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RESEARCH AND CONSULTATION

A review of the consultation on cycling projects in the Auckland region

Auckland Regional
Transport Authority

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Abstract

The Auckland Regional Transport Authority recognised in 2006 that some of the consultation on cycling projects in the region may not be following best practice. It was identified that this might result in projects not going ahead, or having the proposed solution significantly reduced (in terms of what it delivers for cyclists.)

Tasman was commissioned to review eight projects across the region. The projects varied in form and were from five different local authorities. This review consisted of interviews with staff, elected representatives and affected residents and business owners.

We found large variations amongst both the form of the consultation and the level at which stakeholders were engaged.

This paper has five key recommendations for consulting on cycling projects:

1. Start the consultation earlier in the process so local residents do not see the project as a fait accompli
2. Be more consistent in the approach and techniques used
3. Provide additional consultation resource and expertise to projects
4. Involve decision-makers (particularly local politicians) earlier and seek their guidance and support in principle before continuing
5. Work harder at the post-consultation communication

A best practice process is also included in the paper.

The process has been tested in Rodney District on a single project and has enabled it to go ahead with reasonable public support (this was through a wealthy neighbourhood and involved the permanent removal of on-street parking).

Background

Over the last few years a number of cycling projects have received substantial media coverage. Some of this has been positive, some negative.

Public consultation has been identified as one of the main reasons for projects not going ahead, or having the proposed solution significantly reduced (in terms of what it delivers for cyclists.)

Tasman Research and Consultation was commissioned in May 2007 to review eight cycling projects across the region in terms of the public consultation.

Approach

I talked to over 27 people across the Auckland region. These included five local politicians, nine staff (or ex-staff) and five local residents. I also attended a monthly meeting of Cycle Action Auckland and got their views on these projects and cycling consultation in general.

I attempted to interview two journalists but was unable to secure their involvement in the project.

The interviews were conducted in May and June 2007. Each was focused on a specific project, but general comments about consultation were also solicited.

The eight projects were:

1. Lake Road, North Shore
2. Hurstmere Road, North Shore
3. Mt Albert Road, Auckland
4. Onehunga cycleway, Auckland
5. Twin Streams, Waitakere
6. Great South Road, Manukau
7. Buckland Road, Manukau
8. Broadlands Bridge, Rodney

Scope

The scope of this project encompasses the consultation activity and processes for cycling projects carried out by five councils across the Auckland region.

Specifically, the scope of this project includes the following:

- Evaluation of eight projects
- Feedback from project engineers and planners, elected representatives (both councillors and community board members), affected residents and business owners, and a cycling group
- An analysis of public response to the consultation projects identified, not in terms of the decision but the response and quality of information
- Review of project information distribution in terms of area and channels
- The usefulness of information gathered for the decision-makers
- Comparison between the consultation approach of various councils

Excluded from this project are:

- projects and councils not specified in the project brief
- consultation with Iwi

Key outcomes

Key outcomes and deliverables from this project include:

- A set of guidelines for the transport team in each council (regarding consultation)
- A formal “best practice” process for consultation on cycling within the transport team
- Some frequently asked questions and their responses

Summary and recommendations

There is room for improvement in the way the public and stakeholders are engaged in cycling projects in the Auckland region.

There are examples of poor consultation practices across the region, as well as inconsistencies between the different councils. There are some differences within each council, but these are harder to evaluate as each council had only one or two projects evaluated.

I recommend five key improvements to the way that the councils within the Auckland region consults on cycling projects:

1. Start the consultation earlier in the process so local residents do not see the project as a *fait accompli*
2. Be more consistent in the approach and techniques used
3. Provide additional consultation resource and expertise to projects
4. Involve decision-makers (particularly local politicians) earlier and seek their guidance and support in principle before continuing
5. Work harder at the post-consultation communication

All projects should have a consultation plan (and a clearly identified decision-statement). This consultation plan should conform to an organisation-wide template if one exists.

A lot of consultation is solution-based – “what do you think of our solution to the problem?” Where appropriate, councils should consult on a problem, not a solution. This means consultation should usually start with a general question for the public, not a specific one. For example, “how can we encourage people to cycle safely from A to B” rather than “what do you think about this cycle lane?”

More time needs to be set aside in a project timeline to plan and conduct consultation properly. With projects lasting several years from idea to implementation, and designed to have an asset life often measured in decades, it makes sense to spend time getting the consultation right, first time.

I believe that if additional consultation resource is provided to the transport planners and engineers in each council, the benefits will be immediately apparent. In many cases projects were undertaken by staff with no training in consultation and only a little experience.

Extra resource could be in the form of training for existing staff (possibly a mentor

arrangement to complement formal training), the appointment of someone with consultation training and experience to the team or developing a preferred supplier relationship with an external supplier.

Guidelines should be developed to help project teams decide at what level and with whom consultation should be carried out, what should form part of a consultation plan, what techniques to use during the consultation, how and when elected representatives should be involved in the project and how to assess the results of consultation.

Decision-makers should be involved as early as possible in a project (as per the project and consultation guidelines) and their approval sought of the consultation plan (this is especially important in large or controversial projects). Their attendance should be encouraged at consultation events.

Electronic consultation is very cost-effective and convenient for a certain strata of the public. It should be used more frequently (or at least promoted more often).

Stakeholders' details gathered during consultation should be standardised. In particular all feedback from stakeholders should include the option to provide their email address.

While locals living in the area receive brochures for most projects, this is often seen as "junk mail" and discarded. Addressed mail is much more effective and should be used wherever possible. Both owners and occupiers should be contacted.

To inform and seek feedback from passers-by signs should be installed on location informing people of the project and how they can have their say. Currently a cyclist, pedestrian or motorist who does not live in the target area has little chance of being informed or consulted.

Letters of acknowledgement should be sent to all people who made submissions thanking them for their contribution and informing them of the likely timing of a decision.

Once made, the decision should be communicated to all stakeholders, not just those people who made a submission. For a lot of projects, this doesn't happen until implementation is about to begin.

Once a decision is made, it should be placed on LIMs of affected properties so that future purchasers of that property can see what is intended. Once the project has been implemented, this notification can be removed

While I acknowledge that cycle lanes on a roadway are not technically part of the property, the expectation from residents is that it should be shown on a LIM as it *affects* their property. Some residents wanted *potential* cycle lanes shown on the

LIMs, but this is probably more difficult to achieve.

There are instances of engineering and design firms conducting the public consultation on projects. Aside from the risk of possible conflict-of-interest accusations, this further increases the variation of techniques and processes.

If external agencies are used for consultation, they should conform to the internal process developed by that local council.

It is not good practice to have possible designers or implementers conducting the consultation themselves. If an external agency is used, it is better to have them completely independent and removed from the project.

Best-practice process

This flowchart shows the stages of consultation in any project.

Inform the consultation co-ordinator or manager of the project and seek their advice and input throughout the project's lifespan ¹



Identify the decision to be made and how the public could contribute to it ². Be clear on whether you are consulting on a solution or a problem, and the reasons why.



Start identifying stakeholders, both external and internal ³



Assess budgets and the timeline as they will have an impact on the next stage ⁴



Draft a communication and consultation plan in conjunction with the communications team ⁵

¹ However each council decides to do it, there should be a central point where all consultation is recorded or filed.

² A decision – or issue – statement might take the form of “how to encourage people to cycle safely from A to B”, or “whether (and in what form) to install a cycle lane on road X”.

³ This is an ongoing process, but it is crucial to identify as many as early as possible

⁴ Time spent consulting is not often wasted. If there are deadlines, work back from them, otherwise build an ideal timeline and try to get this approved

⁵ Use the template that was revised as a result of the consultation review. Use techniques appropriate to the decision statement and level of public participation

Identify and assemble an internal team to work on the project. Include communications and administration staff, planners, implementers and managers. Get their input into the draft plan



Identify who is the decision-maker ⁶ and ensure they are comfortable with:

1. the decision statement
2. the level of public participation (IAP2 Spectrum) and
3. the techniques being considered (though you don't have to go into the detail)



Finalise identifying the stakeholders ⁷



Finalise the communications and consultation plan following internal and decision-maker feedback



Implement the plan



⁶ As the decision-maker will often be a committee of elected representatives, this is their opportunity to have involvement in the project early on. Get them to sign-off all three points listed.

⁷ The decision-maker will often be able to give advice here. There is nothing worse than presenting a consultation report and being asked "did you consult with X?" and having to reply "no".

Once the consultation period is concluded, acknowledge all who participated in the process with a thank you letter



Once a decision has been made, communicate to all affected parties (not just people who made submissions) what the decision was and how public participation affected it ⁸



Identify the properties affected by the decision and place a statement on the LIM to this effect, with a likely implementation date ⁹



Implement the project ¹⁰



Remove the statement from the LIM

⁸ If there is a gap of more than three months between the end of consultation and the (likely) decision, I recommend you send an interim letter explaining the delay

⁹ The exact process around this would need to be determined by each council

¹⁰ During implementation, further communication and consultation will be necessary. Remember not to re-litigate the decision – this round of consultation is specifically focused on implementation and the works required to do that (for example, what times of the day or week to dig up a footpath outside a resthome)