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Policy
Project**

Responsive today,
shaping tomorrow



The
Policy Project
Community
Engagement
resources

Survey results: Community engagement in government policy making

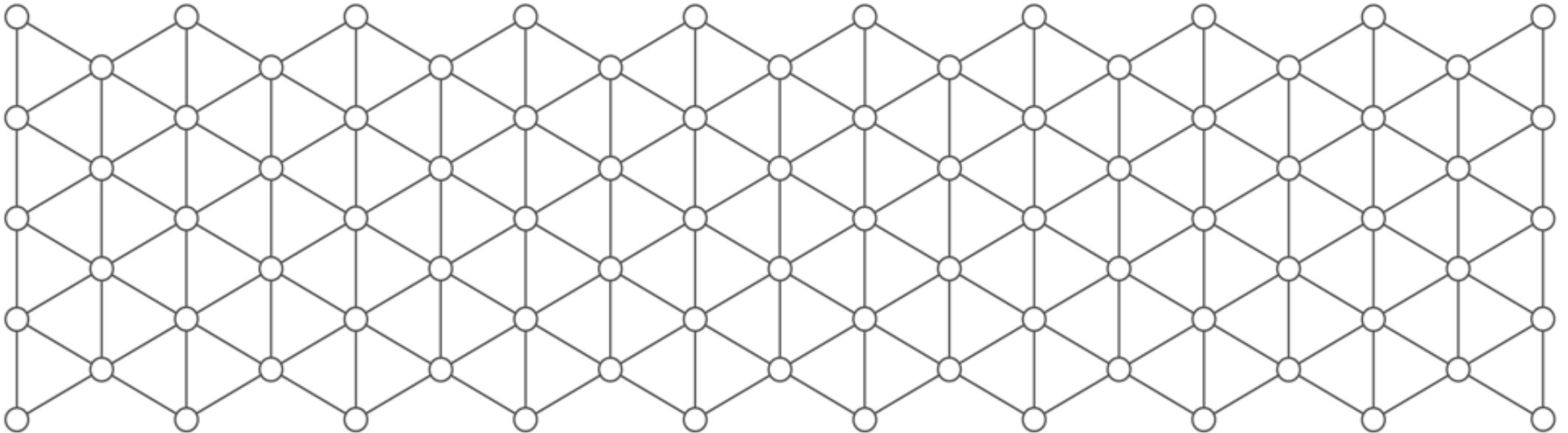


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1. Introduction

1.1 Background to survey

Since 2013, New Zealand has been a signatory to the [Open Government Partnership](#) (OPG), which is an international agreement that aims to improve transparency and engagement between government and citizens. Every two years, all government signatories agree to a set of commitments in a National Action Plan.

The Policy Project, a unit within the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, has been responsible for achieving a commitment in each of the second and third National Action Plans, related to public participation in policy making. As part of its work on the 2018–2021 National Action Plan, the Policy Project was responsible for [Commitment 5](#).

Commitment 5 aims to “develop a deeper and more consistent understanding of what good engagement with the public means (right across the [International Association for Public Participation's Spectrum of Public Participation](#))”. A main focus for this commitment is expanding tools and resources available in the [Community Engagement section](#) of the online Policy Methods Toolbox to help policy advisors to improve their community engagement practice.

To inform this work we surveyed community organisations, engagement specialists, and policy practitioners about community engagement in government policy making.

1.2 Purpose of the survey

The purpose of the survey was to get an understanding of the experiences each of the three groups had with community engagement, and get their insights into what would improve community engagement in policy making. The insights gained from the survey results were then considered by the Policy Project, and reflected in the advice and guidance prepared for policy advisors.

Most of this document provides our summary of the results of the surveys on community engagement in government policy making. Then we outline how the insights and views of survey participants informed the final versions of the engagement guidance we developed to fulfil Commitment 5.

This document is a resource for policy practitioners to help them better understand:

- the perspective of community organisations that frequently engage with government on policy matters
- how to improve engagement with community organisations
- the common barriers that prevent good practice
- what to avoid when engaging with communities.

1.3 Survey methodology

Questions asked

We developed three survey questionnaires that took a broadly common approach, but with minor modifications to take account of the different roles played by the three key groups in community engagement on government policy making. We emailed the appropriate online survey to people from each group. Participants were asked for information about their role and their organisation, and the following open-ended questions about policy-related community engagement by government:

- What went well in a recent engagement?
- What didn't go well in a recent engagement?
- What would improve your ability/capability to engage with or participate in government policy making through community engagement? Specifically we asked:
 - **Policy practitioners** – what would improve the capability of you, your team and/or your organisation to engage with stakeholders and community in the policy process and decision making?
 - **Community members and organisations** – what would improve your ability or those of your community to participate in and influence/public policy process and decision making?
 - **Engagement specialists** – what would improve the capability of the government's policy teams to undertake effective engagement with stakeholders and communities?
- What would be the most important changes government could make to its approach to engagement to improve public participation in policy making?

Selecting participants

Initially, we invited community groups to participate in the survey on the basis of suggestions from the OGP Commitment 5 Reference Group members, suggestions from government agencies, and in consultation with the Open Government Partnerships Team at Te Kawa Mataaho Public Service Commission. Through online research and talking with other engagement specialists, we identified further community networks, iteratively broadening the set of community groups. We tried to ensure community organisations were represented from different sector groups, a variety of organisational sizes, and that there was regional representation. We also invited umbrella networks and organisations to circulate the survey through their own networks.

Policy practitioners were invited to participate in the survey through existing Policy Project networks and through emailing all members of our database of principal policy advisors and policy managers across the public service. All those who attended our public service discovery workshop were also sent the survey.

The engagement specialists and academics were identified through key contacts, many of whom had been involved in the OGP Commitment 5 Reference Group or scoping of this project.

We emailed the survey invitation to participants. The invitation made it clear that the survey results would be analysed anonymously, to encourage free and frank feedback.

Number of responses received

We sent survey invitations from late January 2020. With the onset of Covid-19, the due date for responses was extended in some cases into June 2020. We received 78 survey responses from community organisations, 35 from policy practitioners, and 11 from engagement specialists.

In light of the small number of community engagement specialists who responded to the survey, we conducted a further poll in May 2021. Using the Sli.do app during a keynote address to the annual symposium in Auckland by the International Association for Public Participation (IAP2), we sought further input from attendees on *What the Government should do to improve community engagement practice?* The audience was mostly community engagement specialists, but also policy practitioners and people in other roles. Seventy-one responses were received.

Characteristics of those who responded to the surveys

The 78 community organisations that responded to the online survey represented a wide range of demographic groups and community interests, including youth, disabled people, Māori, women, refugees, rainbow communities, education, and rural groups.

Consistent with who we invited to participate, most policy practitioners who responded were at a senior level within government agencies, generally principal advisor and above.

A further breakdown of the roles of community group representatives, policy practitioner and community engagement specialists is set out in Appendix 1.

2. Survey results

2.1 Key findings

We've summarised the areas that survey respondents identified for government improvement into three broad themes:

- 1) Recognise the value of engagement for quality policy advice
- 2) Improve capability and processes across government
- 3) Prioritise inclusive engagement.

We compared responses between the groups to the *what worked well* and *what didn't work well* questions. These showed a significant overlap in matters valued by both policy practitioners and community organisations, but patchy performance in delivering effective community engagement. There was greater overlap for what worked well, while each group brought their own experience and perspectives on the barriers for improving engagement.

Many respondents mentioned more than one theme in their responses. We encourage policy practitioners and government agencies to consider these aspects together, as mutually supporting ways to improve the quality of engagement.

2.2 What went well in a recent engagement?

The survey asked what went well in a recent government engagement that the respondent had participated in. We have compared the responses to this question from policy practitioners and community organisations – and found significant overlap in the top three themes raised most frequently – see Table 1. The following page provides additional common themes that

came through from these two groups. There were only 11 responses received from engagement specialists and academics. Therefore, common themes raised by engagement specialists are presented separately.

Table 1: Comparison of top themes relating to what went well in a recent engagement for community organisations and policy practitioners

Ranking of theme	Community organisations	Policy practitioners
1 st	Effective online submissions process with clear and accessible materials, and options for how to submit that work for different people.	Face to face engagement (including workshops) – good discussion and questions, opportunity for a range of voices to be represented, active engagement.
2 nd	Face-to-face engagement with affected people, bringing together multiple perspectives in one forum with effective facilitation.	Used an inclusive approach to engagement and outreach – sought views of all interested groups and made sure all could be involved (e.g. ensuring consultation materials are accessible, using regional networks, using both digital and face-to-face consultation).
3 rd	Open to different perspectives and new information (including negative feedback), recognised limits of existing knowledge, genuine interest and willingness to collaborate.	Genuine openness to engagement, listening, no pre-conceived views, working with the community to address issues together.

Other common themes for community organisations

- Iterative consultation process, including following up after engagement sessions and giving feedback to people who provided input.
- Engaged leadership.
- Used existing networks and enabled these to be a hub for consultation, reached out to the right representative organisations for consultation with community groups.
- Generous consultation timeframes.
- Inclusive of all needs and cultural perspectives.
- Asking useful, open consultation questions.
- Built a relationship.
- Made it easy – provided support for people to share their views and navigate formal processes.
- Showed how feedback was going to be used, both during the process and at the end.
- Transparency about the nature of policy processes – being clear what will happen next and when decisions will be made (demystifying the long timeframes).

Other common themes for policy practitioners

- Early engagement – enabled gathering information, building partnerships with iwi and community organisations, and seeking feedback before setting timeframes and preparing consultation materials.
- Constructive approach to Māori engagement – involved targeted outreach and use of external supports (e.g. Te Arawhiti and Te Puni Kōkiri resources, external facilitator fluent in te reo).
- Community organisations were keen to be involved and had good ideas. Engagement worked well because the right people from the community were in the room, and officials listened to feedback on how to facilitate community organisation involvement.

Common themes for engagement specialists

- Forums that supported active debate, created buy in, empowered public participation, and enabled key themes to emerge.
- Diverse group of people contributing.
- Transparency and respect – including being honest about the scope of engagement and what can be achieved.
- Effective outreach and communications.

“Recognising expertise of people in the community with extensive experience.”
(community organisation)

“Taking my team along to hear first-hand what the critical issues are”
(policy practitioner)

“Opportunity to express negative views – communicate that services are inadequate and this is causing distress.”
(community organisation)



What went well?

“Really engaged attendees that raised salient and challenging points.”
(policy practitioner)

“Being open and accessible for conversation”
(policy practitioner)

“People are willing to talk about this stuff. They want to engage. They have ideas. They want to share.”
(engagement specialist)

“No pre-determined outcome”
(community organisation)

2.3 What didn't go well in a recent community engagement?

The survey also asked what didn't go well in a recent engagement the respondent had participated in. We've again compared the response to this question from policy practitioners and community organisations, and still found significant overlap in the top three themes raised most

frequently (see Table 2 below). Other common themes that emerged from these two groups are presented on the following page, along with common themes reported by engagement specialists.

Table 2: Comparison of top themes relating to what didn't go well in a recent engagement for community organisations and policy practitioners

Ranking of theme	Community organisations	Policy practitioners
1 st	Timeframes too short (not enough time for organisations to go through their internal processes).	Lack of capability in Māori engagement – patchy relationships with hapū/iwi, lack of trust, insufficient resources to go to smaller centres and rural communities, lack of knowledge of tikanga, capacity issues for marae and Māori organisations.
2 nd	Lack of meaningful engagement – tokenistic, insufficient, limited scope, not enough interaction and iteration to have credibility.	Limited time and resources – process rushed, lack of planning, no time to build relationships.
3 rd (equal)	<p>Inaccessible processes (not inclusive of Māori, children and young people, disabled people, people outside of the main centres, people who are unavailable for meetings in working hours, etc).</p> <p>Not closing the loop – no follow ups, submissions or summary of feedback not published, long delays with no updates.</p> <p>Poor facilitation of public meeting – rushed, no conversation between submitters or discussion of solutions, key questions not answered.</p>	Diversity, inclusion and accessibility not well planned for – those represented in engagement didn't reflect all the communities with an interest in the outcome.

Other common themes for community organisations

- Not trusting the community to create solutions that meet their needs, excuses for inaction instead of solving problems, condescending approach from some government representatives dismissing concerns.
- Implementation failures and lack of follow through – end results didn't reflect discussions, or no action taken, feels like feedback from the community didn't make a difference.
- Lack of funding for community organisations to do the work of responding to consultation – need to recognise the value of input from representative groups, especially those that bring together the perspectives of marginalised people.
- Outcome pre-determined before consultation.
- Officials not having specialised knowledge of the area / not prepared for meaningful engagement / inexperienced and no mandate to make decisions.

Other common themes for policy practitioners

- Insufficient impact of the engagement – lack of planning for how it would inform policy, frustration from community when they engage but nothing changes to address issues raised.
- Logistical difficulties in contacting everyone and bringing them together for discussion.
- Insufficient outreach – low attendance from some target groups, lack of local contacts, failure to prioritise outreach.
- Limited stakeholder understanding of policy processes, which made it difficult to manage expectations – lack of knowledge of what had happened already, likely timeframes and signoffs needed (e.g. budget bids).

Common themes for engagement specialists

- Engagement didn't enable adequate discussion of options or contentious areas.
- Top down processes – engagement only available when government wants to engage instead of ongoing discussion about what the issues are and what is possible.
- Talking to the same people repeatedly instead of broader outreach.

“Poorly resourced, so while there was some consultation around the country, this was limited. The timeframes were very short and this made it difficult for civil society groups to engage or respond.”
(community organisation)

“It was challenging to contact everyone we needed to deal with, given the range and number of organisations in the sector.”
(policy practitioner)

“We were limited by resource and time.”
(policy practitioner)

What didn't go well?

“Actual face-to-face meeting felt a bit rushed and although it was good to have been invited to give input, it felt that the document was already well-developed and nothing much could be changed.”
(community organisation)

2.4 What the government should do to **improve** community engagement practice

Participants were asked two final questions about areas for improvement in community engagement practice. The questions were similar but tailored for the three perspectives of the sub-groups.

Community organisations were asked:

- What would improve your ability (or those of your community) to participate in and influence/shape public policy process and decision making?
- What would be the most important changes government could make to improve its public and community engagement approaches?

Policy practitioners were asked:

- What would improve the capability of you, your team and/or your organisation to engage stakeholders and community in the policy process and decision making?
- What would be the most important changes government could make to its approach to engagement to improve public participation in policy making?

Engagement specialists were asked:

- What would improve the capability of the government's policy teams to undertake effective engagement with stakeholders and communities?
- What would be the most important changes government could make to its policy engagement approach to improve public participation?

Responses to these questions made it clear that community organisations considered improvements in their ability to participate in engagement to be dependent on improvements in how the government approached engagement. At the same time, policy practitioners and engagement specialists focused on whole-of-government improvements for both questions – linking capability of policy teams to system-wide supports and skills improvements. Due to this, we analysed the answers to these two questions together for each respondent group. This was done to ensure that:

- all suggestions for improved government practice were considered, regardless of which question was being answered
- points repeated by the same respondent for each answer were not double counted.

Bringing together the responses provides a comprehensive picture of community, engagement specialist, and policy practitioner priorities for improving the government's approach to community engagement.

As mentioned on page 5, we took the opportunity to get further perspectives from engagement specialists at the 2021 IAP2 New Zealand Symposium on community engagement.

The information from all groups was presented in two ways. Diagram 1 on the following page presents an overall summary of the key themes raised. Table 3 shows the top themes emerging for each group we engaged with.

Diagram 1: Key themes about what the government should do to improve community engagement practice across all groups

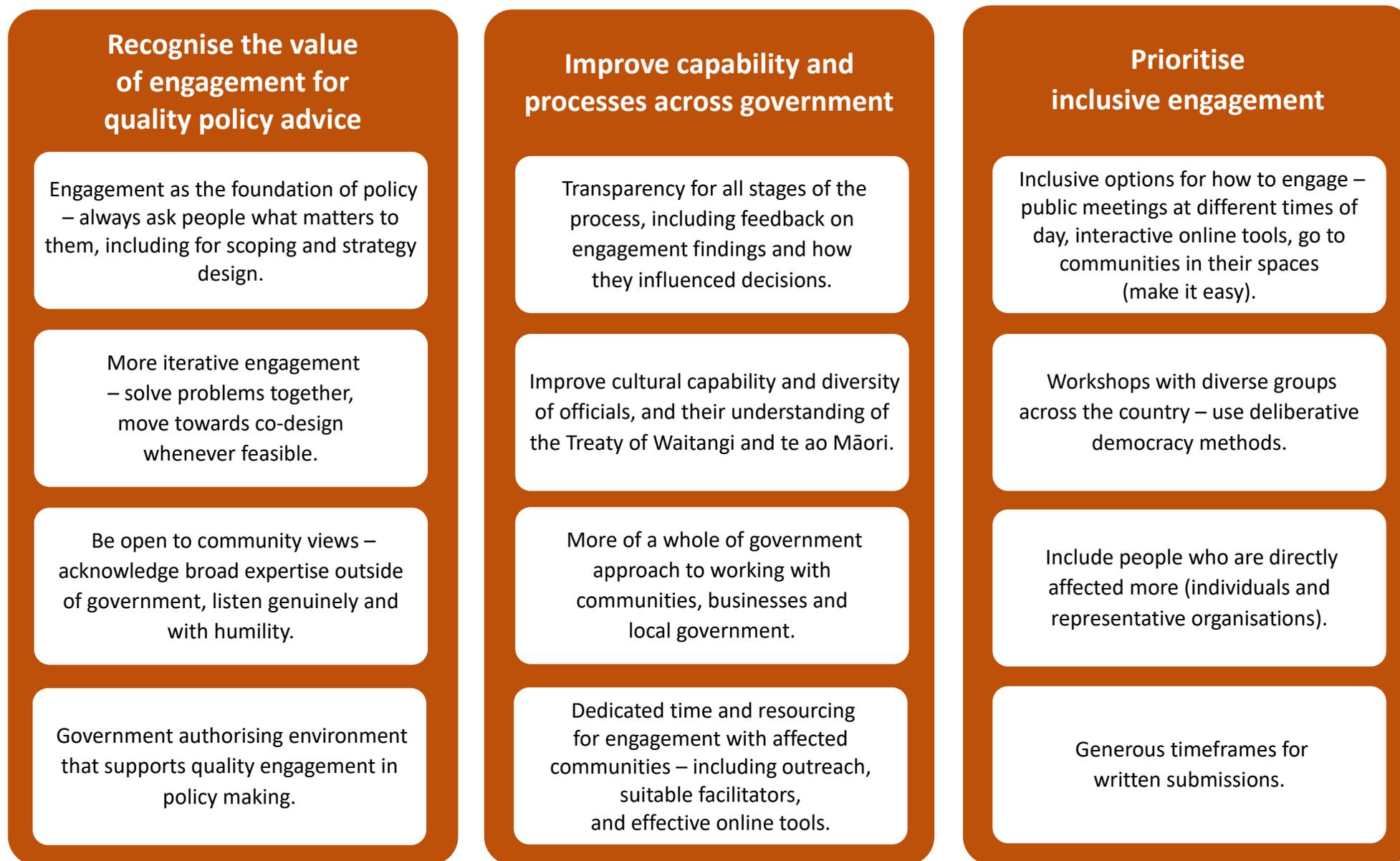


Table 3: Top themes for each respondent group about what the government should do to improve community engagement practice

Ranking of theme	Community organisations	Engagement specialists	Policy practitioners	IAP2 Conference attendees
1 st	Early engagement – including on strategic direction and scoping	Engagement should include asking people what issues matter to them – not only asking people for feedback once there is already a policy agenda.	Whole of government approach to working with community, business and local government.	Co-ordinated approach to engagement across government agencies – reach out together to diverse communities, including in the regions.
2 nd	Invite participation from those most affected and their representative groups.	Tailor engagement to different target audiences, learn from private sector and engagement specialists, and experiment with different forms of engagement.	Improve understanding of Treaty of Waitangi obligations – include early engagement and partnering with Māori.	Resourcing for effective engagement processes.
3 rd	Trust communities to know what will work for them.	[Not applicable due to small number of responses from this group]	Time and resourcing for proper engagement with affected communities, including dedicated resources within departments.	Understand value of engagement across public service – what it is and why it's important.

3. Survey findings informed community engagement resources

As mentioned in section 1.1, we used the survey results outlined above to inform the development of guidance resources and tools for policy practitioners – as part of the Policy Project’s work during 2019 and 2020 on Commitment 5 of the Open Government Partnership. The resulting suite of six community engagement resources were published in November 2020 and the focus of each is set out in Appendix 2. Together they reflect the importance and relevance of the three key themes emerging from the survey, and they help establish a benchmark for good community engagement.

1) Recognise the value of engagement for quality policy advice

The [Good Practice Guide for Community Engagement](#) outlines how to carry out good engagement practice at all levels of the International Association of Public Participation’s Spectrum of Public Participation – whether informing, consulting, involving, collaborating with, or empowering communities. Information from the survey about what worked and didn’t work for community groups during their own engagement experiences was drawn into the advice on good practice at each level of engagement on the spectrum. The Guide emphasises the importance of policy advisors putting people at the heart of the work they do.

The [Principles and Values for Community Engagement](#) resource sets out the principles and values that underpin best practice community engagement. It also describes how to apply the principles. This resource supports the desire reflected in the survey that government better *recognise the value of community engagement* to policy making.

2) Improve capability and processes across government

The [Community Engagement Design Tool](#) promotes the *improvement of policy advisor capability* and advisors’ community engagement practice. It does this by providing guidance on how to design the engagement elements, preferably at an early stage of a policy project when practicable. It helps policy practitioners assess where the engagement could sit on the Spectrum of Public Participation. It also recommends seeking input from community organisations into the design of engagement, where possible. The guide on [Selecting Methods for Community Engagement](#) provides advice to policy advisors about the range of methods available to best suit the engagement design and other contextual factors. A [Getting Ready for Community Engagement](#) guide also advises government agencies how to enable their policy teams to be ready for carrying out good practice and improving their community engagement capability.

3) Prioritise inclusive engagement

A dedicated [Guide to Inclusive Community Engagement](#) emphasises the *importance of prioritising inclusive engagement*, and how to best reach out to diverse voices when designing, planning and delivering engagement. The Māori Crown relationship and the engagement resources developed by Te Arawhiti (the Office of Māori Crown Relations) were referenced and reflected in the guidance.

4. Conclusion

Good practice engagement in government policy making is important for creating robust policy that reflects the values and aspirations of our community. This starts with applying a principled approach that values quality engagement. This survey on community engagement in government policy making shows that community organisations, policy practitioners, and engagement specialists understand the need for further improvement in how government approaches engagement. As well as becoming familiar with the community engagement resources mentioned above (which were informed by the survey), policy practitioners can use the survey results to better understand the values and views of community groups, and their preferences for engaging with government.

The survey findings also provide an opportunity for policy practitioners to gain insights about what works, what doesn't, and what needs to be improved. These insights have been provided by a range of respondents with different experiences of community engagement, including their policy colleagues.

Finally, analysis of these results also demonstrates a considerable degree of common understanding about what constitutes good practice between community groups and policy practitioners. It's an encouraging basis on which to continue working together to improve government's engagement practice.

Appendix 1: Distribution of roles of survey participants

Distribution of answers for community organisations by job title

Job title	Responses received
Other	18
CEO	14
Did not answer	11
Advisor/analyst	8
Director	8
Trustee	6
General manager	5
Board chairperson	3
Manager	3
Treasurer	2
Total	78

Distribution of answers for policy practitioners by title

Job title	Responses received
Principal policy advisor	11
Senior policy advisor	8
Manager	5
Other	4
Policy director	3
Specialist advisor	2
General manager	1
Policy advisor	1
Total	35

Distribution of answers for engagement specialists by title

Job title	Responses received
Partner/owner/director of organisation	6
Principal advisor	2
Customer journey manager	1
Capability leader	1
Did not answer	1
Total	11

Appendix 2: Resources supporting community engagement

A suite of resources supporting community engagement

- **Good Practice Guide for Community Engagement** – A guide for policy advisors on good community engagement practice, including at each level of the IAP2 Spectrum of Public Participation.
- **Principles and Core Values for Community Engagement** – A guide for policy advisors on principles and values that guide good community engagement in policy making.
- **Getting Ready for Community Engagement** – Guidance for government agencies on building capability and readiness for community engagement.
- **Community Engagement Design Tool** – A tool to help policy advisors identify the level on the IAP2 Spectrum of Public Participation most appropriate for a specific policy project.
- **Selecting Methods for Community Engagement** – Resources to help policy advisors choose the right engagement methods to support good engagement planning at each level of the IAP2 Spectrum of Public Participation.
- **Guide to Inclusive Community Engagement** – A guide for policy advisors and government agencies on inclusive community engagement in policy making.