
Audit of councils' long term plan consultation documents 2018-2028

The Auditor General has recently released a review of the success (or otherwise) of councils' 2018-2028 long term plan consultation documents (*Consultation Documents*). In 2015 it became mandatory for councils to produce Consultation Documents while undertaking a review of their long term plans. The aim of these documents is to provide “*an effective basis for public participation in local authority decision-making processes about the content of a long-term plan*”. Essentially, the Consultation Documents should provide members of the public with an explanation of the important issues the council faces during the next 10 years.

The report looked at the different methods councils adopted when preparing their Consultation Documents and how effective the documents were in facilitating community participation. The report notes that effective Consultation Documents should contain clear language, be clear on which issues are subject to consultation and where to find the underlying information that the content of the document relies on.

The Auditor General made several observations on accessibility, length, effectiveness of grouping issues and the questions asked noting these are all important elements that will determine the success of the Consultation Documents. It also assessed the ways councils had tried to improve community participation. The report commended those who engaged with the community prior to the consultation period, focused on effective communication (e.g. using simple language), limited the number of issues consulted on and promoted the documents through advertising campaigns. It also highlighted the need to update the community about progress on issues already consulted on.

In regards to the issue of resilience, the Auditor-General found that most councils acknowledged the need to consider the effects of climate change and risks from natural hazards and observed that councils are developing an understanding of their exposure to risk that will then inform investment decision-making for long-term planning processes.

While the Report could not be said to provide any revolutionary insight into the consultation process, it is hoped that it will help to guide councils in the development on their future plans and lead to more meaningful public participation.
