

Summary of our report

Consulting the community about local authorities' 10-year plans



This report sets out our observations of the first generation of consultation documents, including our impressions of their overall effectiveness, examples of weaknesses and strengths, and opportunities for improvement.

Consultation with the community is a fundamental part of the local government long-term planning process. It is very important that local authorities provide quality information to their communities so that “the right debate” can be held as they plan for the future.

The new requirements

Consultation documents were introduced as a result of amendments to the Local Government Act 2002. Consultation documents were intended to concisely and clearly present to communities the significant issues, plans, and projects to be included in local authorities' 2015-25 long-term plans (LTPs).

Previously, local authorities published draft LTPs for public consultation. These were long and complex documents that were difficult for most of the community to respond to. Feedback received by some local authorities suggests that some submitters found it easier to engage with the consultation document than the previous draft LTPs.

Our review of consultation documents

Overall, local authorities have responded well to the new requirements for consultation documents. However, the consultation documents we audited varied in quality. Consultation documents were a chance for local authorities to improve their engagement with their communities. We consider that some local authorities missed that opportunity. The better consultation documents presented good information on the significant issues and the options and implications for the community, described financial and infrastructure strategies well, and provided specific consultation questions about the options.

Infrastructure strategies

Local authorities are now required to include a 30-year infrastructure strategy in their LTPs. Infrastructure strategies fill a gap in long-term planning. The value of a 30-year view comes with the challenge of balancing a snapshot at a point in time with the dynamic local government environment. Infrastructure strategies are also expected to underpin consultation documents and LTPs, and link to asset management plans.

Vital statistics:

- 54 pages
- Presented to Parliament on Tuesday 11 August 2015
- Contact: reports@oag.govt.nz

The quality of the infrastructure strategies was variable. Overall, however, they have provided a good base for local authorities to build on. Although we issued no qualified audit opinions, some local authorities missed the opportunity that came with the new consultation document requirements, as they often presented consultation documents that:

- included too much background or other unnecessary information, leading to a loss of focus;
- contained poor discussion of the infrastructure and financial strategies, so it was difficult to understand what the strategies were and how they related to the significant issues;
- were unclear about which issues the local authority had already consulted on and which were new issues for consultation; and
- had poorly written consultation questions.

In our view, the presence of these characteristics (often in combination) lessened the effectiveness of the documents' consultation value.

Engagement and consultation with communities

Consultation documents offered elected members and local authorities a very effective means to engage with their communities, and an opportunity to tell the story about their vision for the future of their city, district, or region.

We have not had the opportunity to analyse the effectiveness of actual consultation. However, we asked a small number of local authorities about their different approaches and their views on the effectiveness of their approach.

Our report includes case studies about these local authorities' differing approaches. These case studies give some valuable insights. Increased use of social media and other less formal approaches to interacting with the community during the consultation period appear to have increased the reach of some local authorities. Such approaches, along with the use of tools such as web-based rates calculators, were also well received. These and other innovative approaches will assist future consultation processes.

Although the consultation documents provided a smaller and more focused format as the primary document for the consultation process, the Act required local authorities to also make the supporting information available to the community. The availability of this information was not well understood by some in the community. Some submitters were frustrated by the flexibility the Act allows in the presentation of the underlying information.

The local government sector has shown considerable interest in the effectiveness of the new requirements for consulting on LTPs. We intend to publish a further report on observations about the adopted 2015-25 LTPs before the end of this year.