

GOOD PRACTICE PARTICIPATE

MANAGING RISKS

Adequate resources and awareness of risk are needed when government agencies involve community, voluntary, iwi and Maori organisations in decision-making.

“Every activity carries risk and working with the public by its very nature is unpredictable. This is partially why participation is being done - to reach something new, something not already known.

Establishing a clear purpose and getting agreement on it within the commissioning body is the single most important stage of an engagement process. Indeed, no participatory process should proceed without it.”

People & Participation - Involve, United Kingdom.

Costs of participatory processes

Participation costs for community groups

When a community group participates in government decision-making, the group can pay a very high cost in donated time. Also, there are direct costs associated with transport, photocopying, venues, equipment etc.

It may be necessary to refund direct costs arising from the process, or to provide support services to reduce costs. For example, childcare might be needed during meeting times.

Participation costs for government agencies

Community participation processes require agency time and funding. There are ways, however, to manage these costs.

- Be clear about the outcomes sought and investing time in planning.
- Maintain active relationships and networks so that you can get advice from key groups relatively easily.
- Routinely check details of consultation processes and key results on newzealand.govt.nz to prevent agencies duplicating consultation exercises. Log details of your consultation by emailing the e-govt unit.
- Choose techniques that are appropriate, cost-effective, and reliable.
- the need, in some instances, to weigh the views of one community group against those of other groups, and the implications this may have for decision-making.

Community groups may also feel that government agencies have expectations of them that are unclear or unrealistic.

There is always a risk that you will fail to deliver on promised outcomes. Even where the desired outcomes seem clearly defined from the start, decision-makers may refuse to accept the recommendations or outcomes.

Managing the risks of participatory processes

Other risks when engaging with communities include:

- raising expectations that cannot be met
- creating conflict or damaging relationships
- safeguarding your reputation and avoiding perceptions of ‘capture’ by certain groups or individuals.

Managing expectations

Active relationships must be based on a clear understanding of the advantages and limitations of the relationship. Clear, regular communication is required.

When inviting input into government decision-making, you need to make clear:

- any constraints in terms of confidentiality, financial resources and government policy

Dealing with conflict in relationships

Participation exercises may highlight unresolved issues between community groups and government. Even if the issues are not directly relevant, they may need to be discussed before a participation exercise can progress.

The ‘community’ does not speak with one voice. You may need to find ways of helping people hear the viewpoints of others.

It takes time to build trust, and even in good relationships conflict may occur. If there are serious conflicts, consider using an independent facilitator skilled in conflict resolution.

A poorly run process can undermine confidence and damage relationships between all those involved. Use active listening to ensure people feel heard.

The International Association for Public Participation offers courses on working with ‘Emotional Outrage’ that can give confidence in tricky situations.

Safeguarding reputation and avoiding 'capture'

Everyone involved in the participation is risking their reputation - from those involved in the planning, to those who participate, through to those willing to abide by the results.

Establishing active relationships with certain groups sometimes leads to accusations of 'capture' by others. It is important that you maintain a balanced perspective and have a good understanding of all the groups involved and their points of view.

One of the challenges of active relationships is to ensure your agency's networks are broad and open to newcomers. Networks must reflect the principles of the Treaty of Waitangi and the ethnic diversity of New Zealand society.

Maintaining active relationships with diverse groups is the best way to reach the larger community, not just those who regularly submit their views to government. If you are in touch with a wide range of community, voluntary, iwi and Māori representatives, this helps to keep the 'squeaky wheels' in perspective.

Related resources for managing risk

[Business Cost Calculator](#)

This IT-based tool on the Public Sector Intranet provides a framework to calculate the compliance costs of regulatory proposals. It is designed to assist policy makers in the preparation of robust regulatory impact statement (RIS) in order to improve the overall quality of the regulatory environment for business. The New Zealand version is an adaptation of one developed by the Australian Office of Best Practice Regulation (OBPU) for use in Australian government agencies. 2010.

[Government Community Engagement: Key learning and emerging principles](#)

This paper from the Community Economic Development Action Research Project covers processes for engaging with communities, key

challenges in building a meaningful relationship with communities/ community groups and emergent principles of engagement that can be considered in future work. Department of Labour (2003).