

Significance and Engagement Policy

Purpose

The purpose of this policy is:

- To allow the Council and the community to identify the degree of significance attached to issues, proposals or decisions; and
- To provide clarity about how and when communities can expect to be engaged in decision-making processes; and
- To inform the Council from the beginning of a decision-making process about:
 - The level of any public engagement that is expected before a decision is made; and
 - The type of engagement required.

The general approach

The Council will follow a three-step process to inform decision making:

Step 1 – Determine significance – The Council will use criteria to decide whether a matter is of higher or lower significance. This part of the policy also explains how to approach matters of high significance.

Step 2 – Determine whether engagement is required – The Council will evaluate what it knows about community views and decide whom should be engaged.

Step 3 – Decide an approach – The level of significance and the information being sought will guide Council staff on how and when engagement occurs. This part of the policy clarifies how and when communities can expect to be engaged on different issues.

Step 1 – Determine significance

Significance is about measuring the importance of an issue, proposal or decision. The Council needs to determine how people, services, infrastructure and well-being in the district will be affected. During the development stages of work on a project, significance must be considered because it will guide both the extent to which options should be developed, and the degree to which advantages and disadvantages are evaluated.

Significance indicators

The Council will consider the following factors when determining the level of significance. They are of equal weighting and the greater the cumulative impact of a matter assessed by these factors, the more significant the decision will be. Significance means the degree of importance as assessed by its likely impact on, and likely consequences for:

- The current and future social, economic, environmental or cultural wellbeing of the district;
- The people who are likely to be significantly affected by or interested in the matter;

- The financial, rating, resource and other cost impacts of the decision;
 - Consider:
 - What is the likely increase in rates going to be from a decision?
 - Is this decision likely to significantly deplete financial reserves?
 - Will the decision lead to an increased level of Council debt?
- The capacity of the Council to perform its role or maintain levels of service;
- The ownership or function of a strategic asset;
- Other situations where there is thought to be a strong community interest in a matter.

In considering these factors, the Council will also consider knowledge it has previously gained about community views.

Responding to significant matters

If a matter is significant, Council reports must explain why. The statement will identify the factors that indicate that the decision is significant and the potential implications of a decision. Reports will also explore the range of community views that may exist and assess whether there is a need for further community engagement before a final decision is made.

Step 2 - Determine whether engagement is required

When to engage

When it is required by legislation

The Council will consider community views when it has a legislative requirement to do so (as set out by relevant legislation such as the Local Government Act 2002). Examples of when Council staff will identify community views include the adoption and amendment of both the Long-term Plan and changes to financial policies.

The Council is required at times to use a special consultative procedure, as set out in section 83 of the Local Government Act 2002. The special consultative procedure requires the Council to issue and widely distribute a proposal that is open for consultation for at least one month. This procedure may also be used for any other decision the Council wishes to consult on.

Some decisions can only be made if they are explicitly provided for in the Council's Long-term Plan. These decisions involve:

- Altering significantly the intended level of service provision for any significant activity undertaken by or behalf of the Council;
- Transferring the ownership or control of a strategic asset to or from the Council.

Strategic assets

Strategic assets are essential to the continued delivery of Council services or activities. The Council takes a whole-of-asset approach for groups or networks of strategic assets as opposed to listing each individual asset within a group. The Council also lists individual assets where these are thought to be of critical strategic significance to the district.

The Council considers strategic assets to be:

- The roading network as a whole

- The three waters network as a whole
- The Council's waste assets portfolio as a whole
- The Council's portfolio of reserves as a whole
- Molyneux Pool and Cromwell Pool
- Alexandra Airport
- Molyneux Stadium
- The Council's portfolio of elderly persons housing as a whole
- The Council's portfolio of cemeteries as a whole
- The Council's portfolio of libraries as a whole.

When it relates to a significant matter

The Council will identify community views whenever a 'significant decision' needs to be made. A significant decision is one that has been identified as such under step 1 of this Policy. Note: a 'significant' decision will not automatically trigger consultation or application of the special consultative procedure.

When engagement is not required

There are times when the Council will not normally engage with the community because the matter is routine, operational or because there is an emergency. The Council will not engage on:

- Matters where the Council already has a sound understanding of the views and preferences of those likely to be affected or interested in the matter;
- Situations where there is a need for confidentiality or commercial sensitivity;
- Emergency management activities;
- Organisational decisions (such as staff changes and operational matters) that do not materially change a level of service;
- Matters where the costs of engagement outweigh the benefits of it;
- Matters that have already been addressed by the Council's strategies or plans, which have previously been consulted on;
- Issues where an immediate or quick response is needed, or it is not practical to engage;
- Business as usual: the works are related to the operation and maintenance of a Council asset and responsible management requires the works to take place;
- Matters where the Council has engaged on the unchanged issue in the last 3 years.

When the above circumstances apply and community feedback is not sought, the Council is still required to consider the views and opinions of those likely to be affected by a decision. Consideration of these perspectives can be achieved without using formal engagement processes.

Step 3 – Deciding how to engage

Once the Council decides it needs more information, Council staff will consider how to engage with the community. Depending on the matter being considered and the stakeholders involved, different engagement tools will be applied to meet the goals of the project.

Choosing an approach

It is important that the approach to engagement responds to the circumstances of an individual project and is tailored to support its underlying goals. Projects should consider the following factors when determining the methods of engagement to be used:

- Community focus: Central Otago communities are at the core of the Council's purpose and objectives, and engagement will reflect the need for community input into council decision making.
- Flexibility: it is important the Council can adapt engagement processes to suit a project and its target audience. This involves both looking to previous methods which have worked well and being open to new and developing methods of engagement.
- Legislative requirements: sometimes legislation will prescribe the approach to engagement on a particular issue.
- The role of elected members: engagement processes should recognise the valued role of elected representatives as voices of the communities they represent.

Consultation or engagement

Consultation involves obtaining public feedback on proposals, but it is only one form of engagement. The Council regularly consults communities through processes such as the Long-term Plan, which determines the Council's strategic direction.

Engagement is a broader and ongoing process of sharing information with the community and seeking its feedback, with the purpose of involving the community in the process of decision making. This process may include a more formal consultation process to meet legal requirements. The Council takes a spectrum-based approach to engagement which is set out in Table 1.

The level of engagement

Using the International Association of Public Participation's engagement spectrum as a basis, the methods of engagement adopted by the Council before it decides may depend on whether:

- The matter is of low or no significance and there may be a very small group of people affected by or with an interest in the decision. The Council is unlikely to engage on these matters;
- The matter is significant to a relatively small group of people or is of low impact to many. The group should be informed about the problem, alternatives and solutions so that any concerns they have are understood;
- The matter is significant not only to a small group of people particularly affected but also to the wider community who may have an interest in the decision to be made. The community may be informed, consulted and/or involved to seek feedback;
- For more significant matters, the Council may elect to collaborate, or partner with a community in any aspect of a decision including the development of potential options. This is more likely to occur when there is a distinct group of affected or particularly interested people.

Depending on the level of significance and the nature of the situation, a range of engagement methods may be used to empower communities to participate in the decision-making process. The various levels of engagement are elaborated on in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Council’s engagement spectrum

	INCREASING LEVEL OF PUBLIC IMPACT				
	INFORM	CONSULT	INVOLVE	COLLABORATE	EMPOWER
Goal	To provide balanced and objective information in a timely manner.	To obtain feedback on analysis, issues, alternatives and decisions.	To work with the public to make sure that concerns and aspirations are considered and understood.	To partner with the public in each aspect of the decision making.	To place final decision-making in the hands of the public.
Promise	“We will keep you informed.”	“We will listen to and account for your concerns.”	“We will work with you to ensure your concepts and aspirations are directly reflected in the decisions made.”	“We will look to you for advice and innovation and incorporate this in decisions as much as possible.”	“We will implement what you decide.”
Examples	Council website, social media, newspapers, radio.	Submissions and hearings.	Meetings with stakeholders and local community organisations.	Cromwell Masterplan process (community drop-in sessions, attend community events, opinion surveys).	Roading Team asks the community how they would like the \$100,000 street beautification budget to be spent and carries out their decisions.