Project Spotlight - Northern Corridor Improvements with New Zealand Transport Agency

Can you give us a general overview of your project?

The Northern Corridor Improvements (NCI) project in Auckland, New Zealand is a $NZ700 million motorway, local road, public transport and walking and cycling project that aims to improve travel choices and better link its community to local services and the wider region. The award entry was for the planning, design and consenting phase of the project in 2016-17.

The decision to entrench mana whenua, stakeholder and community engagement as a core project process right from the beginning of the planning phases was seen as critical due to the highly complex nature of the project. The NCI project is in a heavily urbanised, tightly constrained corridor with one of the highest volume motorway corridors in the whole country; over 8 different suburbs with very different communities; New Zealand's fastest growing industrial area; and over 10ha of open spaces and recreational sports facilities. While the project had the potential to bring huge benefits, by necessity it was also going to have a significant impact on a number of community facilities, reserves, special environmental areas and private properties. Building support and understanding what was important to all stakeholders and the community was vital.

Tell us about your project:

        What types of engagement methods/tools did you use? Example, working groups, surveys etc.

At the beginning of the planning phase we used all the IAP2 Core Values and the IAP2 Public Participation Spectrum to systematically identify all our affected groups, their proposed level of participation on the Spectrum, and opportunities and ways to engage with them. We then spent a lot of time running one on one or group meetings and workshops, public speaking at community events, and holding business breakfasts and open days, finding out what was important to our different stakeholders and talking through project options. In formal consultation periods we used surveys, graphics, posters, videos, online software tools like Bang The Table, newsletters and translations to more formally gather in feedback. An important communications tool was regularly publishing summaries of the feedback we received and what we'd done with it, so people could see their input was being valued.

        What principles did you find most useful in carrying out this project?

We are very lucky to work for an organisation that has formalised the value of engagement through an *Environmental and Social Responsibility Policy and Standard* and a *Public Engagement Guideline*. As part of this, the NZ Transport Agency has a set of principles to encourage best practice, including that we know what we are engaging on, we start early, we are genuine, we know who we are engaging with and we understand their background. We came back to these principles at all times and spent a lot of time upfront at the beginning of the project gathering views, listening to people (not debating), building long term relationships and learning about their issues and potential areas of opportunities. We really strived to be honest and transparent as well about which parts of the project people could influence, and those parts that they couldn't. Finally the most important principle that we put in place as a project team was that engagement was <u>everyone</u> on the team's role, not just the engagement manager's job. Our team had a place at the senior management table, we implemented an Engagement Relationship Matrix which assigned accountability for consultation with all key stakeholders across all senior managers and workstreams, we used IAP2 tools and processes at all our decision-making milestones, and every member of the team, including those who normally do desk-research jobs, was encouraged to come and meet our community in person at our open days and community events.

Did you come across any surprises on this project?

Absolutely, a key part of gathering people's views and finding out what is important to them means that naturally you will find out things that a project on paper doesn't know about or hasn't considered. Some examples for us were learning about undocumented rubbish fill, and a new private stormwater device that we then could design around. Or that many people in one of our communities in Unsworth Heights would rather have their local road access shut off, then have a replacement link put in that might have encouraged industrial traffic rat running.

Another surprise was the time, dedication and effort it would take over the two years of the planning phase to understand, assess options and work with the sports community and local government bodies to make sure we got a great result for the facilities that we were affecting and needed to relocate. These decisions were subject to different legal acts and statutory consultation processes, and these all had to be timetabled and completed in between and around our own major National Board of Inquiry hearing.

How were you able to reach such a large portion of the community?

There was no one, easy answer to this. We had a continuous programme of reaching out, seeking people's views and sharing information about our project, and didn't just wait for formal periods of consultation on project milestones. We made a constant effort to attend community events, speak at groups, and share news to our databases. Our online tools helped and our newsletters were sent to a very wide area.

Did you apply the IAP2 Spectrum in this project or the IAP2 Core Values?

Yes, both the IAP2 Spectrum and IAP2 Core Values guided all our work and were formalised in all our decision-making processes and milestones. For example, we formalised our promise that people's input would influence our decisions by adapting a standard Multi-Criteria Assessment (MCA) tool so that community and stakeholder feedback was included and weighted, alongside the other technical factors that are usually scored, like safety, traffic modelling and environmental impacts. We always reported back and "closed the loop" with our stakeholders and community so they knew how we'd used their feedback.

What did you find the most rewarding aspect of working on this project?

Definitely seeing parts of the project that were important to the community successfully designed to meet their needs, for example, the shared walking and cycling path and the list of places we would build access points and local road connections; and seeing a major industrial road reconnected to the network in a place that suited local business and freight needs.

I know for our engagement team specifically too, we also really loved getting out of the office every day, meeting people in the community, learning from people and in return sharing what we'd learnt about the project and how it could help them move around in the future. I particularly loved sharing with people the history of their area, and how our project was taking the cultural history of the area into account in our design.

What are the current challenges or barriers that still exist in this area of engagement?

A key challenge for all planning stage projects is being able to explain and communicate clearly and fairly to people what they can and can't influence – i.e. what's in scope and what's out, what other factors help determine decisions, why sometimes other factors are weighted more heavily than their feedback, what trade-offs we sometimes need to make.

Another key challenge for us in Auckland is trying to reduce our customers' confusion over the division of roles between central government transport agencies (ourselves) and Auckland's local

government organisations, and to try to make it easy for people to understand what's going on or being proposed.

Were you able to overcome those barriers/challenges and if so how?

We tried to overcome this by being crystal clear on what parts of the project we were consulting on each time we held a formal consultation period – tailoring our resources and survey question areas to specifically concentrate on them. We always reported back and published what decisions were made, and how public participation was used in these processes. In stakeholder meetings we spent time explaining the ins and outs of the other factors. Using plain language and being honest upfront was really important.

Our response to the challenge of 'being able to tell the whole transport story' was to work together with the local government transport arm, Auckland Transport, always show a joint face to the public at all times and offer a 'one stop shop' at our community events about everything happening in the area. We found people to be really grateful for this approach, as it meant there was rarely an instance where a member of the public was told that we could not provide an answer to a particular question or direct them to the right place. We also shared feedback and issues that needed a response, and aligned our consultation periods.

What are some of the learnt lessons from this project that others could learn from?

A key lesson learnt was how important it is that your project sponsor values engagement, and ensures that as an engagement manager you have a place at the senior management table.

It was also invaluable to have engagement entrenched in other manager' roles, and to have IAP2-aligned tools formalised as part of the process, including having stakeholder/community feedback scored in decision making workshops and MCAs alongside the other technical factors.