

PART II

Chapter 18

**The Online Participation Project,
New Zealand**

by

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Introduction

The New Zealand State Services Commission (SSC) Online Participation Project was launched in 2003. Its purpose was to examine the scope for e-government to improve the opportunities for the public and businesses to participate in government.

A major output is the 2007 Guide to Online Participation that provides agencies with advice on the principles, strategies, implementation and evaluation of online participation projects.

The Online Participation Project aimed to put participation into practice from the outset. This has meant applying the principles at each stage – from exploring issues in face-to-face workshops, to working with a diverse community of practice to develop the guidance, through to trialling online tools that will enable participation.

This case study presents a unique example of government engaging online to draft a policy and guidance in collaboration with a variety of people.

Context

To meet future challenges, government, at all levels, will need to use all available channels to draw on a wider range of knowledge and ideas than ever before. Technology is one small part of the picture.

New Zealand has set ambitious goals for transforming government. These are expressed as concrete development goals for the State Services¹ and as milestones in the E-government strategy² that aims to ensure that:

By 2020, people's engagement with the government will have been transformed, as increasing and innovative use is made of the opportunities offered by network technologies.

Table 18.1. The Online Participation Project: Key characteristics

Costs	The costs of designing and launching the ParticipatioNZ wiki consisted mainly of staff time, domain registration and server space on the SSC's server given that a free open source software (Mediawiki) was chosen to run the application.
Risks	See box below for a full account of risks and mitigation measures taken.
Benefits	The main benefits were in terms of policy quality (<i>i.e.</i> substantive improvements and original contributions to the SSC <i>Guide to Online Participation</i> made by ParticipatioNZ wiki members) and sustainable networking (<i>i.e.</i> creation of a community of change-makers across and outside government).
Inclusion	Efforts to overcome barriers of distance and time were relatively successful, given the online and asynchronous nature of the wiki platform. However, efforts to ensure a wider range of perspectives and representatives of New Zealand's diverse communities (<i>e.g.</i> Māori, Pasifika, Asian) were less successful.
Evaluation	An initial evaluation of the impact of the wiki soon after launch provided input to real-time adjustment of the platform. A simple set of evaluation questions for tracking the wiki's use and development over time was drafted and posted on the wiki.

Community building

As a first step towards this ambitious goal, the SSC launched a Community of Practice (CoP) in December 2006 to share knowledge and ideas on participation. The CoP played an active role in developing and drafting a Guide to Online Participation (hereafter referred to as the Guide) and soon grew to over 200 members including public servants, academics, members of civil society and the private sector located in New Zealand and internationally. This group has met through:

- Workshop sessions in December 2006 and May 2007 initially to shape, and subsequently to review, the draft Guide.
- Regular lunchtime presentations at the SSC in Wellington to support networking, share knowledge and maintain momentum around online participation.
- The ParticipatioNZ wiki,³ where members could contribute to drafting the Guide to Online Participation and could share news and knowledge.

The main focus of this case study is on the use of this innovative, highly interactive online space in drafting a piece of policy guidance.

Box 18.1. Why use a wiki?

A wiki website is a set of web pages where anyone with access can provide comment and add content directly. Governments can use wikis to seek public input to legislation, policy and service design. The SSC project team considered that a wiki would provide:

- An appropriate method for government agencies and ministries to gather information to inform policy and service design and delivery.
- A transparent process that is not interpreted through journalists' or other intermediaries' eyes.
- Sequential reporting to provide transparency and completeness (similar to a parliamentary transcript) where New Zealanders can enter their own comments, or comment on the views of others.
- An opportunity for participants to enter considered thoughts compared to immediate responses they might give in a physical public forum.

Box 18.2. Wikis in government: Potential risks and mitigations

Risks	Mitigations
Offensive edits/comments might occur	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Publish a clear and well-defined commenting policy on the wiki on what is not appropriate. Offensive or malicious comments will be deleted; criminal activity can be reported. • Realise that there are more editors in a community that want to make it right than there are those who want to make it wrong (as for Wikipedia).
Responses are not timely	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Wiki hosts should post content regularly and be prepared to engage people when it suits them. This may mean checking comments or making edits after work hours and on weekends.
Understanding of social media such as wikis to engage public is low	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use existing government networks to improve awareness and understanding. • Demonstrate increasing public uptake and expectation for government to engage through these technologies. • Promote the <i>Guide to Online Participation</i> to support agencies' development of online tools to engage public involvement in policy and service design.

Launch and learn: the ParticipationNZ wiki in use

The SSC project team wanted to provide the Community of Practice with an online space. One where members could share knowledge, views and contribute content about public engagement with government.

The SSC project team considered what functions were needed to support policy development and sharing of knowledge in an online environment. They then looked at the tools that could support those functions. A wiki was chosen as the most suitable online option for members to collaborate, view and create content. The project team described it as a whiteboard where members could put up ideas, comments and diagrams, as you would in planning or developing a project, policy or service.

The process of designing and building the ParticipationNZ wiki (see: <http://wiki.participation.e.govt.nz>) started in January 2007 and a beta version was launched on 30 March 2007. The wiki was demonstrated to the Participation Community of Practice at one of the regular, face to face lunchtime sessions before it was launched.

Who is using the ParticipationNZ wiki?

Members of the community of practice with access to the ParticipationNZ wiki are a diverse range of people drawn from academia, government, business and civil society, as well as international experts who are interested in public participation.

Full access to the wiki is open to a community of practice members only who are provided with a password by the project team. Members are required to login with their own names and encouraged to add a short biography that all members can access. This is intended to create an online space characterised by high levels of mutual trust and joint ownership.

At the same time, each member is free to invite anyone they know who has an interest in the issue of online public participation. This is to ensure that membership remains open to anyone with something to contribute and to guard against capture or “groupthink”. The wiki is similar, in this sense, to a social networking tool. The success of this approach is reflected in membership numbers: within six months of its launch on 31 March 2007 membership had grown from an initial 100 members to around 300 members. As membership grows and diversifies so will the issues raised, to the benefit of all members.

A number of factors were considered when developing this “hybrid” approach to membership management (i.e. password protected but invitations open to social networking):

- The trust that needs to be established within the community of practice – everyone needs to know who is at the party and understand on what basis everyone is contributing.
- How public servants could interact in an online space on the understanding that their opinions and ideas are not committing their agency to policy positions.
- The more limited investment in moderation required for a trusted space compared to a public space.
- The experience of other online communities (e.g. groups registered with Democracy.org).

How did the SSC project team use the wiki?

The SSC project team was charged with developing a “Guide to Online Participation” for the state services within a relatively short timeframe (eight months). Instead of adopting the classic policy consultation cycle (of draft, consult, redraft, publish), the project team opted to “draft naked” and produce a “living document”:

- **Drafting naked:** Content for the Guide to Online Participation was written directly on the ParticipationNZ wiki where members could see the text in “real time”. There was no “cut and paste” from a word processing document – where it could be refined in-house – before being released to the Community of Practice. All members were free to make edits directly on the draft text or to raise issues for discussion on the associated discussion pages for each section. All revisions to the guide are transparent thanks to the “history” function of the Mediawiki platform which shows the individual names of who those who make edits, which greatly increases the granularity of who contributed what and when.
- **Living document:** The SSC project team decided early on that the *Guide to Online Participation* would be “locked down” after launch to establish a first edition, but that it would not be printed on hard copy. This meant that the Guide would remain a user-friendly online resource offering significant navigating power given its dense cross-references and links between the various sub-sections. The SSC project team also proposed that the Guide be subject to “road testing” by a number of agencies after its launch in order to test implementation of the principles and policy advice contained within its pages. The results of this testing, together with continued discussions within the Community of Practice, would then feed into a future edition of the Guide. In this way the Guide was promoted as a distillation of constantly evolving practice and experimentation with online tools – rather than a definitive “rule book” issued by a central agency.

Initial evaluation of the ParticipationNZ wiki

Two weeks after the launch, an initial evaluation of the tool was undertaken. Members were contacted and invited to provide their views, initial impressions and experiences. This feedback provided very useful insights regarding the platform and how users approached it. Members felt that they got value out of: “being part of the group” even if they are not actively contributing at the moment; being “kept in the loop” and knowing that SSC is taking the lead in launching such a platform. On the basis of feedback from members the main page was redesigned to improve navigation.

An evaluation framework was designed and posted on the wiki to allow members to react to the criteria and data sources proposed. Regular data collection provides a sense of how the wiki is being used and how it is evolving.

In terms of outcomes, the ParticipationNZ wiki has to date led to:

- A transparent and participative process in developing policy and guidance.
- Broad involvement beyond the capital city of Wellington (e.g. members from rural areas and the South Island) and internationally (e.g. New Zealanders abroad or members from Canada, Australia, UK).
- Increasing domestic and international interest expressed by New Zealand’s public agencies, other governments and the press about using social media such as wikis to support public participation, particularly with young “digital natives”.⁴

Lessons from experience

The SSC's initial experience raises a number of strategic, technical and cultural issues which government agencies in other countries may also wish to consider when setting up a wiki for public engagement:

Strategic

- Recognise that technology is just an enabler – the first step is to identify what functions are needed to support public engagement and then consider the technology options that are available.
- Choosing an appropriate name for the wiki as well as its design, presentation and branding (with advice from your communications team) to reflect that it is a government space.
- Risk analysis and mitigation measures are required (*e.g.* when moving from an “internal” laboratory, testing environment to a publically available version of the wiki).
- The need to follow your organisation’s information management requirements and ensure that relevant data hosted on the wiki (*e.g.* text, uploaded files) are captured at regular intervals.

Technical

- The greater resources required to support public *versus* limited access wikis (*e.g.* monitoring users’ input on the wiki to ensure compliance with the terms and conditions).
- The terms and conditions of membership (which should be reviewed with your legal unit).
- Hosting requirements, registration of the domain name, defining the helpdesk resources required to support the wiki (*e.g.* one person with back-up in case of absence) and production of guidance on navigating and editing the wiki.
- Linking between the various social media used to engage with the community (*e.g.* the wiki, a project blog, e-mail, podcasts, video) so that ongoing conversations are as connected as possible.
- Providing a way for users to select relevant sections of the wiki and print the results as a single formatted document.

Management

- Adopt a multi-channel approach to communications, using both online and offline means (*e.g.* marketing to alert potential members about the wiki space could use e-mail, regular face-to-face meetings, phone contacts).
- Welcome new members and encourage them to comment, discuss, edit or post articles on the wiki – particularly if they are unfamiliar with this co-drafting space.
- Involve members in designing and refining the wiki at each stage to better meet their expectations and needs (*i.e.* participation in practice).
- Realise that not everyone will interact in the online environment, as per the “one per cent rule”. In most online environments, typically just one per cent of users will contribute 90 per cent of your content. About 10-20 per cent will contribute occasionally. The rest will watch, and contribute if you make it easy for them.

- Provide opportunities for different voices to be heard and consider various ways to respond to those voices.
- Be transparent by enabling participants to access and share information and comment as policy is developed.
- Build community and a sense of trust by providing opportunities for members to get to know each other (e.g. encouraging them to post information about themselves on their wiki user pages, organising face-to-face events, workshops, and celebrations to mark specific achievements).

What next?

The *Guide to Online Participation* was launched in November 2007 as the first step in an evolving area of theory and practice. As such, it will be tested and refined. Consistent with the Statement of Intent and 2006 E-government Strategy, the State Services Commission will continue to:

- Promote online participation as one of several ways to incorporate public ideas and comments on policy and service design and delivery.
- Research and test online participation strategies and engagement tools.
- Promote and test the Guide to Online Participation with agencies, including how to use social media such as wikis.
- Add resources and case studies, such as the Police Act wiki, to share with State services.
- Respond to increasing local and international interest in online tools and methods for public participation.
- Demonstrate leadership of the State Services Development Goals, in particular accessible, co-ordinated, networked and trusted State services.

Notes

1. See *Development Goals for the State Services* at www.ssc.govt.nz/development-goals.
2. See *Enabling Transformation: A Strategy for E-government 2006* at www.e.govt.nz/about-egovt/strategy.
3. See <http://wiki.participation.e.govt.nz/wiki>.
4. For example, "NZ Looks to Wikis for Public Engagement", *Australian CIO Journal*, 21 June 2007 (see full article at: www.cio.com.au/index.php/id;1799575026;fp;4;fpid;21).

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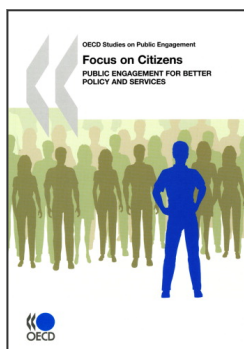
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