

# Getting consensus right

## Infrastructure for a better future

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Please note: the transcript has been edited to make reading as easy as possible.

**Introduction:** Welcome to 'Infrastructure for a better future', a series where we have honest conversations about the infrastructure challenges we are facing and how we can build a better Aotearoa New Zealand. In each episode we talk to experts from here and overseas about what works when it comes to addressing these issues.

**Bas van Laanen:** Tēnā koutou, welcome everybody. It seems obvious when you think about it, but somehow, it's easy to forget – infrastructure is all about people. It's not about concrete and construction. These are just means to an end. When the people and communities who collectively use and pay for infrastructure are missing from being a meaningful part of the conversation, it can be hard to tell if infrastructure investment and services are meeting the mark. When shovels do hit the ground, sometimes this can feel like the disruption is to greater effect than the benefits. Most neighbours of early morning construction can probably attest to a lack of interest in finding some silver lining.

Here at the Commission, we recently published a draft National Infrastructure Plan. It set out a 30-

year path to make sure we have the water pipes, transport networks, hospitals – you name it – that we need.

We asked New Zealanders for their input on the draft Plan, and the volume and sophistication of the feedback we received really highlighted the value of understanding the needs of people today. Are New Zealanders happy with the services they get? Do they feel like they're getting value for money? Are they included in the big decisions that affect them? Do they feel like the benefits of disruptions on projects are worth it, and are the reasons for these disruptions communicated well?

I'm Bas van Laanen. I'm Senior Advisor, Digital and Content at the Commission. I'm joined by Jean Beetham, Senior Advisor, Economics and Research.

**Jean Beetham:** Thanks, Bas. Today we're joined by Moana Williams, Jenny Wigley and Chris Allen from Watercare. Watercare provides water and wastewater services to 1.7 million people in the Auckland region. They ensure that there is a reliable water supply through an extensive

network of treatment plants, reservoirs, pumps and pipes. Their goal is simple, deliver clean and healthy water to Aucklanders and collect and treat wastewater to prevent environmental pollution and protect public health. But for Watercare, looking after its assets and investing in new infrastructure to meet these goals are only part of the puzzle.

The other, as you may have guessed, is people. Understanding what the people who actually drink the water that is delivered through the water network think is the job of Moana, Jenny and Chris. When I say everyone, I mean everyone, they take getting the views of the public seriously. Thank you all so much for joining us. We'd like to start with talking about your recent engagement on your Metropolitan Servicing Strategy. Could you start with giving us some background about what the Servicing Strategy is?

**Chris Allen:** The Metropolitan Servicing Strategy is a long-term plan to guide how we deliver water and wastewater services into the future. It takes a 70-year view. Seventy years has been chosen because it is broadly two consenting periods. The maximum amount of time that we can get a consent to take water or discharge wastewater to the environment is 35 years. So we're looking ahead two consenting periods to give us an idea of what the world might look like, and then we can work backwards to today to set ourselves up to achieve the needs of the future. It looks ahead, and we try to anticipate population growth, urban development, changes to the climate and environmental expectations over that period of time.

It's not just about pipes, it's about how we build resilient, adaptable and sustainable systems that reflect the values and aspirations of our community. It's embedded within our wider planning framework and will guide investment decisions into the future for our downstream planning teams.

**Jean Beetham:** Could you tell us a little bit about why community engagement was important to Watercare for this metropolitan servicing strategy?

**Chris Allen:** Community engagement is important because we're talking about the social license to operate. We wanted to shift from traditional top-down decision making to a more connected and inclusive approach, because it's a shared responsibility that we have with our customers. Watercare can't do some of these things on our

own. We can influence, but we can't control.

As an example, we can't control how people will use the water that we provide to them at their properties, for whatever use they want to use it for. We can influence it, but we can't control it. There's a shared responsibility that we have with our customers, and engagement helps to build trust, and leads to better decisions, and ensures we're investing in solutions that are understood and supported by the people they affect.

**Jenny Wigley:** So I think the one of the awesome reasons that community engagement helps us make decisions is that it expands the possibilities of what we can operate in. Because if we understand, contrary to what we might have previously believed, that the community can live with a whole lot of options, rather than just the one that we thought they could tolerate, then it enables us to make more efficient and more effective decisions. Especially as we look out into the longer term.

**Jean Beetham:** I've seen that in some of my work as well. Like when you collect evidence about what people want, it can really contradict your perceptions of what you thought they want. So if you don't collect that, you might act on your perceptions that are wrong.

What were your intentions for the engagement process? What were you trying to find out or achieve?

**Moana Williams:** I think there's some broader objectives when we went into the engagement. When we were developing the Strategy, it's very hard to get into a conversation that's 70 years into the future and about complex challenges. We wanted to make sure that when we engage with communities, that we could truly reflect the needs of the community. As well as understanding the local perspectives, it is complex, so we wanted people to understand that there's no weighting. It's all equal feedback. How do we collate that feedback into something meaningful, and how do we identify the key challenges and opportunities that will be integrated into the strategy?

So with our tools and approaches, the key things that we wanted to achieve was, we wanted to engage with communities and involve them early. How much earlier can you get than 70 years? That's the start of the conversation, to be actively part of the solution to the problem to these challenges. We wanted to encourage shared responsibility. This is not a Watercare challenge – this is a Tamaki Makaurau challenge.

How do we bring communities into that conversation and make it meaningful? The other thing is, it's a 'why' to the 'what', and so the Metro (Metropolitan Servicing Strategy) is why we have to make these big decisions, what's coming, when we're down your street, it's not just fixing a pipe. It's actually the bigger challenge for the community. So we wanted to increase transparency and dialogue. Those were the key intentions of the engagement.

**Bas van Laanen:** So how did you practically go about that?

**Moana Williams:** Great question. There are disciplines that are available to us. International Association of Public Participation, also known as IAP2. What we wanted to do is we wanted to take a shape and share approach, shaping as in, let's not show them a draft document. Let's have conversations around aspirations and values first.

Once we've got those, then we can talk about the sharing of what we learned from those conversations, and that's building awareness with the community. An informed community allows for better conversations. Our consultation was around awareness as well as looking at diverse communities. 43% of our communities come from overseas, so how do we tap into those different and diverse audiences? Be it ethnicity, age, values, or how people engage. Experiential learning plus rational. Those are complex, complicated conversations. But how do we create a safe environment for them.

We then had to ask ourselves, before we started the engagement, around whose voices are we not tapping into? We have got a traditional group who like the traditional consultations. We've got a growing migrant population. How do we engage with Pacifica? Also, it's a 70-year conversation, how do we engage with the next generation? The next generation are going to inherit the decisions we make today, so let's start those conversations early. How do we make it accessible and less technical and make sure it's culturally appropriate? So those are a lot of the considerations that we made.

With those considerations, and knowing we have resources and funding, how far can we go? We developed drop-ins, youth summits, hackathons – things where people can actually get involved in the conversations. But we also balanced it with those who don't want to get into a conversation, but could give us quick insights. So we had little things like token drops. In these, there were six

decisions on the table and people only have three tokens. Which are your priorities?

Communities were actually making trade-offs right in front of you to see what their priorities are. They didn't have to know too much, but they know what their aspirations and values are and so we used engagement methods to get those quick interactions. We also shared a bit of knowledge around what we do, as well as the more in-depth conversations with communities. We have a team of five and seven people, so not many of us, we're trying to get a nice, range of different communities and different perspectives joining the engagement.

**Jenny Wigley:** The token drops led to decent conversations afterwards. So people would leave post it notes and then we could ask them – “why did you select that and not the other?” You then get this beautiful range of reasons why people make the same decision. All the different reasons behind the decision shows so much more about them than the initial decision itself. So yeah, we were finding out a lot more about Aucklanders than we thought we knew.

**Jean Beetham:** That's such an interesting finding. If you'd done that online and you hadn't had those conversations in person, you might not have understood the context behind why people were making those decisions. I could see that would generate a lot better data for you to use in your decision making and could even help you design the engagement that you do going forward, because you were out there meeting the people while they did it.

**Bas van Laanen:** We've released this draft National Infrastructure Plan, and we talk a lot about trade-offs. We've got a limited amount of money to spend on infrastructure. The very nature of the token drop is about asking people to do trade-offs – do you think that resonated with people and they understood that there is that limitation to infrastructure investment?

**Jenny Wigley:** Yes, they got that very quickly and the labels on the jars were pretty clear. If you were into reusing and recycling water versus saving money, it was pretty clear to you that it would be easy for you to vote. But for a lot of people, they sat there with the chips in their hand for some minutes, it was quite difficult, but they did understand what they were asked to do. Water is such invisible infrastructure, and they kind of go through this process of going, actually it is quite important. Then the next thing

they think about is that there is a limited pool of money, and then all of a sudden they have to compete between, you know, lowering carbon emissions or preparing Auckland for severe weather. It was quite difficult for a lot of people to make that call. But the understanding wasn't an issue.

And then we had the added bonus of being able to say, it's your money, it's your water bill. Where would you like it to go? People like having power over something these days, so it was quite awesome how easy it was to engage people after that.

**Moana Williams:** When we had the options part, that's part of the experience, right? Being able to do the token drop. What we wanted them to experience is the decisions that we (Watercare) have to make, as well. We put the Watercare hat on the community to show that it's actually not very easy to make those decisions. As well as keeping costs low, through the process, we identified we always have to make it affordable. That is, they would spend their token every time. That helped us understand that actually, that's non-negotiable. It has to be affordable. Our approach and our purpose is to make things affordable, and they validated that. So yeah, just giving the community the opportunity of making those decisions, and wearing the hat of the infrastructure organisation, they have that shared responsibility – the pressure was on to make a decision right in that moment.

**Jean Beetham:** Given the Strategy has such a long-term timeframe, how did you account for this, in terms of how you ran the engagement process? How did you weigh up, or get the community to weigh up those short-term options versus that those longer-term considerations?

**Jenny Wigley:** We put a lot of effort into getting the youth voice. We had three different engagements where we talked to youth, and we had a lot of time with them. So that wasn't just a token drop. It was a lot of them asking questions and us showing quite basic diagrams and giving them opportunities to learn while they considered the trade-offs. I guess the thing about youth is that they are very good at learning really quickly. They're hard wired, and they don't sort of stick on this political spectrum and go, I like this. If you affect their narrative, they just change it completely immediately. So that's quite refreshing.

**Bas van Laanen:** Was there anything that kind of

surprised you from doing this research?

**Moana Williams:** What surprised me, I think, is the want to be involved in the solution, so that shared responsibility.

Once you invite the conversation, they're not necessarily aware of how they can help, but they're asking us to provide more resources. We can't do it alone. What surprised me is that want, whether or not it's practical in its delivery, it raised the question of, how do we give more responsibility to the community, while our pipes are under the ground but the voices in the community are above ground? How do we start tapping into the community in different ways, and how do we be curators or resource hubs to allow the communities to own their challenges?

**Jenny Wigley:** I guess I was very pleasantly surprised to find – we did a couple of deliberative workshops – and in the room, we had lots of different people standing at different parts of a quadrant where their beliefs fell, and then within about 20 minutes, they'd come to a consensus that they could all quite happily get behind. I always find that really quite helpful, because that's exactly what we need. We're only making one decision on behalf of a community, we don't get to give different people different levels of service. When they can tell us what they can live with, we can go forward knowing that our decision is probably about right.

**Moana Williams:** We just sat back and allowed the conversation and dialog to naturally occur in the workshop, where they found a middle ground for an acceptable level of change. The result of that was, we don't want you to stick to the standards, but we want you to step off the standards and incrementally start leading that way in small spaces because the cost of living, and so we just, majority of the time, we're just listing and facilitating, and they were coming up with solutions which were realistic and practical. So that's another wonderful thing to see this dialogue, meaningful dialogue, play out in these sessions. Yeah.

**Jean Beetham:** It's such a great example of a deliberative, participatory approach, helping people to navigate through complex decision making and then to actually come to a consensus point. In my experience, for complex topics there's really no way around having to do some kind of process like that. If you're talking to people in isolation, you'll never get to that same result as if you put them in a room together. It's



really cool to hear that example.

**Bas van Laanen:** I mentioned at the start about the disruption around works. You know, we've all experienced it. I'm curious if you felt as your engagement progressed that the perception of you guys kind of getting in the way change? Was that something that came up?

**Moana Williams:** What we found through engagement is we were always taking two to three minutes to introduce what Watercare does, and why we exist. From a survey response perspective, those who are most affected are going to fill in the survey. For us, the top three areas, or local board areas, were heavily impacted communities who wanted their voices heard. When we were out in the community, 90% to 95% didn't know who we are or what we did, so we had to explain the tap and the toilet and what we did. That was a good position to be at. From an awareness and water literacy perspective, it only takes one to two minutes to start that conversation and an extra minute to start moving into the future state.

We had to give the conversation time to allow the community to move to a point in which we could start talking about why the Strategy is important, and why preparing for the future, and these decisions, will reduce or mitigate those challenges in the future by preparing for that potential future. Then there was a level of understanding once we got to that point in the conversation.

**Jenny Wigley:** It's like the community basically came to tell us that they want us to do what we need to do to prevent reactive fixes, to prevent ongoing maintenance of streets. They pay it forward in order to have a better long-term, less disruptive, less costly, long-term outcome.

**Moana Williams:** Engagement is a two-way street. We have to listen, and we have to show that the feedback has been used effectively. When the communities change, we have to adapt with them. We adapt our network, when we have to and we have to make it resilient, but we also have to be resilient when it comes to engagement. As we've said – the audience we had 20 years ago is very different from today.

We've got a lot of communities that are coming from overseas that believe that water is unsafe. Because they couldn't drink it overseas, they can't drink it here.

**Jenny Wigley:** I think there's a like as a very dry economist perspective, I think what you can say if you don't engage with people in a natural monopoly, you run the risk of very grossly inefficient outcomes. Because you're listening to one perspective – and then making decisions. You're not taking into account what people value over here and you're plowing money into what people don't value over there. So that's the risk you take if you don't listen to people in your community in a broad sense.

**Jean Beetham:** I think that was really captured in what Moana said, when you said that 95% of people didn't know who you were or what you did. It just shows that if you only talk to people who take an active interest in coming to talk to you, you might be missing the majority of your population and not hearing those views. It's really interesting to hear that you've experienced that from multiple angles during your process.

**Jenny Wigley:** It's like any teacher, when you're in a classroom, if you're flying with the fastest students then you make all the decisions about the curriculum based on that one student. It's not working.

**Jean Beetham:** You'll miss the point.

**Bas van Laanen:** All right, cool. Hey, I think that's a good way to end it. Thanks so much for taking the time to talk to us. It's been a really interesting conversation. I think you guys are doing brilliant stuff.

**Chris Allen:** Thanks.

**Moana Williams:** Thank you.

**Jenny Wigley:** Awesome.

**Narrator:** Thanks for listening. Find out more about the work Te Waihanga is doing to transform Aotearoa at [tewaihangagovt.nz](http://tewaihangagovt.nz).