

Community Consultation

How best to consult with the Playcentre communities to assess views on a range of issues.

Consultation can collect positive information, but to ensure an effective consultation process, here are some pointers for the board.

Why consult?

Legal obligations to consult

A board's legal requirement to consult is spelt out in relatively few situations.

Examples include:

- Commitment to Te Tiriti o Waitangi
- Ministry of Education, Ka Hikitia 2018-2022. Realising Māori potential is considered in all targets, plans and policies
- Consult with the organisation's communities when developing policies, plans and targets to improve the progress and achievement of all whānau.

This includes a responsibility to consult whenever it is developing or reviewing critical aspects of its operations, and as part of ensuring key educational and administrative responsibilities are met.

Here are some examples.

Natural justice principles

The principles of natural justice, which include fairness, mean it is wise for boards to consult with Playcentre communities whenever it is in the process of making decisions which will strongly impact on its members.

Playcentre communities that have not been consulted before a controversial decision by the board would have good reason to challenge the decision in the High Court and the Office of the Ombudsman.

Consultation and engagement

Playcentre community consultation is an integral part of who we are as an organisation and is an important aspect of community engagement.

The Education Review Office defines this in the following way:

Community engagement is 'meaningful, respectful partnership between schools and their parents, whānau, and communities...focused on improving the educational experiences and successes for each child'.

THE EDUCATION REVIEW OFFICE INCLUDES "EDUCATIONALLY POWERFUL CONNECTIONS AND RELATIONSHIPS" IN DOMAIN 3 OF ITS PROCESS INDICATORS, AND IT GOES ON TO STATE:

Parents and whānau are the primary and ongoing influence on the development, learning, wellbeing and self-efficacy of their children.

IT IS SIGNIFICANT THAT COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT IS PART OF ONE OF THE FOUR PRINCIPLES IN TE WHĀRIKI:

The wider world of family and community is an integral part of early childhood curriculum.

Community consultation and board operations, policies and procedures

Community consultation is also a critical part of the board's operations – for instance:

- during its constitution and strategic plan development and update process,
- and as part of its self-review and policy review processes.

Many boards have a community consultation policy, or provide for community consultation as part of specific policies. Examples could include:

- Reporting to students, parents and community on achievement policy
- Māori student achievement policy
- Special education needs policy
- Te Tiriti o Waitangi and Māori Partnership policy

If the board is concerned that there is a sense of discontent in its Playcentre community, or a major change process is about to take place, a careful consultation process could be useful.

What about consultation when the board has concerns about what is going on in the organisation – with the General Manager, for instance - which it hopes will provide it with ammunition to deal with this perceived problem?

Community consultation is not the way to deal with those kinds of concerns. Using consultation processes for this reason quite rightly risks making staff suspicious and defensive.

What does the board want to know?

AVOID A WIDE RANGE OF SUBJECTS IN THE CONSULTATION

Once the board has decided it needs or wants to consult, it is recommended that it limits the topics covered in any consultation. This avoids, for instance, an overlong survey that people don't end up completing and too much data that is not then able to be put to good use.

AVOID QUESTIONS ABOUT THINGS THE BOARD HAS NO CHOICE ABOUT PROVIDING

It is also wise to only ask questions about issues where community feedback can affect an outcome. For instance, the board is required to ensure the delivery of the curriculum is in line with NZQA, TEC and our PTE status'. So, even if all the survey respondents agree the organisation should stop teaching the Playcentre Education programme, the organisation cannot implement such a change.

Who is the board going to consult?

The smaller the number to be consulted, then the higher the chance of an error. For example, if there are fifteen families in the Playcentre the board might want to hear from all fifteen in order to ensure it has covered all the bases.

On the other hand, if there are 3000 families in the Playcentre community, and the board has done a random sample of 300 families (10%), then provided they all respond, the chances are it has a reasonably good picture.

If the board chooses a sampling method that doesn't include everyone, it is still free to make a general invitation, through Playcentre internal communications, for any other whānau interested in participating.

How is the board going to consult?

A SURVEY

Surveys have their uses but they can be costly, time consuming, may have a low response rate, and may not actually tell the board what it wants to know. An online survey may also not be anonymous.

OTHER OPTIONS

- a focus group where a random sample is taken from the organisation roll and personal invitations are sent to the sample group to come and discuss the key questions the board has identified;
- a group of people doing on the spot interviews at an already established event. For example, member interviews;
- a telephone survey. This may need some pre-warning through internal communications and however else the organisation communicates with its community;
- an “exit” survey of parents who have decided their children are to leave the Centre; and
- the board might get more and better quality responses from two questions once a term on the bottom of the regular communication channel than a three page questionnaire once a year.

ANY BARRIERS TO PARTICIPATION IN THE CONSULTATION PROCESS?

The board could also brainstorm possible barriers to participation by its families in a consultation exercise, and how those barriers could be overcome.

Having someone else to ask the questions and record the answers, or survey questions in languages other than English relevant to the Centre might encourage people with literacy issues, and speakers of languages other than English to respond.

Fine-tuning the consultation process

Once the board is clear about why it wants to consult, what it wants to know about, who it is going to ask, and how it might go about asking them, the next step is to look at the specifics of how it is going to collect that data. Here are some tips.

Asking questions in the “right” way

The saying is “lies, damn lies, and statistics”, and it is certainly possible to create a survey form or interview questionnaire that will get answers the board wants to hear rather than the “truth”.

For example, here are two different ways the board could frame a question about ICT:

Version one

Next year we are continuing to develop our information and communications technology programme. Do you think the organisation should buy:

- A. 15 new computers?
- B. 10 new computers and budget for networking the entire organisation?
- C. 10 new computers, a digital camera, and scanner?

Version two

A major goal of the board over the past few years has been to improve the provision of information and communications technology.

This has included networking the organisation, increasing the number of computers available, and improving our software. In your opinion how do you think the organisation is doing in this area?

Still way behind other services	1 2 3 4 5	Best facilities in the area
Not enough emphasis on ICT	1 2 3 4 5	Too much emphasis on ICT

Have you any other comments?

There could be times when version one would be appropriate. For example, when the Finance has raised a sum of money to contribute towards computers and the whole community has already clearly identified this as a priority.

However, version one assumes that the goal of improving ICT is shared by the whole Playcentre community, while version two allows room for a range of views. The “openness” of version two is more effective for board consultation focused on strategic priorities. However, version two is not a “perfect” model question either, because it is values based.

Ensuring a response

Include relevant background information

It can be useful for a survey, for instance, to “remind” its community of background information to increase the chance of a more informed response. For example, if the board is consulting on its strategic plan, it could summarise an aspect of the strategy as part of a question. It could also include a cover page to the questionnaire which highlights key goals.

Keep it simple

Multi choice, Likert scale or open-ended questions?

For quick results multi choice, or a Likert scale (for example, the 1-5 range in the example above) are user friendly and easy to translate into data. Answering two or three questions of that kind can also get people eased into what they think about a topic so when they come to “comments” they may have something to add.

There are other forms of consultation where asking several open-ended questions can generate good feedback in a way a scale cannot.

Example: the board is considering developing its outdoor areas.

What do you think are the best aspects of our playground areas?

What are the areas you would like to see improved?

Have you noticed anything about our outdoor areas that have caused you to feel concern for child safety?

These kinds of questions could even have a sketch or photograph of the playground as it is currently. The questions also show the board is interested in a range of parent opinion.

Tailor to your Playcentre community

Consider the language of the questionnaire. For example, are the questions easy to understand? Rather than use words like “literacy” and “numeracy” the consultation could use “reading” and “numbers”. Sometimes it is useful to have someone available to ask questions and write the answers for the person being consulted. This might encourage greater participation from people who are not confident with literacy or who are verbally fluent in English but not confident writing in English.

Ideally the main body of the questionnaire (before people add comments) should be able to be answered in ten to fifteen minutes.

Ways to shoulder tap people have already been mentioned, but also think about communication challenges the board might face with its community. Centres in different communities will find varying tailored ways to get the best engagement from their community. One Centre might find they get a better response rate to a survey by asking parents to log into their website and request the survey by email. Against that option, is the difficulty with making an email response anonymous.

Another Centre might find it works to have a trusted member of their community visit a random sample of families. Or, if there is a widely listened-to community radio station the board could use the station’s community noticeboard service.

Test drive the questions

Test out the questionnaire by, for example, giving the questions to board members or even people who have nothing to do with the organisation to answer. This helps prevent questions that assume prior knowledge or use jargon not all the Playcentre community will understand.

Provide incentives to respond

The board could also encourage responses with a prize draw that everyone who replies is entered into. Ideally survey forms are anonymous so if it does this, have a cover slip for a contact name that gets detached and entered in the prize draw box.

Feed the consultation results back to the community

Make sure the board feeds back the results of its consultation exercise to the community.

If there has been a high level of requests on an issue that is difficult for the board to action, tell people that the request has been noted but is not achievable in the short to medium term.

Letting the Playcentre community know the results of the process, and if possible any impact that has been made on board decision making, will encourage participants to feel the effort they put into responding was valued, and they are likely to be receptive the next time the board decides to consult.