information to make decisions for the project. This is particularly important where a project runs over a long period of time as it gives you the opportunity to remind people of where you are up to in the process and what the next steps will be.

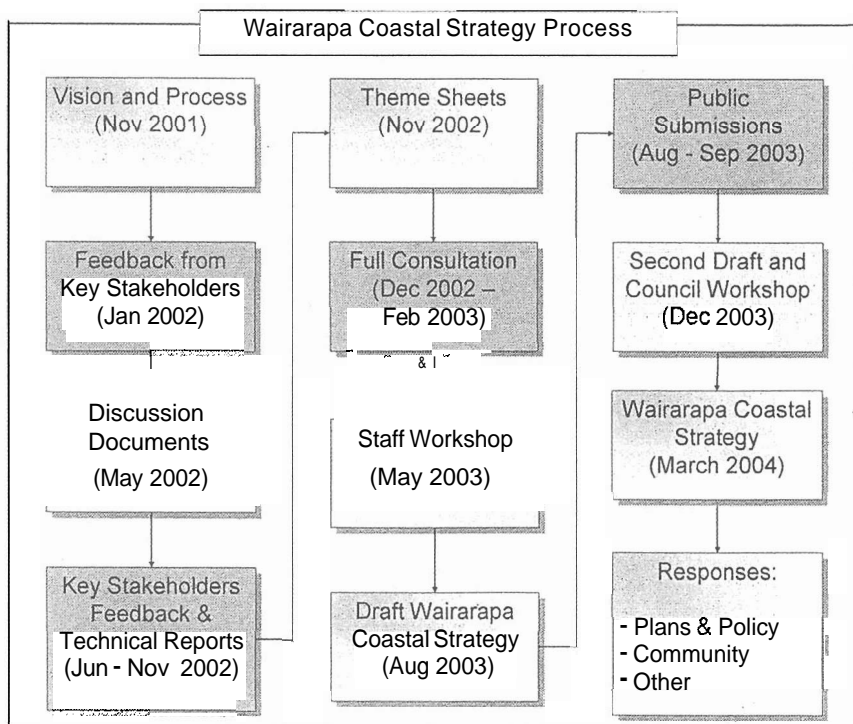
At each stage in developing the Wairarapa Coastal Strategy, and often in between stages, a newsletter was sent to people on the mailing list to keep them up to date with the work that was happening and to let them know of any changes to timeframes. A summary of submissions and decisions on submissions were also sent out. All information was written and presented so it was easy to understand, informative and encouraged further public involvement.

MANAGING THE NUTS AND BOLTS OF IT

In order to effectively collate and use the results of consultation you should establish a system that will enable you to record, store, and sort the responses you receive. As a minimum you should consider a database that allows you to build a mailing list and sort comments by the stage of consultation and by issues.

Establishing this database at the beginning of the process will enable you to more easily feed information back to the community and identify particular issues of concern.

Having several consultation steps during the development of the Wairarapa Coastal Strategy



meant it was vital that the Council keep track of where and when different people were involved. We set up a mailing list that initially included key stakeholders. The list later grew to include over 500 households and at every consultation opportunity people were asked whether they wished to be added to, or removed from, the mailing list. The database also enabled us to sort comments by issue and by page reference number of the Draft Strategy. This meant we could address groups of submissions on the same issue rather than each submission on its own.

CHANGE TACK IF YOU NEED TO

If you have done your homework and decided why you are consulting and how best to consult, then you should have come up with a process that meets your expectations and needs. But if things are not progressing the way you had hoped because there is little public interest, there is flurry of misinformation and a hostile response, or there is concern from staff or councillors, then you should be able to identify this and take steps to remedy the situation. In doing this you are separating the "consultation process" from the outcomes or development of the overall project. It enables you to say "this consultation tool or process is not working" rather than "there is obviously something wrong with the entire concept of the project".

The original process agreed to for the

development of the Wairarapa Coastal Strategy included the preparation of a draft for public comment and then the release of the Final Strategy. The Draft received a large amount of public response and certain aspects of the response caused some concerns within the district councils. The Group recognised that an additional consultation step was required to bring all local councillors and interested council staff up to date before the Draft was finalised and released.

A second Draft was prepared that incorporated or responded to many of the issues raised in submissions. It was presented at a workshop attended by all local councillors. The workshop also provided an opportunity to outline the level of community participation, support and buy-in. Adding this extra step to the consultation process resulted in greater staff and councillor buy-in to the final Strategy and ensured that the project itself was not at risk simply because some extra consultation was required.

CONCLUSION

While many people think carefully about the outcomes they are trying to achieve from a project, and are aware that consultation will form part of that project, they may not think about the outcomes they want to achieve from the consultation or ways to maximise the

benefits. There are several techniques to improve the consultation for your project including establishing why and how you will undertake consultation; choosing the right tool and skills for that consultation; and being flexible enough to respond if the consultation is not achieving the desired outcomes. Taking time to investigate and consider these techniques will ensure that whatever your project is you can design and implement an appropriate and effective consultation process.

FOOTNOTE

1. The Wairarapa Coastal Strategy Group was formed in 2001 with representatives from Greater Wellington Regional Council; Masterton, Carterton and South Wairarapa District Councils, Rangitaane o Wairarapa; and Ngati Kahungunu o Wairarapa. The Wairarapa Coastal Strategy is a non-statutory document and was released in April 2004 after more than two years of public consultation and technical work.

Wairarapa Coastal Strategy available at www.gw.govt.nz/em/coastal or contact Rachel Hornsby on Rachel.Hornsby@gw.govt.nz



Left: View to Turakirae Head from Putangirua Stream. Photo by Rachel Hornsby. Right: The terraces surrounding Palliser Bay. Photo by Pete Nikolaison 2002.