

Meaningful and Fulfilling Contributions to Public Decisions

Community Panel Report

Remit:

How can citizens make a meaningful and fulfilling contribution to public decisions?

Introduction

26 self-selected participants from across the public and private sector participated in a two day panel deliberation. The deliberation was held from the 6th to the 7th of February, 2023 at the Kensington Town Hall in Naarm (Melbourne).

The participants addressed the question:

How can citizens make a meaningful and fulfilling contribution to public decisions?

At the outset, when defining their terms the group chose to change the word 'citizens' to people in order to be inclusive of all people in our communities.

How do we define 'meaningful' and 'fulfilling'?

There are three components to a meaningful and fulfilling public decision-making process. These are:

1. The design of the process itself:

The process needs to :

- a. Be Resourced and informed
- b. Set clear expectations for all involved
- c. Allow for depth and breadth of discussion, and
- d. Be respectful and based on common purpose.

2. Participant experience:

Participants should feel:

- a. that the decision or process is about something that matters to them
- b. empowered and heard in the process and that their feedback is considered
- c. Included and respected
- d. Like they have made a contribution
- e. Inspired & hopeful as a result of the process
- f. That their contribution and involvement is valued, and
- g. That the process is satisfying, worthwhile, and uniquely rewarding.

3. Outcomes of the process: the process should result in:

- a. Outcomes that are genuine, tangible and which will be considered/taken on board by the sponsor- not just a tick box exercise
- b. Outcomes that have impact on the remit
- c. Outcomes that will be followed through & have an ongoing results

Recommendations

Recommendation 1

Fostering public participation that is more representative and accessible

Public participation should genuinely represent the demographics in a relevant community, where possible. For example, by using a representative sample of that community by reference to factors including income, home ownership status, education, and professional, religious or cultural background.

It should strive to include historically underrepresented groups. Engagement processes should be made more accessible by removing barriers to participation. For example, engagement activities should be designed with a diverse audience in mind, with careful consideration given to the time, date, mode and location of activities, and possible remuneration of participants.

Making public participation more representative, accessible and diverse will enhance the quality of public decisions by ensuring that all relevant voices can be heard and have an equal say.

Recommendation 2

Include public into decision-making processes early

Make the most of the rich base of community knowledge and information, by accessing it early enough in the decision-making process for it to make a difference to the outcome.

Take into account the wishes of the community by engaging early (pre-project design) and throughout the project's lifecycle.

Help everyone to understand the full picture from the start.

Early engagement:

- Unlocks wider and valuable community data and knowledge
- Allows us to fully understand the context so decisions are made with 'eyes wide open'.
- Mitigates the risk of missing opportunities, new ideas, approaches and solutions.
- Helps avoid project delays, money wasted on unwanted or unpopular decisions or projects.
- Supports more robust, defensible decisions

Recommendation 3

Create a fair, consistent and transparent mechanism to assess ideal levels of and opportunities for public consultation

An assessment tool should be developed for use by implementers and authorisers, and should be independently reviewed and overseen.

The assessment tool should include factors such as financial, social and physical impact, size, community interests and needs, length of project, possible negative impacts and trade-offs, time and resources required, as well as being scalable to a range of issues and contexts.

It should address risks of over-consultation and excessive bureaucratisation.

People want to be involved in things that matter to them.

Authorisers and implementers need clear guidance to operationalise public inclusion

Recommendation 4

Governments commit to greater, ongoing investment in community participation

We need commitment from all levels of government to enhance community participation in public decisions. This commitment must:

- Be embedded as an ongoing practice
- Include sufficient financial investment
- Be monitored and evaluated for impact on an ongoing basis to ensure the commitment remains fit-for-purpose

1. Victoria has implemented this at the local level via legislation. It is leading to wide-spread change in the way that local governments work with their communities and make decisions.
2. This could be extrapolated across all other levels of government to increase community participation across key public decisions. This does not always have to be via a deliberative panel or process, but should be transparent, inclusive and enable people to make informed decisions and provide informed recommendations.
3. To be successful, this requires active support and financial commitment across all levels of government. This could require legislative change to give governments a clear mandate.
4. There should be a mechanism for monitoring, evaluating and reporting back on the impact of these measures.

Recommendation 5

Design public participation processes for measurable success.

Build on a review of what exists to develop practice guidance and evaluation parameters for designing public participation processes which could include the below.

People affected by the decision are engaged and included when designing public participation processes.

The scope is clearly defined and articulates everyone's level of influence (participant and decision-makers).

Participants are at the centre of a participation design that is transparent and aligns with the proposed scope.

Evaluation is incorporated in the design from both participant and decision-maker perspectives.

Participants need to understand why they are there and what decision they are making. Everyone involved needs to understand what level of change is possible.

Strong public participation design will result in meaningful and fulfilling experiences - participants will be there and achieve what they are there to do.

Great design will result in better public decisions. Intentional design will improve trust in the process and confidence in the outcomes.

Recommendation 6

Increase people's understanding of how to effectively contribute to public decisions (i.e where and how)

Educate and train people on how to effectively contribute to public decisions by providing access to clear, relevant and sufficient information and resources which increases people's understanding of how they can contribute.

People require the skills, knowledge and resources to be empowered to participate.

Increased participation in public decision making results in greater public satisfaction and better reflects the communities served by those decisions.

Increase the diversity of people who understand and can access engagement opportunities

Recommendation 7

Supporting people-led decision making

In order for communities to be empowered to initiate, influence and lead decision making that affects them, they need to be supported. This could look like;

- Training and capacity building (in community decision making, facilitation)
- Mentoring (in community building, in advocacy, in conflict management)
- Funding (funding opportunities, government partnerships, grant application writing)
- Education (critical thinking, data gathering, understanding bias)
- Practical tools (technology and ways to capture and validate insights, data used for evidence)
- Adequate communications for awareness raising and planning)
- Network (access to other community organisers/leaders doing this work to learn/share, members of community with experience)

More and more people feel like they aren't being heard and decisions are being made about them, without them. Because of this, trust has been steadily eroding and people are feeling disillusioned in their governments.

There has been a greater increase in polarisation within communities; as seen around proposed developments and/or policy changes.

Communities will feel more confident and empowered if they have been given tangible support to initiate and lead decision making. Because of this, they are more likely to want be involved in the future.

Recommendation 8

Enable independent bodies to drive continuous improvement.

To continuously evaluate and refine the effectiveness of structural enablers, tools and processes that encourage peoples contributions to public decisions.

Functions of these bodies may also include complaints, keeping practitioners accountable, defining what successful engagement looks like, celebration & recognition of well run engagement, education of the public, professional development for practitioners, encouraging community-led decision making.

To build credibility and trust, the body will commission public deliberative processes to inform the work.

Develop and release an annual 'State of meaningful contribution to public decisions report' (like State of Environment Report). This report scope includes the current state of public contribution to decision making at the community, local and government levels across Australia.

- Drive strong government commitment to citizen participation in decision making
- To hold stakeholders to account
- To ensure a continuing focus on improving citizen participation in public decision making

Opportunity to strengthen existing bodies that support continuous improvement (such as IAP2) to avoid duplication.

Recommendation 9

Collate evidence to determine the value of public involvement in decision making.

An evidence-informed case is required to determine how public involvement is improving decision making outcomes for the participant, community and decision makers.

Strong evidence (short, medium and longer term) is necessary to advocate for change. Evidence is needed both at an overarching systems level, as well as at the level of each specific participation activity.

Communicating and sharing the findings of evidence synthesis provides a platform for further discussion on the value of these decision making approaches.

Evidence is needed to:

- inform and influence policy change
- increase awareness of the benefits and limitations of the process
- improve practice
- increase public trust in the decision making process and outcome/s
- Improve funding models for engagement practices

Recommendation 10

Closing the loop

Establish what feedback from the sponsor looks like when feedback is done well . This may include:

- who needs to receive it (may include both those involved directly and those not involved directly)
- how it is delivered
- whom it is delivered by
- a summary of outputs from engagement
- changes made as a result of the engagement etc.

Opportunities for feedback will form one part of the design of the decision process as will establishing who is responsible.

Updates may be provided at multiple points in a decision / project lifecycle. This may be informational or prompt new engagement opportunities, and that's ok.

This will enable participants and the wider community to;

- feel valued and that their contribution mattered,
- see how their contribution shaped an outcome to make a difference
- encourage future participation
- Increases trust in decision making

Minority Reports

A minority report is a view from a small group (of at least 3 people) about a recommendation previously outlined in the report, or another important piece of content that these people felt was not adequately covered by the majority views. These minority views provide diverse views and are not held by the majority of the participants in the panel.

Minority Report 1

A minority of participants supported the following recommendation and wanted to include it in the report.

Change decision-making culture and systems

Trial new approaches for placing community members in decision-making and/or significant advisory roles

For example:

Engage with a local council to trial a entirely randomly selected (but demographically representative) committee within a local government to review [a defined, selected number of] Council decisions, advise on Council vision and engagement approaches for the full term of a Council (if Victoria: starting in 2024).

Regardless of which approach is chosen, the initiative should have a focus on identifying barriers and opportunities to involve community members more directly in decision-making roles.

Practical wisdom and community needs are reflected in agenda-setting, resource allocation and decisions.

Reduce the current power imbalance between citizens and government decision makers to so that community needs are better understood and drive change.