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THE SUBMITTER EXPERIENCE - REPORT No. 1
Understanding Experiences of Interacting with Local Government:
A qualitative study



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Purpose

This document is to report the findings of qualitative research with people who have made a submission to local government. The research is part of a larger research investigation, and this report should be read in conjunction with these findings.

Methodology

This report is based on 24 qualitative individual in-depth interviews in Auckland, Northland, Canterbury, Nelson and Southland. Each interview took up to an hour. We spoke to a range of people who had made submissions to local council, either as individuals or as representatives of community groups.¹ The research took place in October and November 2007. The findings from this research are not intended to be statistically robust, but to provide depth, and to inform, the quantitative survey of submitters that followed.

Key findings

Consultation is seen as a means to an end

While submitters are able to comment on the consultation process itself, they see it as a means to an end to attempting to attain a positive outcome for themselves and their communities. If the outcomes they desire from the consultation process are not forthcoming, submitters can express frustration at the process itself, and the consequential lack of action.

Outcomes influence perceptions of the consultation process

Submitters perceptions of the strengths and weaknesses of the consultation process are intrinsically tied up with their perceptions of the outcomes. If their submission is not upheld, submitters question the validity of the consultation, whether the council was just “going through the motions” and if the council has listened to their views. If their submission is successful, submitters we spoke to are more likely to consider the consultation was a valid exercise, that their views were listened to, and that councils are listening to the views of the people they represent. For councils, there is potential for more effective communication (particularly to unsuccessful submitters), to mitigate some of the negative perceptions of council at this point.

¹ We also interviewed one business group representative in Nelson.

Community and individual submitters have differing perceptions

Whether submitters made their submission as an individual, or as a representative of an organised community group, has a bearing on some factors in the consultation process. Individuals we spoke to tended to feel less capable of having an influence, and potentially, more likely in the future to make a submission as part of a community group. While this does not mean the community submitters we spoke to felt universally positive about their capacity to have an influence, there was a stronger sense from these submitters that they considered council had listened to them.

The implications for local government are to develop and expand the processes for collective submissions. The community board processes were mentioned as a relatively effective means of engaging with council. However, some felt the role of these could be broadened and strengthened.

Triggers and expectations of the council consultation process

The triggers for engaging with council are issues-based, and are either proactive or reactive on submitters part. Some respond reactively to an invitation to submit via council postal mailout; others proactively make a submission themselves. Both types of engagement are driven by submitters desire for action: either improvements in their area, or as a response to a council proposal. While we interviewed submitters who applied to council for funding in this research, this type of engagement is not the focus of this report.²

Few individual submitters have any preconceptions of the consultation process. Community submitters however (particularly those who have made more than one submission), have more awareness of the process itself, as well as the timeframes required for both consultation and decision-making.

Overall, submitters have a range of views on how well local councils are conforming to the principles of the LGA. Their views are influenced not just by council's consultation process, but by their own views of how well their issue is being addressed, their reason for engaging with council, and the outcome of the process.

The quantitative report should be read in conjunction with this report and will provide a statistical understanding of the strengths of these findings. This qualitative report is intended to provide an understanding of the perceptions themselves, but not their pervasiveness among submitters.

Interim proposed actions are highlighted at the end of this report.

² We have included comment from submitters who applied to local government for funding, as they were able to provide a viewpoint on much of the consultation process.

BACKGROUND AND OBJECTIVES

Background to the research

The Local Government Commission (LGC) is carrying out an operational review of the Local Government Act 2002 and Local Electoral Act 2001. Accordingly, the Commission requires information concerning how the Acts are actually implemented on a practical level and whether or not they are operating as intended. As part of this review, the Local Government Commission requires information concerning residents' experiences and perceptions of opportunities to participate in local government decision making. 'Participation' in this context encompasses the following:

- voting in local elections
- directly inputting into local authority decision-making (through, for example, such mechanisms as making written submissions or attending council meetings).

To this end the Local Government Commission contracted Colmar Brunton to undertake three pieces of research aimed at obtaining residents' (the public's) views and experiences:

- *Post (local) elections survey 2007*: examines voting behaviour of electors (people who were eligible to vote) and the impact of various sources of advertising and other information on voter understanding and behaviour. The survey report is available at www.lgc.govt.nz on the legislative review page.
- *National survey: Knowledge of, and participation in, local government.*
- *Interviews and survey of residents (individuals and community groups) who have inputted to council decision.* 24 in-depth interviews supported by a telephone survey of a further 300.

Similarly, the Local Government Commission is interested in gaining an insight into council officers' views of, and experience with, public participation as one input to council decision making. Accordingly, in addition to the exploration of this issue the Commission has, or will make directly, the Commission contracted Colmar Brunton to undertake a fourth piece of research being an on-line survey of all New Zealand's local authorities (85 in number). At the time of compiling this report, that survey was yet to be conducted.

This current report covers the in-depths interviews of 24 people who had made submission to councils. It has been subtitled Report No.1 as a second report covering the telephone survey of 300 people who had likewise made submission(s) to council, when produced, will be subtitled Report No. 2.

Research objectives

The specific objectives of this qualitative phase of the overall study were to:

- Provide insight to why people choose to engage with the council (including exploration by the interviewers of both “negative” vs. “positive” reasons).
- Determine what expectations residents have when entering that engagement (including what they consider it should achieve).
- Provide insight to, from their perspective, what worked well, what did not work so well and what could be improved (this information needs to be cognizant of the discussion line for LGC discussions with 14 councils see below).
- Related to the above, how would the participants rate their experiences relative to requirements of councils under relevant sections of the LGA (for example section 14, principles related to local authorities, and Part 6, section 82 principles of consultation).
- Provide insight as to how cost effective the consultation and planning procedures are from the residents’ perspective.
- Provide insight to the impact of increasing (resident) participation in local government decision-making and planning.
- Provide information for the Commission to test whether council officers/elected members and ‘residents’ perceptions are matched or mismatched on the above points.
- For all of the above, test whether expectations, experiences and perceptions differ or are remarkably similar across type of resident (individual, business, community group), type, and size of council.
- Identify key questions/issues to be included in the subsequent quantitative research of 300 submitters.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Rationale for qualitative research

Qualitative research is a methodology used when it is important to develop an in-depth understanding of the perceptions and experiences of the target audience (particularly when these are unknown at the start of the process). Qualitative research consists of a range of techniques which allow for people to speak in their own words, and provide their own prioritisation and emphasis of their experiences. These techniques include using a semi-structured topic guide, non-direct questioning, and providing people with the time to consider their answers.

Sample and process

24 interviews across five regions

The final sample for the research was 24 interviews, conducted either by telephone or face-to-face. While face-to-face interviews are more suitable for qualitative research, as they allow more data to be collected, and for the researchers to show people stimulus materials, Colmar Brunton also employed telephone interviews for this project. These telephone interviews allowed a wider range of submitters to be canvassed, and for a broader geographical spread.

The final sample was agreed with the Commission prior to the fieldwork commencing, and was based on analysis of the spread of contacts details held for each council.

Table – Total number of interviews by council type and methodology

Area and Council	Interviews face-to-face	Interviews telephone	Total
Kaipara District	-	5	5
Manukau City	5	-	5
Nelson City	4	1	5
Environment Canterbury	4	1	5
Southland District	0	4	4
TOTAL	13	11	24

Table: Number of interviews by submitter type

Area and Council	Individual	Community	Total
Kaipara District	3	2	5
Manukau City	4	1	5
Nelson City	2	3	5
Environment Canterbury	4	1	5
Southland District	3	1	4
TOTAL	13	11	24

Please note: some submitters had made submissions both as an individual, and as a representative of a community group. In these cases, they are counted as being community submitters.

Please note: One of the Nelson submitters was on behalf of a business group, but has been counted as part of the community submitters quota.

Selection of council type and regions

The five councils were selected by the Commission to represent a range of city, regional, and district councils. Lists of people who had made a submission either to the Annual Plan, or the Long Term Council Community Plan, were provided to Colmar Brunton by each council. Our sample was selected and recruited from these lists.

Process

Submitters were recruited by telephone, and selected for interview after determining if they fitted the criteria, and considered their submission to have been important.

Each face-to-face interview was conducted at the submitters home in each region and took an hour. Each telephone interview took between 30 minutes and up to an hour.

A semi-structured topic guide was used for the interviews, allowing the submitters to discuss, in their own words, their experiences of engaging with local council. A copy of the guide is appended to this report.

Notes to this report

Analysis of regional, council type and submitter differentiation

Any regional differences, council type, or submitter differences will be highlighted in the reporting only if they are considered relevant. If there are no differences by these characteristics, this will be noted, and the text can be assumed to refer to the total sample of submitters (n=24).

The key difference for analysis and reporting is whether or not a submitter is an individual, or a community representative. This differentiation determined much of their perceptions of the consultation process. The tendency was also for first time submitters to be individuals, and for repeat submitters to be community representatives (although some community submitters had only made one submission). Submitters perceptions of the consultation process were influenced by how 'experienced' they were with making a submission.

Attribution of comments

Verbatim comments from submitters are used to illustrate key points in the text, and to add evidence to the findings. These are attributed by region and type of submitter, unless only one or two people fit this category and it would be easy for the reader to identify them from the report. In these cases, only the region is identified.

DETAILED FINDINGS

SUBMITTERS – WHO ARE THEY AND WHAT DO THEY WANT FROM ENGAGEMENT WITH LOCAL GOVERNMENT?

Introduction

This section provides context to the comments from submitters and details their reasons for submitting, their expectations of the engagement, and their desired outcomes from the engagement. It also provides an understanding of how submitters perceive local government prior to the submission process.

Submitters are looking for action

Submitters, whether they make a submission endorsing, or arguing against, a local government proposal, want something to happen as a result of their submission. Ideally, they want local government to take notice of their submission, and act on it. For example, when a submitter writes to the local council requesting road works are undertaken to repair pot holes in their street, they want this to occur. If councils are asking for submitters opinions, they consider that council is planning on taking some action. It is therefore an integral part of submitters expectations, and the main reason for making a submission, that they expect action as a result.

Therefore, much of the frustration for submitters, is that action is not taken, or that decisions about what might happen, take a long time. There is a sense, most strongly from those submitters on whose submissions a decision has not been reached, that the consultation process has been frustrating to them because of councils' perceived lack of action as a consequence.

While the engagement process itself is important to submitters, it is vital to remember that this is perceived by them to be a 'means to an end' and that ultimately, submitters are looking for an outcome. That is, either for local council to make positive changes in their region, or to make a decision *not* to do something (for example, those submitters who have campaigned against a rezoning proposal in their region).

"It's important that you tell them your opinion, otherwise how do they know what we want?"

Southland submitter

"You want them to do something."

Christchurch individual submitter

The reverse situation to that described here occurs when a submission is accepted, approved, and acted upon by council, but there is some degree of failure in the communication of this successful outcome to the person writing the submission. In a situation of this type uncovered during the research, and consistent with the tendency to attach over-riding significance to the outcome rather than the process, the submitter was happy with their submission on the basis that they got the outcome that they wanted, even though the process itself was less than ideal.

"An engineer turned up one day to measure up the area so they could build the carpark ... I asked what it was going to cost and he said the council was going to pay ... that was the first I heard that they'd actually approved it." Northland, community submitter

Awareness of local government decision-making

Submitters we spoke to hear about the possibility of making a submission one of two ways: either by correspondence (mass mailing) from their local council inviting feedback on the Annual Plan or the Long Term Community Council Plan (LTCCP) or, by hearing from others about a proposal by council.

Individual submitters tended to be less 'plugged in' to councils usual methods of communicating to community groups, and so, tended either to:

- React to an invitation to give feedback that came in their letter box, or
- Spontaneously submit a letter on an issue about which they felt strongly.

Submitters who made a submission without referring to the LTCCP or the Annual Plan may never have heard of the LTCCP or Annual Plan. Rather than being solicited for feedback, these submitters have provided unsolicited comment to their local council. The local council has then fed their submission into the LTCCP or Annual Plan consultation process.

Submitters who responded to an invitation from council, may never have done so, had they not received communication from the local council. Once they do receive an invitation however, they can easily recall an issue or concern that they would like to submit on. This issue may have never been aired, had they not been encouraged to respond. In these cases, submitters can be reacting to something in the Annual Plan or LTCCP that came to them in the post, or they may make a spontaneous submission on an unrelated issue.

Individual submitters tend to be made aware about the possibility of making a submission via the local council. Or, if they have not received an invitation, but have an issue, they can also spontaneously write a letter to council. Once they have proactively written to council, some submitters only then become aware there is a 'consultation process' and that they have become part of this process.

Community submitters tend to be more 'plugged in' to what local councils are doing, particularly if they are a community group formed around a specific issue (ie coastal erosion, urban development, climate change); or are involved with a business which is affected by council activities and regulations. They have networks, and in some cases, are on community boards or residents' associations, and hear from word of mouth. They also hear from other sources, such as relationships with local councillors, or from reading council websites. All these sources of information alert them to when council is proposing to make a decision that may affect them. Some of the community submitters we spoke to are highly organised: they have regular communication with council and each other, are able to access information relatively easily (in comparison with individual submitters), and are more savvy in terms of council timeframes and processes.

"At the time I made my submission, it was everywhere [information about the Annual Report or LTCCP], you couldn't miss it." Southland submitter

Perceptions of community versus individual submitters

As the above alludes to, not only do **community** submitters have higher awareness of 'what is going on' at local government level, they tend to have stronger links or ability to interact with council, or to perceive they do. This leads to their perception that local council is an entity to which they are entitled to challenge and engage with, and that they are capable of doing so in a democratic manner.

The key difference between these community submitters, and those who act as individuals, is that individuals can consider their submission to have been less effective, and less 'listened to'. This is because community submitters can be more proactive in calling the council, and discussing their submission, than individual submitters. Most individual submitters send in their written submission and wait to hear of the outcome.

Individual submitters also tend to be less aware of what happens when they make a submission. From their perspective, their letter is received, and should therefore be actioned. They are less aware of the consultation process and the timeframes for planning. This can lead to frustration about the long timeframes for action.

Individual submitters tend to have higher expectations of the councils' likelihood of actioning their submission, and perhaps naively, optimistic expectations of timeframes. They therefore tend to be surprised and somewhat disappointed in the length of time it takes for decision-making to take place, and the amount of time taken for action.

Community submitters we spoke to, particularly those that have taken part in more than one submission round, are more likely to consider the process as timely.

Triggers and reasons to engage with local government

Submitters care about their community and anything that impacts on it

Submitters, either individual or community, care about, and are highly engaged in their own communities. In many instances, they have lived in the region for quite some time, they have strong links to an area, and a sense of place and history. Whether they make a submission as an individual or a collective organisation, they have a genuine concern, not only for their own welfare, but that of the whole community. Some issues that submitters might see as benefiting them personally, are also considered to benefit others as well. For example, one submitter who wrote in support of councils' plans for improving air quality, was expressing his personal opinion, but considered air quality to be of concern to the whole community, not just to himself. On other occasions submitters may see themselves as addressing issues that affect everyone, but which most people (including themselves) have generally become apathetic about. This can be especially true with issues such as the council rates, and water charges, where there can be a tendency for submitters to feel that everyone sees the issue as they do (i.e. 'costs are too high'), but no one does anything because 'it never has any impact'.

The triggers to engagement with local government are issue-driven. So, while some submitters have made a submission only after being invited to by mass mail out, they are easily able to identify an issue they would like to raise with the council. People make submissions about issues in their community they feel strongly about. Some submitters have also applied for funding to the council. This is generally for something that will benefit the local community, and which they feel passionately about.

For example, one submitter who regularly walked his dog along a riverbed had been prompted to write to the council with suggestions about the way the river bank was managed for recreation purposes. He felt it was important for the council to understand how residents use the river bank, and to suggest changes to their plans for development.

"I walked along the river bank and took lots of photos to show them what could be done and I wrote them a letter. I wanted to show them what the river bank was like now, and what it could be like."

Christchurch, individual

Others also submit because they are "sick of complaining and not doing anything about it". They feel they should be alerting local government to an issue, and that, rather than passively complain about it, they can try to effect change.

Expectations of the consultation process

Individual/first time submitters have little or no expectations of the process

Before they make their submission, many (particularly **individual** and first time submitters³) have very few expectations or views of the process itself. These submitters may expect that the council will read and take notice of their submission, and that, as a result, council will take into account their views. In some cases though submitters may be cynical, and do not expect to hear back from council, or to have their opinions valued. This can apply especially to issues like residential rates, where submitters feel that councils have deliberately chosen to raise rates without consultation. But in terms of the process of engaging, individual submitters have very limited expectations of the process. They expect there to be some relationship between their submission, and action taken by the council, but very little in between.

Community submitters, especially those who have made more than one submission, on the other hand, have more detailed expectations of the consultation process, and are more likely to be able to describe what they expected to happen. They are more likely to understand that there is a process, and that their submission is a smaller part of a larger decision-making process. They have realistic expectations about the timeframes required. Moreover, in some cases, they may have friendly relations with council members, which allows them to informally discuss the progress of their submission.

“One of the issues is knowing who to go to. I knew the mayor so knew who to get in contact with. If I didn’t know the mayor it would’ve been hard to know who the decision maker or facilitator is. For a person who is not in a position of knowing those contacts, it could be a little daunting ... I guess that was an issue too, I wasn’t exactly sure what they wanted to see, so we supplied them with a lot of information... And, once again, I guess it’s because it’s what I do that I can put it together. Others may not have been able to. I would guess that if I was in a small minority community group and they didn’t know the rules or how to go about it, it would be quite daunting.”

Nelson, community submitter

Essentially, first time/individual submitters have higher expectations of a positive outcome, and little, or no expectations about the consultation process. Community/repeat submitters have “learned from past mistakes”, and have a more realistic expectation of the consultation process (particularly around the timeframes of decision-making).

³ Most of the individual submitters we spoke to have only ever made one submission. A couple had made previous submissions, often in another area to a different council when in a different area, and/or on a different issue.

Desired outcomes

Submitters want action and to be listened to

Submitters of course want local government to make decisions that affect them in their favour. If they are opposed to urban intensification in their neighbourhood, they want the council to leave zoning restrictions as is, rather than allow more intensive development. If they want improved air quality, they are in favour of the council banning open fireplaces in residential home. So, the desired outcome for all submitters is primarily to have the council make decisions that they perceive affect them (and their communities) positively. Their secondary objective is to be listened to. If the council consults with people, they expect them to listen to the feedback.

Submission type – written or verbal format

All the submitters we spoke to submitted in writing. Some had also presented their submission verbally. Most has been given the opportunity to present their submission verbally. Some could not recall if they were asked or not, and some considered it was “too soon” from the time of their submission, for a hearing to have been arranged.

Those that choose not to submit verbally did so for several reasons:

- Lack of confidence public speaking
- Lack of confidence speaking to strangers in a meeting or formal hearing
- Lack of time or ability to take time off work or travel to a hearing
- They consider a written submission should be sufficient information for council.

“No, I didn’t want to go to the hearing, isn’t it enough that I wrote my submission, do you have to present it as well?” Christchurch, individual submitter

Those that did choose (or said they would choose in the future) to make a verbal submission also did so for several reasons:

- Wanting to ‘tell their story’ and persuade councillors in person
- The ability to reinforce their written submission
- The ability for more than one person to speak (for community submitters), or for individual submitters to bring supporters.

“We just read out our submission. They didn’t ask any questions.”
Southland submitter

“I’ve found the actual speaking part of the process really good, although it is really nerve wracking at first. But if you can get in there they do listen to you – being able to talk about your views does help them to carry more weight.” Northland community submitter

Outcomes inevitably influence perceptions of the consultation process

There is a strong correlation between submitters perceptions of the consultation process, and the outcome of the decision. Those submitters whose submission had been successful, were more likely to be positive about the experience as a whole (including the consultation process itself). Those submitters who had been unsuccessful in their submission, or whose decision was pending or 'dragging on and on' were much less likely to be positive about the experience as a whole.

Submitters whose submissions had been 'unsuccessful' fall into two camps: those for whom council decision-making went against their wishes, and those for whom the process had not been resolved. These two types of outcomes affect submitters perceptions of the consultation process differently.

Example 1: Decision against submission

One community submitter raised the need for a pedestrian crossing to help the elderly safely walk across a wide road in her area. The council had considered the idea, and rejected it, citing lack of funds, and that their analysis regarded modifying the crossing as unnecessary. She was upset and angry that the council had not listened to the specific needs of the community, and had not actioned her request. The effect of this on her perceptions of the submission process were that she felt the council:

- had not received her submission with an open mind
- had not taken her needs into consideration
- has not listened to her submission
- had not given priority to funding and was therefore mismanaging public funds.

Example 2: Decision pending Environment Court decision

An individual submitter had made a submission in support of councils' plans for reducing greenhouse gas emissions. His submission had been made over four years previously. Since his submission was made, he had been kept regularly informed by the council, and had learned the councils' decision was being challenged in the Environment Court, and a final decision was likely to be some years away. This delay in the process and the ability of larger and more powerful lobby groups (than himself as one person) has influenced his perceptions of the submission process.

The effect of this on his perceptions was that he felt:

- frustrated at the lack of action on the part of the council
- frustrated for the council at being stymied by powerful lobby groups
- disillusioned at the ability of 'ordinary people to make a difference'
- discouraged from ever making a submission as an individual again.

While submitters are able to comment specifically on the consultation process itself, it is again important to recognise that submitters engage with local government in order to take part in decisions that affect them and their communities. So, regardless of how well a council performs on the consultation process, if a decision goes against a submitter, they are quite likely to conflate their perceptions of the outcome with their perceptions of the process. For example, if a council decision goes against a submitter, it is likely they will feel the council did not listen to their point of view.

Some submitters also feel councils “fold” under pressure from big lobby groups, such as developers, and can make decisions based on their needs, rather than the needs of the community.

“Within the council are people who are interested in community matters, but lack knowledge about the issues. In a small town, I believe that lobby groups can get to people. The Grey Power was a big group lobbying the council. ”

Nelson, individual submitter

In the view of submitters, it is important for councils to communicate the reasons for decisions. This a crucial part of helping submitters to feel the consultation process was valid and appropriate and that all submissions (particularly their own) were given due consideration. Without this, some submitters perceive the consultation process was merely “going through the motions”, and the outcome was already a foregone conclusion prior to the consultation process.

PERCEPTIONS OF ENGAGING WITH LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Introduction

The section provides an understanding of submitters' perceptions of engaging with the council. Our sample included people who had made a submission more than once. In the discussions, we therefore focused on the most recent submission experience. This section highlights the factors that submitters considered worked well for them, as well as where they consider the consultation process could be improved.

Relative performance of councils is not the role of the research

This report does not discuss the relative performance of each council in each region, as it is not the role of the research to determine if, for example, submitters in Kaipara District consider their council is performing better than submitters in Canterbury. The purpose of speaking to submitters from a range of regions, and who have submitted to a range of types of councils, is to determine their views overall, and to canvas a range of submitters.

A note on regional differences and council type

We have not highlighted any regional differences in this section, as the key difference in submitter experiences related to their perception of how well the council in their area has listened to, and taken action on, their submission. However, there are two points to note regarding council type for this report.

Where more than once council type (ie regional, district or city) has jurisdiction (or is perceived to have jurisdiction) over a geographical region, or an issue (such as water quality), it is much more difficult for submitters to identify the responsibilities of each authority. This was most evident in Christchurch, where there was much discussion over where the roles of the Christchurch City Council and Environment Canterbury start and finish. People were confused as to which council has jurisdiction over which issue.

"Their roles are not clear to us, and I wonder if they are clear to them! Who makes the decisions, I really don't know."

Christchurch, individual submitter

In Southland there was some confusion between Venture Southland and the Southland District Council. This phenomenon was less evident in Kaipara, Nelson and Manukau.

Perceptions of the engagement process

Initial awareness

Submitters are generally happy with how well their local council disseminates information. Those submitters who responded to a mailed invitation to feedback to the council felt particularly that the council has sought to involve them in decision-making, and had brought the opportunity to make a submission to their attention.

However, there is more than one level of awareness. While on this level, most submitters considered they had been kept informed about issues in their areas, some submitters felt that the Annual Plan and LTCCP processes were not well promoted. **Community** submitters in particular considered their own contacts and vigilance had helped them to discover when the council was planning to “slip something through”. They considered some aspects of the planning process were not well advertised, in order that lobby groups were not given adequate timeframes to respond to council proposals.

Most submitters felt information was available at council offices, or on council’s website, if people proactively looked for it.

One submitter had seen council displays in a local mall that sought to explain a complex issue in an accessible manner to shoppers. While she applauded the idea of taking “the plan to the people”, she did consider the issue was too simplistically presented for people to grasp the full implications of the council proposal.

This raises the issue of the link between awareness and comprehension for people. Submitters who had a relatively simple issue (for example, tree trimming in their area) considered the information provided by council to be adequate. However, some community submitters (particularly those responding to a complex and wide-ranging strategic issue) felt there was less effort on councils’ part to make them aware of pending decisions. While they conceded they had been made aware of an issue, the level of information provided in order for them to respond was consider inadequate in some cases.

Timeframes

For the first time submitters we spoke to (individual submitters in most cases), timeframe was the most frustrating aspect of the process for them. Few realised the length of time that could be required for a consultation process to take place, and for a decision to be made and action taken.

If we just discuss timeframes in relation to responses to their submissions, most submitters were happy with the amount of time it took for council to acknowledge receipt of their submission.

However, as above, for many submitters, the length of time overall for consultation, decision-making, and action, is considered very long. Some recognise this is not always something councils can control. For example, where there are multiple interested parties, legal obligations, and other issues, some complex planning initiatives can take many years to finalise.

Submission type

As discussed in the previous section, all the submitters we spoke to wrote a submission and posted it to council. Most were given the opportunity to present verbally. Some spoke of their council providing an opportunity to email a submission. This was viewed positively by those who had seen this on their council website, as it provided an opportunity for people to quickly respond or feedback on an issue.

The submitters we spoke to who had made a verbal submission were mostly community submitters. They took the opportunity to speak at a hearing, either individually representing their group, or with key members of their group.⁴

"[It was a] fascinating process. The hearing went over three days. It was well organised and everyone was given a set time. It was a gallery so was open to the public. It made it easy to be involved. It was a good process because people came up with ideas that helped me change my views or vice versa."

Nelson, individual submitter

These submitters were positive about the opportunity to present their submission verbally. They consider this provides them with the chance to be personally persuasive to council, to put their views across in a more intimate and emotive setting, and to have a face-to-face discussion of the pros and cons of their submission.

"I do worry about written submissions. They are generally summarised and written up by a council staff member. I don't have much confidence about what gets written. I prefer to submit directly [verbally]."

Christchurch, community submitter

While presenting verbally in a formal hearing setting does not suit some people, those that do like this type of submission find it appropriate and appealing. Some did however comment on the verbal submission process, saying it took all day, and was long and arduous, both for themselves as submitters, and for councillors having to sit and listen for long periods of time. Submitters who spoke at a hearing felt the process could be broken up into shorter hearings over a longer period to help the council remain fresh and alert and able to take in all the information they needed to.

⁴ . While only one of the individual submitters we spoke to had made a verbal submission, others expressed interest in doing so in the future.

"When I went to my hearing to talk about my submission I had eight points. I chose to speak about a couple of them because of time limitations. Then one councillor asked me a question about one of the points I had chosen not to speak about because I had written about it clearly. And, I remember saying 'haven't you read my submission?'. Some councillors looked like they were going to sleep. The hearing goes on for too long and I don't think people can get a fair hearing. It's too intense. Councillors can't physically listen for that length of time."

Nelson, individual submitter

"I felt heard by the Council, because of the opportunity for questions and answers. And that was two way as well. I could ask questions of them as well...I think I got a fair hearing and I was able to take others who support the cause. So that was helpful. We had a limited timeslot, but that is totally realistic. I had the opportunity to sit through a couple of people in front of me, and I could see Councillors starting to nod off. There were a lot of people that just wanted to have a say. There was something like 140 people that were going to present on the LLTCP... Sitting in a council chamber listening to people prattling on about their pet causes is not that aspirational."

Nelson, Community submitter

"We didn't feel like the council listened to us, at one point I think one of them was nodding off at the hearing. I'm not sure I blame them, it was all day listening to people bang on about the same issue."

Christchurch, community submitter

Within the hearing and verbal submission process, some submitters considered councillors were not well informed, or had not read, the written submissions on which they were expected to make decisions. Some felt the council did not always "do it's research" or have all the information they needed in order to make a decision.

"The first submission I put in I was shocked at how little knowledge the councillors had about the issues when they made their decisions... Afterwards, I actually thought it was a joke and I didn't take (their decision) seriously. When I realised that they had been serious and their decision had gone through, I asked them for certain information, such as how many households would be affected. And, they had no clue, but they did go and find out for me".

Nelson, individual submitter

Format of communications

Submitters did not have any issues with the format in which council presented it's documentation. However, few had read the Annual Plan or LTCCP. Some had never seen it. Those that had read parts of the document had only read those sections that were relevant to their issue, and ignored the rest.

Of those who could comment on the documentation supplied by council, it is clear they considered the language of council to be highly technical, legal, and very complex. This is because the issues are often complex, technical, and require careful description. Those who have read and understood the council documentation tended to be well educated and professional, and they consider the documentation to be potentially less accessible to people who are not able to understand the content.

"Lots of people wouldn't have use of the internet. This [regional policy document on the table] requires a certain level of understanding." Christchurch, individual submitter

"It's very technical stuff, there's a lot of jargon, and political garbage in it." Christchurch, individual submitter

Submitters acquired information either as delivered to them (in summary form) via the postal invitation to comment from visiting council offices, or by printing off documents from council websites. Having a range of sources was considered appropriate.

Outcomes

There are three outcomes from making a submission to council: a decision is made in support of a submission, a decision is made against a submission, and a decision is pending.

As discussed in the previous section, submitters can differentiate between the outcome of a consultation, and the process itself. However, the two are inter-connected.

For those submitters whose submission was rejected, they strongly perceive that council did not listen to their point of view, did not take into account the factors they outlined, and have not allocated funding to the need as best they could. Many rejected submitters consider the letter informing of the decision against their submission does not adequately address their submission. Some would like a better explanation of how the council came to the decision. For example, wanting to know how many voted for or against their submission, and also what swayed councillors in favour of the other side. This might help unsuccessful submitters to feel that while a decision did not go for them, that is was a considered decision nevertheless.

Those for whom funding was cited as the main reason their submission failed, would like more information regarding where funding is going, and what councils priorities are. These submitters feel particularly aggrieved, both about the consultation process (which they consider to have been a total waste of their time), and council's performance overall.

"I felt like council sits on their arse and twiddles their thumbs." Southland submitter

For those whose submission was upheld (or their bid for funding was successful), the positive outcome was very satisfying to them. They considered the council had listened to their needs and considered their submission. They felt the council was performing well, on both the consultation process itself, and in relation to managing the particular issue on which they submitted.

"Everything worked out rather well." Nelson submitter

For those who submission has not been resolved, there was either frustration at the lack of action, or a total lack of awareness of what stage the council was at in the decision-making process. They had generally had some form of communication from council acknowledging receipt of their submission. However, some had no further information in the intervening months, and this could lead to a sense of frustration about the purpose of the entire process.

"I accept that things can take a bit of time to work their way through, but there hasn't been any specific correspondence with me to say 'these items were raised by you and we would like to take them further'. All I've had has been a general type of stock standard mail merge type letter"

Manukau, individual submitter

One submitter had been kept well informed about the progress of the consultation process, as this had "dragged on" for several years.

What effect does the outcome of the engagement have on the likelihood of repeat engagement for submitters?

For some **unsuccessful submitters**, having their submission rejected was a discouragement from ever bothering to submit another submission, regardless of the issue. They considered the process to be "a sham" and something council did "because it has too", rather than a genuine attempt to garner their feedback. They felt disillusioned with the process, and with their ability as citizens to influence or input into local government decision-making.

"It felt like the council was very entrenched and autocratic." Christchurch, individual

However, other unsuccessful submitters felt galvanised into more formal action by a rejected submission. Some felt, perhaps as individuals they had been unsuccessful, and that developing a collective or community submission might be more successful. They also felt they could "learn from their mistakes" by becoming more aware of council processes and ways of doing things. Having this experience could be an impetus to be more organised, and to develop stronger strategies for engaging with council in the future.

"It's a good chance to have your say, even though we didn't get very far. You've got to start somewhere. You have to keep pushing don't you, even if it takes a lot of time."

Southland submitter

"As one person, you can't really make a difference. Unless you become part of a powerful lobby group, you are left feeling powerless."

Christchurch, individual submitter

"It has taken two or three years work as a group to get our views across, and we have had to call upon various experts and use them to educate the council, it hasn't been easy, but at the end of the day council have become very supportive of our views"

Kaipara, community submitter

Clearly, those who had been **successful in their submission** were buoyed and encouraged by the process. It enhances their faith in the consultation process. If they had another issue with which they were concerned, they may be more likely to engage again.

For those **submitters for whom resolution was yet to occur**, there could be a mix of both frustration and anger at council for “dragging the chain” and lacking in action, or just a sense of feeling mystified about what is going on. Some were sympathetic to councils caught up in complex issues and competing lobby groups: others blamed council and councillors for deliberately delaying decisions in order that they eventually “get their way”.

In some cases this can impact upon their desire to engage with the process in future:

“It’s a bit disappointing; it does make me think there is not much point in submitting another one next time.” Manukau, individual submitter

In the particular case quoted above, the individual concerned had spent some time researching their submission, and felt that they had addressed an important and relevant issue (safety for cyclists) constructively.

Overall impressions of the process

The research provided submitters with a chance to reflect on the process of making a submission, regardless of whether or not a decision had been reached. All were glad they had made a submission, regardless of the outcome and whether they would do it again. Some had put very little time and effort into a submission, and some had put a great deal. The submissions from the people we spoke to ranged from a one page letter or postcard, or filling in a response form provided by council, to months and months of preparation, research, engagement of independent consultants for expert advice, hundreds of volunteer hours in preparation, and lengthy documents in support of their views.

At the conclusion of the submission process, many submitters are still unaware of the LTCCP or Annual Plan, or even to which plan their submission was allocated. All they know is that their issue is either resolved, or not. This is all many care about. They do not want any more complex processes for engagement, or access to documentation – they just want their problem solved by council.

For many of the ‘professional’ or repeat submitters (generally those we spoke to in this camp were community submitters), they considered engaging with council part of getting what they wanted to happen to happen. They considered the process both necessary and important. They also consider it quite a specialised and inaccessible process, and not for the faint-hearted.

Submitters consider the challenge for local government is for the consultation process to find a way to simply but effectively present often complex and strategic issues. This will allow people for whom the decision will have an impact (be that positive or negative), to effectively understand it, access information, and provide their views. The next challenge is for councils to interpret and incorporate this feedback into the decision-making process.

Overall submitter positive and negative experiences

As a summary, the following table provides some overall thoughts on positive and negative feedback from submitters. These factors manifest themselves across all geographical regions, and types of council. Some are more likely to be perceived by either individual or community submitters, and where this is the case, this is noted in the table.

Table – What is working well

POSITIVE ISSUES	EXPERIENCED BY
Information is available in a range of formats	All, particularly those with the internet appreciate documentation being available on websites.
Submitters are given the opportunity to make a verbal submission	All, particularly those who want to reinforce their submission, and want to do so verbally.
Acknowledgement of receipt	All, as councils are perceived to be managing the administration of submissions satisfactorily.
Feeling listened to	Successful submitters mostly, but some others as well

"It's good you can download the documents from the internet site, the council's website – it means you can have the PDF's on your PC, and you can send them off to other people."

Christchurch, Community submitter

Table – What is not working well

NEGATIVE ISSUES	EXPERIENCED BY	SOLUTION
Not having enough time to adequately respond to a council proposal	Community/experienced submitters Those commenting or reacting to a complex issue	Early and more visible notification of council decisions coming up Warning system for complex issues
Lack of communication on the progress of submission	All, but particularly longer term issues and where planning has gone over the timeframe or been delayed	Email or postal communication with submitters and information about potential timeframes and slippage
Lack of clarity on the reason for a decision	Unsuccessful submitters	Opportunity to discuss or elaborate on decisions that go against submitters. Some submitters feel this 'end' of the process could be better managed by councils.

"This interview is the first I have heard for a while about what is happening with the council. I knew it had gone to the Environment Court, but talking to you has reminded me that I haven't heard about what is going on."

Christchurch, Individual submitter

PERCEPTIONS OF COUNCIL PERFORMANCE ON THE PRINCIPLES OF CONSULTATION

Introduction

In this section we explore more explicitly submitters perceptions of how well they consider the Act's principles of consultation have been demonstrated by their local government during the consultation process.

Reaction and comment on each of the principles was sought from each submitter. There were no key differentiating factors by region or type of council in their response. However, there was some inter-relationship between those submitters who had been successful, and those who had not. Although, this was not universal, as many submitters who were disgruntled at the outcome of their submission gave positive feedback on the council's performance on demonstrating the principles of the Act.

The principles - summary table

The table below shows the wording of the Act as it was presented to the submitters. Most had never heard of, or considered, these factors prior to the interviews.

Table: wording of the principles (emphasis Colmar Brunton's)

PRINCIPLE	WORDING
a	that people who will or may be affected by, or have an interest in, the decision or matter should be provided by the local authority with <u>reasonable access to relevant information</u> in a manner and <u>format that is appropriate to the preferences</u> and needs of those persons.
b	that people who will or may be affected by, or have an interest in, the decision or matter <u>should be encouraged by the local authority to present their views</u> to the local authority.
c	that persons who are invited or encouraged to present their views to the local authority should be given <u>clear information by the local authority concerning the purpose of the consultation and the scope of the decisions to be taken</u> following the consideration of views presented.

PRINCIPLE	WORDING
d	that persons who wish to have their views on the decision or matter considered by the local authority should be provided by the local authority with a <u>reasonable opportunity to present those views to the local authority</u> in a manner and format that is appropriate to the preferences and needs of those persons.
e	that the views presented to the local authority should be received by <u>the local authority with an open mind</u> and should be given by the local authority, in making a decision, due consideration.
f	that persons who present views to the local authority should be provided by the local authority <u>with information concerning both the relevant decisions and the reasons for those decisions.</u>

Factors to take into account – intensity and level of involvement

Please note that some submitters have more intensive experience of making and presenting a submission than others. As discussed earlier, some submitters provided a short, less involved submission, while others spent many months preparing their submission. Therefore, it was easier for the more highly involved submitters to comment on the principles; there was more experience for them to draw from. Those who had a less highly involved submission experience also commented, but not to the same extent, on the principles.

Most of the information regarding the principles has been discussed elsewhere in this report as part of the overall experience of submitting. However it is important at this point to allow discussion regarding the principles as this discussion is not specifically addressed elsewhere in this report. This section is intended to provide some form of summary of the experience as a whole using the principles as a framework for reporting.

A – Access to information

Submitters consider they have been provided with the appropriate level of information for their requirements. Submitters that respond to an invitation to provide feedback to council have required less (and do not necessarily desire more) information. They have not sought further information. Submitters who wrote their submission proactively, and without reference to any council documentation do not need any information: they know their problem, and have suggestions to council as to how to solve it.

Submitters, whether community or individual, who are submitting on a more complex or strategic issue (for example, rezoning, urban intensification, or water or air quality issues), tend to have a higher need for information generated by the council. This is simply because they are reacting to a council proposal, and need to read the documentation on this carefully.

Most of the submitters we spoke to considered access to information via council websites and offices was appropriate. Some consider the councils did little to publicise that information was available. Others were more ambivalent on the topic, and felt that if people wanted the information, they would seek it themselves.

"I am not really sure what 'reasonable access' means, but if you try then you can find out information, and I suppose if I was interested I would make a greater effort ... it would be reasonably cost effective to have it on some sort of web page, but I suppose in Manukau City it might need to go into libraries as a lot of people are not going to have computers on access to the internet."

Manukau, individual submitter

Having information available as PDF downloads on websites was also seen as making council documentation more accessible.

While having information available is good, some submitters who had read it commented on the formal and technical nature of much of the documentation. This is potentially a barrier. So while councils are considered to provide access to information, some submitters did comment on the comprehension levels required of the reader to access this information.

"Some of that stuff is hard to follow. Every large organisation has it's own words and jargon."

Southland submitter

"Yes, the information is available. Whether or not it is palatable is another matter."

Christchurch, individual submitter

In some cases however, submitters did consider that reasonable access to relevant information was not provided. This criticism was raised by some submitters because they felt that councils were not informing their constituencies about planned changes that would impact on communities, the public in general, or the environment. In particular, one submitter wanted councils to proactively communicate "anything that affects quality of life or the capital values of properties." This could be achieved by a pamphlet included with the rates notice that would proactively advise residents about:

"Changes to the zoning plan, where heights could be increased, that could affect many people and could affect their view corridors, the changing of zoning as far as densities, that could affect people, changing anything to do with parks, recreation and beaches, that could affect people, there is a myriad of things."

Manukau, individual submitter

B – Encouragement to put forward their view

Submitters ranged in their perception of the term 'encouragement'. Some considered their council had encouraged them to submit (particularly those who had responded to a postal invitation), and had given them the opportunity to put forward their view. If they had not received the postal invitation, it is unlikely that these submitters would have proactively made a submission. Having done so once may encourage them to do so again in the future.

Others did not consider the council had actively encouraged them to make a submission – they felt the opportunity and process is available for people should they choose to make a submission, but that this is not the same as encouraging them to do so.

“Technically, yes [they did provide encouragement], but not strongly enough.”

Christchurch, community submitter

“Nobody encouraged me, I just did it myself.”

Southland submitter

It was also commented by one more experienced submitter that on some occasions they may present their views to council, only to find that the councillor/s that they especially want to make these views known to, are not present. This was frustrating to the submitter not only because they missed the opportunity to sway the views of that councillor, but also because they were not forewarned, and had no alternative means of presenting to them.

Some submitters considered not all people in the community are fully able to present their views to council. For example, those with limited literacy, or disabled in some way. It is these groups with a limited ‘voice’ in the community that may find it the most difficult to engage with council in the traditional manner.

C – Clear information about purpose and scope of decision-making

Submitters who responded to a postal invitation to submit were less able to provide a reaction to this principle; nor were people who had proactively (without reference to the Annual Plan or the LTCCP) made an issue-based submission. This type of submitter, whether individual or community, did not seek or require information about the scope and purpose of decision-making. It is only those submitters who responded to a proposal in the LTCCP or Annual Plan that considered they needed, or wanted to know about the scope and purpose of the decision/s being made.

Given this context, we can exclude those who did not want information regarding the scope and purpose of the decisions, because they do not require it for the purposes of making their submission.

Most submitters that do require information from the council regarding the scope and purpose of the consultation considered this information was clear to them at the time they made their submission. Sometimes however there was confusion on their part, that related perhaps to the expected timeframes for decisions to take place. Submitters usually considered information setting out the scope and purpose of a consultation process was contained in the relevant documentation they received. In one case a fairly experienced submitter felt they were generally only advised that they could present, but that the process, and in particular the purpose and scope of the consultation, was not made known to them.

D – Reasonable opportunity to present

Submitters generally considered they were given reasonable opportunity to present their views. This was especially true for first time submitters. The submitters who did not consider they were given a reasonable opportunity to present were those who had a complex issue to respond to. They considered they had less time than they would have preferred to prepare their submission. In this case, some felt the council had deliberately deprived them of adequate time to prepare in order to push through their own agenda.

All the submitters recall being given the opportunity to present their views verbally. As discussed in our earlier section, they have a range of reasons why they may not have taken up this offer.

E – Open-mindedness

Some submitters found comment on this principle difficult. This was particularly true of people who had made relatively low involvement, written submissions.⁵ The extent of their involvement in these cases is to get a two letters of communication from the relevant local authority: one to acknowledge their submission, and one to inform them of the outcome of the consultation. It is therefore difficult for them to comment extensively on the level of open-mindedness demonstrated by the council.

“They listened, and they asked questions.” Southland submitter

Those who have made a verbal submission are more qualified to discuss the open-mindedness demonstrated by the council. This is strongly related to whether their submission was successful or not. Those whose submission was successful considered the council had fully considered their submission and been open-minded about the decision they reached.

Those whose submission was not successful were more inclined to perceive that the council did not demonstrate a level of open-mindedness or listened to/took notice of, their submission. These submitters perceived the consultation process as simply “going through the motions” and not a serious or credible exercise. They considered that the council had already “made up it’s mind” before seeking submissions.

“I felt they had preset conclusions on the direction and method before they consulted us, and that they are obliged to consult with us but not necessarily to do anything based on our views.”

Christchurch, individual submitter

⁵ In this context, we are using the term ‘low involvement’ to refer to the submission itself, not to the submitters relationship to the issue on which they are submitting, as this is something that submitters almost always consider to be highly involved.

"They sat there and listened, they didn't take sides, they were very neutral."

Christchurch, individual submitter

F – Information on decisions and reasons for those decisions

Submitters perceptions of whether or not their council had adequately demonstrated this principle is linked to the outcome of the consultation process. Successful submitters we spoke to tended to consider the council had provided them with enough information about the decision. They were generally just delighted that they had been successful.

Submitters whose submission was unsuccessful, however, considered they did not get enough information from the council about why a decision went against them. Some unsuccessful submitters felt "fobbed off" with council explanations about why they had not been successful. Some also felt that councils used "lack of funds" as a way of explaining their decisions. Many wanted the opportunity to discuss or appeal the decision that had been made, and did not consider the council provides an opportunity for them to do this. When lack of funds was cited as the reason for their submission being unsuccessful, submitters also began to question not only the value of the consultation process, but the performance and priorities of council as well. For example, they wondered just what exactly the council was spending their rates money on when they purported not to be able afford to action their submission, and if they were doing their jobs well.

"It's a political process, you have to treat it like a political process. The councillors are politicians after all, you have to think what will they want to do that will get them elected again."

Nelson submitter

"I am a lot more cynical about the process now, I didn't feel listened to. I don't feel like I achieved anything."

Christchurch, individual submitter

"I'd like to see more feedback from councillors. How individual councillors voted, the discussion behind why decision were reached is important. How they came to that decision."

Nelson, individual submitter

Comment on the principles – summary table

PRINCIPLE	SUMMARY COMMENT
<p>that people who will or may be affected by, or have an interest in, the decision or matter should be provided by the local authority with <u>reasonable access to relevant information</u> in a manner and <u>format that is appropriate to the preferences</u> and needs of those persons.</p>	<p>A range of options (ie web, hard copy at the council, or posted out) is important.</p> <p>Some issues with language and comprehension of technical and formal documentation.</p> <p>Some feeling that councils do not proactively provide information about issues that will impact the community.</p>
<p>that people who will or may be affected by, or have an interest in, the decision or matter <u>should be encouraged by the local authority to present their views to the local authority.</u></p>	<p>Interpretation of ‘encouragement’ varies.</p> <p>Some say proactive postal mailing and invitation to submit is encouragement.</p> <p>Some say providing the opportunity and having a consultation process in place is appropriate, but does not necessarily constitute ‘encouragement’.</p>
<p>that persons who are invited or encouraged to present their views to the local authority should be given <u>clear information by the local authority concerning the purpose of the consultation and the scope of the decisions to be taken</u> following the consideration of views presented.</p>	<p>Some require little information on the scope and purpose, and do not seek it out, particularly those who submit proactively on an issue that concerns them.</p> <p>Those that are responding to a council proposal have the highest need for this type of information.</p> <p>Council is perceived to be doing this to the appropriate level.</p>

Comment on the principles – summary table, continued

PRINCIPLE	SUMMARY COMMENT
<p>that persons who wish to have their views on the decision or matter considered by the local authority should be provided by the local authority with a <u>reasonable opportunity to present those views to the local authority</u> in a manner and format that is appropriate to the preferences and needs of those persons</p>	<p>Submitters consider they are given reasonable opportunity to present.</p> <p>Some do not feel comfortable about the thought of verbally presenting in the formal hearing format.</p> <p>Some consider those with limited writing abilities or disabilities or lacking confidence are not given the opportunity to submit in the way that best meets their needs.</p> <p>Those that do feel comfortable value the opportunity to present verbally.</p>
<p><u>that the views presented to the local authority should be received by the local authority with an open mind</u> and should be given by the local authority, in making a decision, due consideration</p>	<p>This principle is hard for low involvement submitters to evaluate.</p> <p>Those that can evaluate it tend to be verbal submitters.</p> <p>Open-mindedness is related to the outcome – so if a submitter is successful, they are more likely to consider the council is demonstrating this principle, than one who is not successful.</p>
<p>that persons who present views to the local authority should be provided by the local authority <u>with information concerning both the relevant decisions and the reasons for those decisions</u></p>	<p>Rating of this principle is related to outcomes – when a submitter is successful, they consider they have received adequate information about the decision.</p> <p>Those that are not successful would like more information, or the opportunity to appeal.</p>

Comment on cost-effectiveness

Submitters could not comment on whether or not they considered the council had used funds cost-effectively in consulting with them. They had little idea of the cost of the consultation process.

"I don't think it would have cost them much – some travel costs and postage, but I couldn't tell you how much it was." Southland submitter

"I don't know how much it would have cost them to send us all a copy of the form [inviting feedback on council planning]. I don't want them to spend too much money. I would have thought \$3,500 would be a huge amount of money." Southland submitter

However, one community submitter had a view on the cost.

"It's a democratic process and that has a cost. If you are going to involve people in decision-making, you need to understand the costs attached to that. And it makes the decisions more sustainable in the long-term if you get people's buy in at the start."

Christchurch, community

PROPOSED ACTIONS

Interim findings

These conclusions are based on the qualitative phase of this research. The quantitative phase has yet to be completed at the time of writing this report (as this qualitative research is in part designed to inform the development of the quantitative phase).

Thoughts on improvements to the consultation process

While we recognise the Commission does not have direct influence over individual councils, we have provided below some general principles that the Commissioner could consider bringing to the attention of local government overall.

Again, we highlight that this report does not critique any particular councils' performance, but is intended to highlight the experiences of submitters, and where they have suggestions for improving the community consultation process from their perspective.

Communication

Once people have made a submission, we propose the following strategies may help to improve their perceptions of the process overall, regardless of the outcome:

- Ensuring submitters are aware when decisions are likely to be made, particularly when consultation is on-going and longer in length. This will help submitters to feel listened to, and that their submission has not gone into an administrative black hole.
- Ensuring submitters, when notified of a decision that has gone against them, feel their input into the decision-making process has been appreciated. For example, thanking them for taking the time to make a submission, and encouraging them to do so again should the opportunity to have their say present itself.

Language and comprehension

We recommend reviewing language or wording in documentation, or providing two 'levels' of documentation – one for people interested in the overview or summary, and one, more technical level, for those wanting to respond to a council proposal.

Process of appeal

For unsuccessful submitters, there may be merit in a process of discussion for people to understand in more detail why their submission was not upheld. Submitters could be given the option of more detail if they request it, or the opportunity to respond to the decision.

APPENDIX I - TOPIC GUIDE (TELEPHONE AND FACE TO FACE INTERVIEWS)

Target audience

24 - 28 people who have engaged with the council in:

- Kaipara District Council - Dargaville
- Manukau City Council - Auckland
- Nelson City Council – Nelson
- Environment Canterbury – Christchurch
- Southland District Council - Invercargill

And who have made a submission to council as an:

- Individuals
- Business
- Community group

Materials

- Abstract photosort (small)
- Topic guide + Section 82 list of clauses
- Incentive form + Incentive

Timing

- Telephone interview – 30 – 45 minutes
- Face to Face interviews – one hour

Please note: This document is a guide only. The sequence in which topics are covered may vary according to the natural flow of the interview and the individual respondent. Regardless of the sequence of the conversation, please be assured all the objectives will be covered. This guide will be used for the face to face interviews, and modified for the telephone interviews.

Please note - This is not exact wording of the questions – the researcher will use this as a guide and ensure all the objectives are covered over the research.

Introducing the topic and the research purpose

Purpose: to ensure respondents are reassured about their confidentiality and the purpose of the research, as well as covering off housekeeping like recording and timing.

- From Colmar Brunton, not the local council.
- Interested in your experience of making a submission to the council. This has three parts (the issue you submitted on, the outcome of the issue, and the process).
- We are most interested in your thoughts on the process of your submission, as the research is looking at the Local Government Act, and how the consultation process is perceived by people who make submissions to their local city, regional or district council.
- So while we talk about the issue and the outcome, we really need to understand your perceptions and experience of the process you went through, and any suggestions you have for improvement.
- No right or wrong answers, just your views, you don't have to be an expert.
- Reporting will be by theme, not individual comment.
- Take about an hour (or 30 minutes over the phone).

Context and motivation

Purpose: the section will give us understanding of what type of person the respondent is, and how engaged they are in their community as well as an understanding of their views on the local council.

Lets start with finding out a little bit about you before we talk about the submission you made to council. It just gives us an idea of the range of people here in [location].

Are you from the area? How long have you lived here?

- Family/Work/Interests in your spare time? Involvement in the community (ie any clubs or sports, or cultural or interest groups they belong to in the area)?
- What do you love about living here? What do you tell people about the area if they are thinking about living or visiting here?
- What are the issues for the local community here? What concerns you? How come?

Do not directly probe on council performance at this stage but note any comments that arise. Get a sense of what type of person they are, ie community focused, etc. We should have a good idea at the end of this section of what level of involvement they have in their community and their views on council performance.

Perceptions of the submission experience

Purpose: this section will get their view and experiences of the submission process. It will also provide their suggested 'ideal' process and any particular issues for them about the current process.

Now thinking back to the submission you made to [specific type of council as per location]... Lets draw a line on this piece of paper representing the time you started thinking about making your submission to now. Let's talk about the process for you – plot along here all the things that happened, and when).

Draw a line along a page and use as a prompt to help structure the discussion as the talk about the process.

- How come you decided to make a submission? (probe on whether their submission was to the LTCCP or annual plan, and do they know this?)
- What was your reason for making a submission (probe on what they were trying to achieve, was the reason 'positive' or 'negative' ie did they think the council was going to stuff something up, or did they want to support something the council was doing?)
- What was the issue? What happened? How did they hear about the possibility of making a submission (probe on sources of information – where do they look, what research do they do)
- How did you make your submission (ie by letter/email/verbal)? (and was this as an individual or part of a collective or group?)
- What did you think the process would involve at the start? What were your expectations? What did you hope to achieve? Did this happen?
- Did you feel the council listened to/read/took note of your submission – why or why not do we feel this?
- Did the council decide for, or against your submission?
- What was the purpose of the consultation from the councils perspective do you think – what was it trying to achieve? How successful do you feel this was? How well (or not) do you think the council conducted this consultation? How come?
- Thinking about the whole process for you, the issue, the way the council communicated with you and all the documentation or interactions you had with the council – how would you describe it to others thinking of doing the same thing?

Projective - Actual – looking at these abstract pictures, this is just a way for me to understand better how you felt about making your submission and about the process you went through. Choose which of these pictures best represents how you felt when you made your submission?

Describe feeling and discuss. Probe on characteristics to compare to later

- What did you like about the submission process (probe on the method, the formal, or informal aspects of it, sense of community, meeting the people)
- What did you not like about the process? How come?
- Having experienced what you have with the Council consultation/submission process, should another issue come along that you wanted to have your say on, would you bother? If yes, why, if not why not?
- Projective – Ideal - Again, looking at these cards, which of these cards would represent how you would want to feel if the council did as you suggested and you were able to make a submission in the way that suits you best. Describe feeling and discuss.

Probe on characteristics and compare to previous selection to understand the differences and what it would take about the process for this to happen.

At the end of this section we should have a good understanding of their experience of submitting and what their views on the process are.

Perceptions of the consultation process

Purpose: to understand submitters perceptions of particular aspects of the consultation process.

Now that we have an idea of how the experience was for you, let's think about some specific aspects of the consultation so that we can get an understanding from you about how the council undertook the consultation process.

Councils are required to involve local residents in aspects of decision-making and planning, and councils have been asked to ensure residents are consulted about matters that concern them.

- Do you feel your council has done this? How come/why/why not?
- Do you feel they have used council money well in consulting with residents (if not, why not/if so, how come).

Here are some specific things councils are aiming to do with the type of consultation they do with residents.

Read out the sections a – f (see separate sheet) from section 82. Read out each section and invite comment....

- Do you consider your council has done this (probe why or why not)?
- Do you consider they could do this better (if so how)?

Perceptions of engagement

Purpose: to understand submitters perceptions of the overall engagement activities of the council.

Great, now lets talk about the [specific type of council depending on location] council overall engagement with the community, not just the submission process..

Read out - Councils are required to involve local residents in aspects of decision- making and planning. This includes taking into account:

- the different interests of the communities that collectively make up the city, district or region.
 - the interests of future as well as current communities/generations.
- Do you think your [specific type of] council does this (probe why, why not)?
 - Aside from the formal submission process we just talked about, what other means would you like to see your council using to engage residents in the decisions it makes? (probe on format and frequency)
 - To your knowledge, are they doing this already?

So, last question, if we are to think about how the council is performing in the area of consulting residents on planning and decision-making, how well overall would you say the [type of council and area] are doing. Give them a mark out of 10 (1 = terrible, 10 = perfect). Probe on ranking and how come? What factors are you taking into account when you give them this overall mark?

Anything else to say/add?

Thank, close and provide incentive form to sign + incentive.
Get postal address for vouchers if telephone interview.