



Te Kawa Mataaho Public Service Commission, Long-Term Insights Briefing

Report of the Governance and Administration Committee

October 2022

Contents

Recommendation.....	2
Introduction.....	2
About long-term insights briefings.....	2
About the Public Service Commission’s briefing.....	3
Trust and confidence in the public service.....	3
COVID-19 and public trust.....	3
What affects participation?.....	4
What enables and hinders participation?.....	4
Misinformation.....	5
Regional Public Service Commissioners.....	5
What can be done to improve public participation?.....	6
What will participation look like in the future?.....	7
Supporting specific communities to engage.....	7
Engaging with young people.....	8
Engagement with Māori.....	8
Consultation on the Commission’s briefing.....	8
Conclusion: our views on the briefing.....	9
Appendix.....	10

Te Kawa Mataaho Public Service Commission, Long-Term Insights Briefing

Recommendation

The Governance and Administration Committee has considered the Long-Term Insights Briefing from Te Kawa Mataaho Public Service Commission, and recommends that the House take note of its report.

Introduction

The Public Service Commission produced its first long-term insights briefing, as required by the Public Service Act 2020, in June 2022. The briefing is titled *Enabling Active Citizenship: Public Participation in Government into the Future*. It focuses on the role of public participation in government and why participation matters. The briefing explores what affects, hinders, and enables participation. It uses this information to suggest what the public service could do to enable people to participate in a meaningful way to achieve appropriate and effective government services.

This report covers the main points raised in the briefing and explores what we discussed during a hearing with the Commission.

About long-term insights briefings

The Public Service Act 2020 introduced a requirement for chief executives of government departments to develop and publish long-term insights briefings at least once every three years. The briefings must be produced independently of the relevant Minister, and the chief executive must consult the public on the subject matter of the report and a draft version.

The purpose of the briefings is to inform the public about medium- and long-term trends and future risks and opportunities facing New Zealand. The briefings should provide information, impartial analysis, and potential policy responses to the challenges identified in the briefing. They can be a way of enhancing public debate on long-term issues. This can contribute to future decision-making—not only by Government, but also by Māori, business, academia, not-for-profit organisations, and the wider public.

The Public Service Commissioner told us that the public service has a duty of stewardship, to look ahead and provide advice on future challenges and opportunities. He explained that incoming Governments used to receive briefings from the public service. These set out the big challenges and provided information that the Government could use to formulate its core policies. However, after the mixed member proportional (MMP) voting system was instated, briefings in this form became superfluous. This was because coalition negotiations would take place before the briefings were delivered, and the main goals of a Government are often set during coalition arrangements. In response, the public service began offering

briefings to individual Ministers instead. The Commissioner commented that, with the loss of government briefings, some of the long-term strategic thinking of the public service was also lost. The long-term insights briefings are designed to reinstate this strategic thinking and preserve the institutional knowledge that the public service can offer the Government.

About the Public Service Commission's briefing

The Commission's Long-term Insights Briefing focuses on public participation and how it plays a role in the government of New Zealand.

The Commission defines participation as involvement by any part of New Zealand society, or any community of New Zealand, on an individual or collective basis, in government decision-making.

Why participation matters

As the briefing notes, public participation is central to a healthy democracy. It gives the public and communities opportunities to be informed, and to influence decisions. It also enables the public to influence the design and implementation of public services, making services more appropriate and effective. Finally, participation matters because it provides a way for the Government and public to work through complex issues together in an inclusive way.

Trust and confidence in the public service

The Commission's briefing says that New Zealand consistently performs well in rankings related to public trust and confidence. New Zealand experienced an increase in public trust between 2007 and 2020, while many other countries in the OECD¹ saw a drop. This trust will help the public service navigate future challenges, said the Commission. We were pleased to see that peoples' trust in the public service and government is increasing. We noted that the Commission conducts quarterly analysis to see where trust and confidence is strongest. It uses this information to improve services. We asked whether this analysis showed whether some sectors are performing better than others and whether services in certain regions of the country outperform others. The Commission explained that it is working on forming a more detailed view of these things. It is a matter that is always discussed during the Commission's regular meetings with chief executives.

COVID-19 and public trust

The Commissioner believes that the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated trust in the public service. The pandemic highlighted how transparency and competence affects the public's trust and confidence in the public service. During the pandemic, the public were able to see what, and how much, public servants do on their behalf. Members of the public could see the people advising the Government, and the outcomes of this advice. The Commissioner commented that he does not believe the public service behaved differently during the pandemic, but that its work was more visible due to extensive media coverage. We heard that trust levels are still higher than pre-pandemic levels.

¹ The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) is an association of 34 countries, including New Zealand, that are democratic and have free-market economies.

What affects participation?

During our hearing, we discussed how trends in the way the public service operates can affect participation. We heard that the public service has changed from operating under a traditional administrative model with relatively little public engagement and low autonomy for most public servants. Now, public participation and quality engagement is a core tenet of the public service.

Societal trends also affect the level of participation in democracy. The four trends discussed in the briefing are: increasing inequality, climate change, demographic changes, and digital technology. Some trends form a positive base to build from whilst others pose challenges.

What enables and hinders participation?

Factors that enable participation include:

- Government Ministers being supportive of public participation
- official information being available and accessible in a timely manner
- public and communities having the capacity and capability to participate
- the public service being able to work in new ways
- digital and online forms of engagement being available and easy to access.

The factors that hinder participation are generally the opposite of those listed above. Poor processes, indifference, or ethical lapses can undermine people's willingness and ability to participate.

The briefing explains that Governments have wide discretion to make decisions, limited only by legal requirements. Governments may choose to consult or involve the public in decision-making. The main role of the public service is to provide free and frank advice to Ministers to help them develop and implement policy. Whether the public are involved is ultimately the Minister's decision.

We discussed how MPs have good insights into the needs of their regions. However, if they are not Government MPs, this insight may not be utilised when designing services for that region.

The briefing explained that a culture of open government and engagement enables participation. One of the most basic forms of participation is through accessing official information. To facilitate this, information needs to be readily available. The Official Information Act 1982 helps to facilitate information being made available to the public. However, in a world where information is so accessible, people expect more, said the Commission. We heard that proactively releasing information can help.

The public's capacity to participate depends on people being aware of opportunities for engagement. Their capacity is also affected by the avenues of participation offered. If the avenues suit their needs and circumstances, people are more likely to be able to participate. For example, providing digital avenues of participation could suit a number of people.

The way the public service operates can hinder participation. Short timeframes, a lack of meaningful engagement, inaccessibility, a lack of follow-up, and poor facilitation were raised by community groups as their top concerns about engaging with government. It was also suggested that public servants may need specific training to help them facilitate quality engagement experiences and manage privacy issues related to participation.

Technology gives many people access to timely public services, but some people want to speak to a human when accessing services. The experience a member of the public has when on the phone contributes to how much they trust the service. The Commission predicts that services will continue to be offered both digitally and via human interaction. We were pleased that the human interaction aspect of the public service will not be lost. We know that many New Zealanders want to access services through human interaction.

Technology offers a lot of potential in terms of public engagement and unifying the public service. However, it also poses challenges. These include internet access and digital disadvantage, cybersecurity, and misinformation.

Misinformation

Misinformation is incorrect or misleading information. It is different from disinformation, which is deliberately deceptive. The spread of misinformation is increasing. Misinformation can seriously hinder the public's trust in government, leading to lower levels of participation.

We discussed how the Commission's briefing deliberately used the term misinformation to cover both misinformation and disinformation. We think that disinformation has greater potential to erode people's trust in government, but noted that misinformation can also do this. The Commissioner said it is part of the role of the public service to dispel misinformation. We are interested in how the public service determines what information is misinformation.

We asked whether a Government being too insistent about a particular issue, such as encouraging people to get vaccinated against COVID-19, could erode people's trust in government. The Commissioner said that part of the role of the public service is to provide accurate, evidence-based advice to the Government. It needs to update this advice as evidence changes over time so that what the Government legislates or encourages New Zealanders to do is informed by the most current evidence.

The Commissioner said that the way in which people can choose to access information and filter it nowadays represents a huge societal shift, akin to the industrial revolution. There is no longer one obvious source of truth. The public service needs to respond to this by engaging with the public in more innovative ways. The days of simply writing a consultation document and letting people respond are mostly over, said the Commissioner.

Regional Public Service Commissioners

The public's ability to engage can be hindered by the way the public service operates. Regional Public Service Commissioner positions have been established as part of the ongoing reforms to the public service.² The reforms aim to change the public service so it

² <https://www.publicservice.govt.nz/guidance/public-service-act-2020-reforms/an-overview-of-the-changes/>

operates as one joined-up system that effectively tackles the big, complex challenges facing New Zealand. We heard that there are 11 Regional Public Service Commissioners covering 15 regions across New Zealand.³ Local communities' capacity to participate is supported by these commissioners. Regional commissioners are responsible for engaging with local communities—including local government, iwi, NGOs, and others—to work out what the community needs and wants from public services

The Commissioner said that, at present, these commissioners organise the public service in that region. However, in the future it would be beneficial to provide them with a mandate to use funding as they see appropriate. We asked how this shift would likely take place. The Commissioner said that over time more flexibility could be introduced into the system. He gave an example of reducing family violence. Often government money is put into specific programmes to help stop family violence in a region. However, if people on the ground in that region were allowed to decide where to put that money, greater autonomy and flexibility could be achieved within the current system.

Some of us questioned whether this arrangement would achieve the outcome of better serving the community, having observed that public servants have in the past taken a risk-averse approach to making decisions. The Commissioner said that it can be difficult to run a regional programme from Wellington. He said that there are layers in the public service which can cause “blockages” between staff in Wellington and front-line public servants in the regions. We heard that the regional commissioners are a breakthrough in this area. The Commissioner told us that there are opportunities to make the public service more responsive to customer needs, and he is very hopeful about the work being done to bridge the gap between central government and the services reaching communities.

We were interested to hear how oversight and accountability of government money would be maintained if regional commissioners had a mandate over funding for that area. We were told that money would be spent on programmes and causes designed to achieve specific goals, and the Minister would remain ultimately responsible for the outcomes from the funding.

The Commissioner also said that having a board made up of chief executives from across different departments helps create a more unified public service. This board is responsible for ensuring that the public service is upholding its principles.

What can be done to improve public participation?

In the “Direction of Travel” section of the briefing the Commission used the information about what affects participation to identify ways of improving New Zealand's capacity and capability to support public participation. The aim is to enable people to participate in a meaningful way that results in the most appropriate and effective services.

The Commission outlines three things that the public service could do to improve trust, participation, and how it supports government.

³ <https://www.publicservice.govt.nz/system/regions/>

1. Adopt a common framework for participation that all agencies use when consulting or engaging with the public. This would provide more consistent and measurable engagement.
2. Try innovative approaches to tackle the most important problems. For example, task a representative group with analysing a problem and recommending how to improve the situation.
3. Establish an expectation, over time, that the public service will use a fully collaborative and empowering approach. This would include qualitative conversations, devolved decision-making, and co-designing policy and solutions.

The Commission says the public service needs to change the way it operates to create opportunities for this kind of participation.

What will participation look like in the future?

The briefing explains that the Commission predicts that the public service will move towards using more enabling forms of participation in the future. This would see the public service partnering with the public to involve them more in government decision-making. Methods used to facilitate this could include: co-design, collaborative governance, and citizens' juries or assemblies. Empowering forms of participation place the final decision in the hands of the public. This can be done via delegated decision-making or using participatory budgeting models which devolve funding decisions to the people the funding is intended to help.

The Commission acknowledged that the bulk of participation in New Zealand currently tends to be consultation rather than the more collaborative type of participation that places the final decision in the hands of the public. During our hearing, we heard about an example of a deeper form of participation which involved the Pike River Mine survivors and their families. The Commission said it recently released standards for the public service to follow about how best to work with survivors. The survivors, families, and friends of the victims of the Pike River Mine disaster were interested in contributing to making future public service responses to disasters better. By engaging with them, the Commission learned that survivors want honest communications and early access to information.

The Commissioner explained that if these standards had been devised using classic consultation processes they would not be as powerful or as useful. He emphasised that the public service needs to get better at this deeper, more empowering form of participation and using it in the right contexts.

The Commissioner acknowledged that this example is not isolated—much of the public service is doing work like this. However, the Commission is working to shift the whole system of participation to a more empowering one.

Supporting specific communities to engage

We asked what the public service is doing to support migrants to trust government and participate in it. We observed that migrants often do not trust the government because they feared, or were let down by, the government of their home country. The Commission said it does a range of things as part of the general introduction to New Zealand that is offered to migrants by the public service.

The Commission emphasised that allowing people or organisations who have connections with migrant communities to explain how they can participate in democracy is more effective than having the public service directly connect with them.

We suggest that diversifying the public service is one of the best ways to ensure meaningful engagement is carried out with all communities in Aotearoa.

Engaging with young people

We asked how the public service is engaging with youth and whether any trends in this engagement have emerged. The Commission said young people expect to be able to engage in government decision-making. They expect more than just voting and commenting on consultation documents—they want more personal engagement. This is why it is important that the public service provide innovative ways for people to engage, and shift towards the deeper, more empowering forms of participation.

The Commission noted that young people generally trust the Government less than older people. However, the disparity between the generations is less in New Zealand than in other countries.

Engagement with Māori

The briefing discusses the importance and benefits of Māori participation in government. It states that the Treaty of Waitangi/Te Tiriti o Waitangi emphasises the importance of Māori having opportunities to participate. Māori participation helps to build trust between Māori and the Crown. It also contributes to decisions and services that reflect Māori perspectives, tikanga and mātauranga Māori, or that use kaupapa Māori approaches. The briefing says that this is ultimately more likely to deliver better services and more equitable outcomes for Māori.

Consultation on the Commission's briefing

We note that under the Public Service Act agencies must provide for public consultation on the topic and on a draft version of long-term insights briefings.

During our hearing with the Commission, we heard that only Te Rūnanga o Ngāi Tahu provided feedback. The Commission subsequently told us in response to written questions that it had engaged with the Pacific Youth Leadership and Transformation Trust (a Christchurch based charity run by Pacific young people) and the Wellington Interfaith Council. The Commission noted that it does not have many existing relationships with the public compared to other agencies. However, it reflected that it aims to build incentives and better engage with the public when producing future briefings. We were pleased to hear this.

We think that more could have been done to connect with Māori, youth, migrant, and ethnic communities. We would encourage the Commission to be more proactive when engaging with these communities. We would prefer to see it actively reach out to people if they do not respond.

Conclusion: our views on the briefing

The Public Service Commission's briefing is one of the first long-term insights briefings to be prepared. We recognise the value of these briefings, as they generate strategic thinking about the medium- and long-term trends, risks, and opportunities that affect or may affect New Zealanders. The briefing provided good insight into what affects public participation in government, how it could be improved, and what participation may look like in the future.

We found that the Commission's briefing clearly set out predictions about what participation will look like in the future. The briefing suggests the public service will move towards using more collaborative, empowering approaches to participation that offer the public a way to better influence government decision-making. This could involve the public service partnering with the public and using delegated decision-making to allow the public to be fully involved in government decision-making. The Commission explained that, to do this, the public service will need to adopt innovative ways of engaging with the public.

Regarding the quality of information in the briefing, we considered how well it set out the trends and future risks and opportunities facing New Zealand. We think the Commission successfully presented relevant information about trends in public management, demographic changes, increasing inequality, climate change, and digital technology. It also explained how the trends could lead to different risks and opportunities in the future. It made it clear what participation will likely look like in the future and set out how the public service needs to change to facilitate this.

We commend the Commission for focusing on the role of public participation in government, as we agree that participation underpins our democracy. We were pleased that the briefing was set out clearly and easy to read. This makes it accessible to all and useful to people involved in public participation in the future.

We found the briefing useful, and believe it will be of value to the public and the public service. We do think it would have benefited from more input by Māori, young people, and migrant communities. We encourage the Commission to consider how to connect with these communities as part of its future work.

Appendix

Committee procedure

We met between 27 July and 19 October 2022 to consider the Long-Term Insights Briefing from Te Kawa Mataaho Public Service Commission. We held a hearing with the Public Service Commission. The briefing is available [here](#).

Committee members

Ian McKelvie (Chairperson)

Rachel Boyack

Naisi Chen

Jamie Strange

Hon Michael Woodhouse

Recording of our hearing

A recording of our hearing is available on the committee's Facebook page.