



# COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION

to strengthen the public good.



**FACILITATING ACTIVE CITIZENSHIP AND FOSTERING A CULTURE OF OPEN GOVERNMENT ARE KEY ROLES OF THE PUBLIC SERVICE\*. And at the heart of open government is participation – citizens actively influencing the workings of government by engaging with public policy processes and helping to design services, programmes and approaches that will work.**

\*Public Service Act, 2020

**The Act gives permission to tackle the many complex issues facing public agencies in new, more effective ways.**

An understanding of adaptive complex systems is helping shape this new approach. Communities are adaptive complex systems and as such have significant potential to add value into the policy and operations of the Public Service. Involving community voice from the very beginning of policy making, creative and authentic engagement processes and creating space for co-design and localised implementation create opportunities for greater impact, better relationships and increased trust in our system of government.

But engaging with people and communities in different and meaningful ways can require a number of shifts from previous consultation and engagement approaches.

Drawing on insights from community-led development, here are some practical hints for effectively enabling community participation to shape policy and services.

🔗 [inspiringcommunities.org.nz/shaping-the-future/](https://inspiringcommunities.org.nz/shaping-the-future/)

# 1.

## ENGAGE EARLY

**Seek out community input as early as possible, preferably during the exploration phase of your policy initiative, or in the design stage of your strategy development or action planning process.**

**T**est your assumptions - Communities may well have better ideas and plans than you do. They may just require you to get out of the way or to help in ways not immediately apparent.

- 🌀 **Tap into existing relationships and networks** (e.g. advisory groups, panels, umbrella organisations etc) for early, informal input. If you don't hold those relationships personally, it's likely someone in your agency will – ask around!
- 🌀 **Frame these initial conversations** in ways that allow strengths and opportunities to be identified, rather than focussing solely on issues or problems.
- 🌀 **Use these conversations** to intentionally explore ways for communities to get involved – ask for ideas and suggestions about what will work for communities on the ground.
- 🌀 **Also check on community availability** (what else is going on?), capacity and what will be required to enable people to contribute meaningfully. This will help you build reasonable timeframes and resourcing into your project planning. Get your engagement process off to a good start by showing in your planning that you respect people's time, energy and other commitments. For example, even if your timelines are tight, don't plan engagement activities for school holidays or other times when communities have limited availability. Otherwise you risk people wondering whether you really want their input.

- 🌀 **Be aware of the resource and power disparity** in any community/government engagement. While engagement is part of your core paid role, community members will be participating on top of their core mahi. Recognise that you are asking people to go 'over and above' by providing longer timelines for input than you'd expect from colleagues within government, and if possible, paying for people's time.

🔗 [www.powerdigm.org.nz/shaping-the-future-report](http://www.powerdigm.org.nz/shaping-the-future-report)





## 2.

### VALUE RELATIONSHIPS

**Relationships are essential – good ones are the basis for effective collaboration and partnership. But authentic relationships and real insight can be difficult to achieve through ‘one-off’ participatory processes and techniques, no matter how well designed.**

**C**ommunities already have a sense of their relationship to government (or even to your agency) based on past experiences. Valuing and committing to ongoing relationships creates the conditions for mutual respect and learning. This will require investing in the sets of skills (facilitation, brokering, conflict resolution) that support robust and respectful dialogue between diverse actors.

- 🌀 **Do a bit of research** into the community's previous experiences with government agencies and processes to understand your starting point. The legacy of Iwi/Crown relationships must always be acknowledged. But also be aware of other potential challenges e.g. previous consultations where the community voice has not been heard, policy decisions or operational practices that have actively damaged trust.
- 🌀 **Commit to doing things differently** going forward. This could mean explicitly acknowledging past challenges, be honest about what you can and can't do, about how the work is progressing, timelines and who the final decision makers are (Managers? Ministers? Cabinet?).
- 🌀 **Always provide a feedback loop**, and be willing to do this in person if this was how you received input initially (e.g. in a focus group or hui) – but also be guided by what people tell you works best for them.

- 🌀 **The public release of your strategy** or plan is not sufficient to close the feedback loop. Let people know how their insights influenced your advice, strategy or plan. Provide information about trade-offs which were made, or other factors that may have influenced the final options or decisions. This is respectful, and also helps to grow mutual understanding.
- 🌀 **Ask for feedback** on your engagement and participation processes, understand what worked and how you can improve. Adapt your processes for next time – and find opportunities to share your learnings with your team, your agency and more widely.

Relationships are essential



# 3.

## RECOGNISE AND RESPECT DIFFERENCE

**Approach engagement with curiosity and humility. There can be a wide gap between your day-to-day experience of life, and the diverse lived realities of the people and communities who'll be impacted by your agency's work.**

**O**ften these differences are so fundamental that they create blind spots, framing both the questions asked and how the answers are interpreted. Deeper community engagement can help reveal and remedy both our personal blind spots and the institutional and structural biases in play (e.g. institutional racism, ableism etc).

- 🌀 Do you understand the diversity within the communities you wish to engage with, the barriers to engagement that may exist, and what you may need to do to mitigate them?
- 🌀 Are there people within your agency (e.g. regional or operational staff) who are closer to the community, and can help provide insight, connection or support?
- 🌀 Are there organisations or people in your networks who 'walk in two worlds' i.e. come from/live in/work with the communities you need to engage with, but also understand the language, processes and machinery of government?
- 🌀 Could you support these people or organisations to design, lead and facilitate engagement conversations and processes on your behalf? For example, training community facilitators to ask questions within their own communities.

Support community facilitation



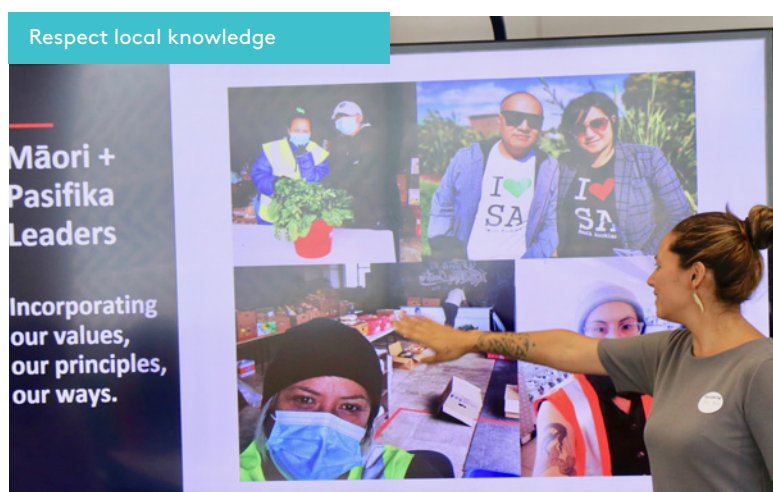
# 4.

## TRUST COMMUNITIES TO DELIVER

**Policies, services and strategies may be designed centrally – but they are always implemented locally. Respecting the knowledge of local communities and recognising their initiative and strengths will often result in better outcomes than imposing top-down or ‘off the shelf’ solutions or programmes.**

**A**im to get better at building local networks and going there for ideas first, rather than initiating ‘co-design’ processes after the decision or direction has been made centrally. Consider how you can decentralise implementation of new initiatives as much as possible.

- 🌀 Devolve power (funding and decision making) to local communities and hapū or iwi as much as possible.
- 🌀 Where effective local solutions or services have already been developed, look for ways to work alongside, support and strengthen them. Creating something new is often unnecessary and can undermine what the community has already built.
- 🌀 Look for ways to embed ongoing community participation into implementation (e.g. co- design of services, iterative improvement processes for services and programmes at the local level).
- 🌀 Value and provide support for the community organisations, networks and local leadership required to support effective local implementation.
- 🌀 Mandate innovation and learning at the local level. Provide flexible funding and parameters that allow for change, adaptation and learning as you go. Use evaluation methods that embrace local variability, rather than ones which require strict programme fidelity.



**Here are a few further references and resources to support you in your work.**

- 🌀 Shaping the Future - [interconnected approaches that will drive transformative change](#)
- 🌀 The legislation enabling [a more adaptive, agile and collaborative public sector](#)
- 🌀 The Policy Project's [Good Practice Guide for Community Engagement](#)
- 🌀 IAP2 Spectrum of Public Participation [increasing the impact on the decision](#)

# POWERDIGM



**If these ideas have been helpful and you'd like to dig deeper into how you could implement them in your work, contact Powerdigm to continue the conversation.**

**Powerdigm is a collective of associates experienced in community innovation and change. We specialise in effective, authentic collaboration, policy development, co-design, developmental evaluation, and sustainable transformation. [www.powerdigm.org.nz](http://www.powerdigm.org.nz)**