

Sally Hett

# Trust local knowledge: citizens are experts in their own lives

I was excited. When I started working I was excited about the social impact mandate inherent in the public sector – how good! Then, as my work led me into the depths of the public sector’s limitations, I was swallowed by despair. As an advisor on the Government Inquiry into Mental Health and Addiction I was a sponge to the pain of the country. I heard the pain in young people, solo mothers, whānau, refugees of not being heard, seen or supported. The reality of slow, siloed, under-resourced and overly risk-averse agencies was undeniable.

Climate, technological and demographic changes are driving inevitable and much-needed systems change. The current siloed, slow and risk-averse public sector is not effectively addressing the complex problems we are facing. It is human nature to value someone’s opinions and knowledge when you trust them. I see trust as the missing piece in authentically involving citizens in decision making, at both Cabinet and national and local government levels. The ultimate reflection of trust being reciprocated within agencies

and with the public will be when we have devolved some power closer to where communities affected by decisions live, work and play; and when participatory problem solving becomes the norm.

## **Under the hood**

If you look under the hood of agencies, people are working extremely hard and care deeply about serving New Zealanders. However, the political and bureaucratic demands of business as usual leave little time for doing the *do* – not news to many

who are reading this! The blend of media scrutiny, putting out fires, competing priorities, accountability requirements, and relationships with staff, other agencies or politicians would put pressure on anyone. All of this is exacerbated by shifting government priorities every three years. I am exhausted thinking about it.

Young policymakers are thinking, ‘hold up, is this my work environment?’ Young people generally are thinking, ‘hold up, are those policies meant to serve me?’

I do not believe the New Zealand public sector is where it could be. Nor do many public servants and leaders working every day to improve it. The upshot of this is compromising what is delivered to citizens, resulting in needs not being met. The effect on policy development has been summed up as follows:

[Policymakers] design some rational solution, it goes through the political meat grinder, whatever emerges is implemented (often poorly), unintended consequences occur, and then – whether it works or not – it gets locked in for a long time. (Beinhocker, 2016)

A key piece missing in policy design is connecting with those most affected. Currently the problem is identified and

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defined and solution options developed, all from a desk in Wellington. It is only during the consultation phase that people affected by the decisions are engaged. On the Mental Health and Addiction Inquiry we heard that consultation is a cross between a con and an insult. Safe to say, it is not cutting it. Decision making is then back in a meeting room. Implementation is centralised and only evaluated, maybe, after a set amount of time. 'Information and knowledge deficits mean that the intervention that will achieve the desired outcome is not identified'; increasing the risk (Eppel and Karacaoglu, 2017, p.381). Without local knowledge, policymakers cannot help but create rational solutions based on international research, ways they have done it before and what is politically palatable.

## Politicians remind us that it is a citizen's right to engage with the government. But really, submissions and select committees?

The State Services Commission's *Getting to Great* report said their hypothesis is that 'low engagement scores [from public servants] represent lost hope and people feeling like they are not trusted' (Francis and Suckling, 2014, p.40). If public servants do not feel trusted to do their job, how can they reciprocate trust with communities?

Frustration with the policy process does not reflect simply disagreement about policy options between young people and older generations. It is widely acknowledged that systemic changes are needed: the disconnect is between Wellington and Kaitia, between front-line staff and boardrooms, between experts and citizens; it is between those making the decisions, and those affected by them.

Politicians remind us that it is a citizen's right to engage with the government. But really, submissions and select committees? As described on the New Zealand Parliament website, a select committee is where 'committee members work together to consider topics that Parliament's House of Representatives needs more information

on and recommendations about' (New Zealand Parliament, n.d.) The select committee system is framed around politicians needing more information, not about systemically involving citizens in decision making, not about civic dialogue. If that is the main avenue by which to engage, it is far from inclusive.

### How did we get here?

We always point to the New Public Management reforms and the State Sector Act 1988, and for a good reason. These changes fundamentally shifted the way public servants served. The power shifted to the Beehive. Public servants went from serving the public to serving their ministers. Relationships with the community sectors were not prioritised.

People's best judgement was superseded by a mix of prescriptive rules and neo-liberal governance. Over the same period, the government hid behind the story of austerity to implement a bundle of economic policies that eroded social services, reduced healthcare spending and cut taxes for the wealthy. Governments championed progress, being solely concerned with economic outputs (Heinberg, 2013).

This shift in governance approach was not ethically neutral. It embedded a set of values in our public sector reflective of the neo-liberal shifts in society broadly – to individualism, competition and hyper-consumption. We treat government agencies like businesses and wonder why collaboration is hard. 'The system incentivises separate agencies to be enterprising about their own resources, focused on the production of outputs, but not incentivised to connect with others or focused on achieving better outcomes' (Cameron, 2019, p.5). Competition between agencies is counter to the purpose

of the public sector – to work together to improve the intergenerational wellbeing of New Zealanders (Treasury, 2019).

### Change, please

Luckily, despite all this, I am still excited. I am excited because I see a way forward. I am excited because there is an appetite across the public sector for much-needed system change. We cannot keep doing the same things and expect different results. I am excited because people get it.

- 'With each generation of citizens come higher and higher expectations of government and the public service. That is a good thing. And we must rise to the challenge' (Hughes, 2019). See, State Services Commissioner Peter Hughes gets it.
  - Public servants also get it, using toolkits from the Policy Project and working hard despite the institutional environment wearing them down (Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2017).
  - State Services Minister Chris Hipkins gets it, stating, 'the public service needed to be adaptive and responsive to the changing needs of citizens, who did not live their lives in neat compartments' (Devlin, 2019).
  - The current government gets it, leading internationally with a wellbeing approach to budget decision making, showing a willingness to experiment with new ways of working.
  - Grant Robertson gets it, stating at his annual IPANZ address in February 2020 that agencies should be exploring new models that will better deliver outcomes.
  - The new Public Service Act reflects this need for systemic change, hoping to 'break down the silos of the current system and create an environment based on collective responsibility and co-ordinated action that delivers great outcomes to New Zealand' (State Services Commission, quoted in Donadelli and Lodge, 2019, p.44).
- The question is how to embed legislative changes into culture. Public servants are asking how to translate 'a spirit of service to the community' into action (Public Service Legislation Bill, s9). With so much of business as usual governed by

conventions around rules, we need to change conventional culture – ‘how we do things round here’ – as well as legislation. In the 1980s they were good at ‘hyper-innovation’, top-down changes that affected every way we lived. We do not want to create this change that way. New ways of operating are needed to displace the past – models that live out our values.

#### **Wanted: trust in local knowledge**

We need a more humanised bureaucracy built on trust. I say trust because that is both a prerequisite to and result of genuine community involvement. ‘Governments should trust communities to identify their own needs and make their own decisions’ (Monbiot, 2019). Communities’ trust in the government will grow as a result. McKinsey has found that understanding citizens’ needs and working with them to satisfy expectations can deliver up to nine times more trust in government (D’Emidio et al., 2019).

Addressing core problems for citizens is fundamental to delivering the desired outcomes. To do so, ‘those most affected by a given policy should have deeper involvement. Citizens are experts in their own lives’ (Rashbrooke, 2018, p.55). We need a policy process that embeds the voices of those most affected and values local knowledge earlier in the process. This will build trust and a sense of connection. We need a policy process that:

- co-constructs outcomes with those most affected. There is little point in working towards outcomes that people do not want. It seems logical;
- connects with other agencies that might too be contributing to the outcomes;
- identifies the root-cause problems by connecting with the realities of citizens’ experiences;
- co-designs policies grounded in evidence about the problem. I know ‘co-design’ is overused, but the principle remains necessary – that the community is involved in the process of designing the policy. This could be a ‘citizens’ jury’ approach, whereby individuals representing a cross section of the community (a mini-public) are presented with the evidence to debate and deliberate on, to then reach a collective decision or recommendation

on the given policy issue. Citizens’ juries embed participation in policy design (Participedia, 2019);

- embeds feedback loops to allow for improvements. The process of iteration allows lessons to be implemented and policies able to evolve with citizens’ needs, to ensure creating the desired outcomes.

Involving those most affected means including young people. We are affected by the decisions made today as well as past ones, for longer: your decisions to deregulate; your decisions to chase inflation over wellbeing; your decisions to all but ignore the climate crisis for 50 years; your decisions to keep investing us out of home ownership. I am not talking about our views on policies aimed at young people.

participatory model. While reinstating the four well-beings in the Local Government Act is a great start, council processes need to change to reflect the shift to outcomes over outputs, and take on the participatory approaches to build trust and leadership. The New Localism approach, done right, will better align with the kaupapa Māori approach (Waatea News, 2019). One paragraph does not do this movement justice. Nevertheless, it is worth emphasising that shifting power closer to communities makes their involvement far easier and more intrinsic.

#### **Participatory problem solving in action**

##### *Public sector innovation*

Now, I know that what you are thinking; another daily stand-up, financial indicator,

## How can we get a more diverse and significantly larger group of young people to engage, and provide their opinions to the public sector?

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People have to understand that young people’s experiences help shape better policy for everyone.

#### **Yes minister**

Despite all the hard work to genuinely involve communities, it could still lead to nothing. Ministers can override all the participatory work with a simple ‘no, I like it my way’. No wonder public servants are nervous, building trust in the community only to back out on what was discussed. This veto power can fuel distrust as community contributions are not valued. More than anything, we need ministers to see the value of participatory policy. The trust must extend to between community and Cabinet.

#### **Localism**

‘The much bigger change is this: to stop seeking to control people from the centre’ (Monbiot, 2019). Devolving decision-making power to the local level will make community involvement more meaningful and effective, provided councils adopt a

politician making a top-down decision. The term innovation gets used to discuss politically driven changes, such as the New Public Management reforms (Donadelli and Lodge, 2019). These ad hoc command-and-control ‘hyper-innovations’ are not what we want to promote.

We see innovation as participatory problem solving, continuous improvement, enabled by and contributing to building trust. We see innovation as the use of methods to systematically deliver better outcomes for citizens. In the public sector, the objective is not about the bottom line, but rather about building trust and transparency and enabling citizen-informed decisions.

Across town on Dixon St, among Post-it notes and hot desks, I work at Creative HQ, which is striving to bring this framing of innovation to the public sector. One initiative I am involved in is Lightning Lab GovTech, a three-month accelerator-style programme. It takes projects and staff from government agencies who are tackling complex problems, and applies proven and

effective innovation methodologies to create solutions that work. GovTech is ultimately about better serving citizens by delivering better outcomes. Projects have focused on youth-centric policy engagement and embedding whānau voices in the social sector.

### Youth voice

How can we get a more diverse and significantly larger group of young people to engage, and provide their opinions to the public sector? This was the focus of the Youth Voices team from the Ministry of Social Development and Ministry of Youth Development in the 2018 programme. In 2019 the team co-designed a platform – The Hive ([the-hive.co.nz](http://the-hive.co.nz)) – with young people across the country. They have undertaken a pilot with the Department of Conservation, gaining input from

281 young people on the New Zealand Biodiversity Strategy. The team is now looking at how to move from a prototype to a final cross-government tool.

### Whānau voice

In 2019 a team from Te Hau Āwhiowhio ō Otangarei Trust, Te Tihi o Ruahine Whānau Ora Alliance Charitable Trust and the Social Investment Agency (now the Social Wellbeing Agency) came together to amplify whānau voices in the social sector. They heard about the significant inequalities between Māori and non-Māori, in health and social outcomes, but also in trust and in who is listened to. The team created a tool to collect whānau voices and combine these with existing data to shift the way we contract in the social sector. They received significant funding from the Digital Government

Partnership Innovation Fund to build and test the product.

Momentum is building. Young people are not sitting on their hands. We are drafting legislation, taking to the streets, representing communities on local bodies, and developing new ways to do policy.

I hope this article is read as part of a call for a fundamental shift in the way our public sector serves, moving from silos to participation enabled by trust. My ask is that you reflect on whether your work is based on internal information or evidence from participatory problem solving. 'If people demand a new kind of government long enough and loudly enough, democratic politicians will have to give it to them' (Rashbrooke, 2018, p.287).

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