

Project: Because of You

The Horowhenua District Council's Long-Term Plan (LTP) 2024 engagement 'Because of You' campaign was a transformational initiative aimed at increasing participation, particularly among historically underrepresented groups such as Māori, Pacific Peoples, tamariki and rangatahi.

With a proposed 17.4% rates increase and service cuts, Council recognised the urgency of deep, meaningful and inclusive engagement to ensure community voices directly influenced decision-making.

Data from the 2021-2041 LTP Amendment revealed that submissions were primarily from those aged 65+, with minimal engagement from younger demographics. To address this gap, Council adopted a 'Familiar Faces, Familiar Places' approach, prioritising targeted, culturally relevant and accessible engagement methods. This included an innovative Council Elective at Levin Intermediate, interactive sessions with colleges and collaboration with Unison Community Choir and rangatahi from Muaūpoko iwi.

Through a phased, well-governed strategy, Council maximised resources by shifting from costly printed materials to digital tools such as QR codes and video submissions. The project led to a 40% increase in submissions from individuals aged 25-35, first-time oral submitters and direct policy impacts, such as funding for gender-neutral signage.

This model of participatory democracy, trust-building and targeted outreach sets a benchmark for inclusive local government engagement, offering a replicable framework for other councils.



Levin Intermediate elective group – mihi whakatau at Council.

The Strategic Context

The Horowhenua District Council's Long-Term Plan (LTP) 2024 was not business as usual. There was a need to up our game in terms of engagement and enabling the process to be more accessible, less scary, enjoyable, and at a push, 'cool' to be part of, for young people and minority groups.

Facing a proposed 17.4% rates increase, the highest ever alongside service cuts, Council recognised the need for deep and inclusive community engagement, to better understand what our community wanted, how they were feeling and their aspirations for a better Horowhenua. This project aimed to enhance participation, particularly among those historically underrepresented, ensuring their voices were heard and directly influenced Council's decision-making.

Horowhenua is home to a diverse population, with 35% identifying as Māori or Pacific Peoples, and half under the age of 44. Historically, these groups have been less engaged in local government consultation. The 2021-2041 LTP Amendment garnered 418 submissions, with a majority from those aged 65+, and fewer than 50 submissions from individuals aged 34 and under. This data highlighted the need for a targeted and inclusive approach.

The 'Because of You' project sought to:

- Improve the representation and engagement of tamariki, rangatahi and minority voices in the LTP
- Strengthen trust between Council and the community and promote transparency
- Foster relationships with key stakeholders for future engagement.

Targeted engagement was designed for a Levin Intermediate elective group which was an opportunity to not only involved them in the LTP process, but to also learn about the role of Council and services provided. In addition, large groups of young people from three local colleges took the opportunity to be part of engagement sessions and have their voices heard through the submission process. A Community youth choir and rangatahi affiliated with Muaūpoko iwi were part of two further groups where designed engagement was delivered.

The project aligned with Council's strategic direction by prioritising participatory democracy, inclusivity and community-led decision-making. It leveraged off existing networks while building new connections to historically underrepresented voices which ensured a representative, data-informed approach.

Key risks included community apathy, misinformation and resource constraints in being able to support excellence in engagement. To mitigate these, Council adopted a 'Familiar Faces, Familiar Places' strategy, partnering with trusted community leaders and engaging in face-to-face outreach in settings that were familiar to our community. Digital and low-cost communication methods were also employed to maximise reach within Council's budget constraints.



Levin Intermediate elective group.

Project Management

The 'Because of You' engagement campaign was carefully structured over several months, incorporating a mix of face-to-face and digital initiatives to cater to a wide-ranging audience. Events and workshops were held in schools, community hubs and community facilities to maximise accessibility. Council officers, elected members and key community leaders played an integral role in the execution of the plan, ensuring that engagement activities were inclusive and far-reaching.

A phased approach was adopted:

1. Planning and relationship-building with key stakeholders, including iwi, schools, tamariki and rangatahi organisations
2. Active engagement through community events, online initiatives and targeted outreach sessions

3. Data collection, analysis and refinement of engagement strategies to lift response rates
4. Formal submission process and hearings where submitters were able to present to Council and final reporting.

Resources were strategically allocated to maximise impact. Instead of printing costly consultation documents, Council used QR codes linking to the Consultation Document and submission forms, allowing funds to be redirected toward direct engagement activities that were going to have a direct impact. Officer time was also optimised by leveraging existing relationships and collaborating with community leaders to enhance credibility and in turn, community reach.

A clear governance framework was in place to ensure transparency, accountability and effectiveness. The project was overseen by a multidisciplinary team, including elected members and officers who all had defined roles and responsibilities.

Quality assurance measures included crating regular feedback loops. This included ongoing communication with stakeholders to assess effectiveness of the project and subsequent campaign and adjust approaches in real-time, as they were needed.

Stakeholder validation and feedback sessions with key groups ensured that community voices were to genuinely heard and accurately captured.

By adopting an adaptive and responsive approach, Council successfully managed the project, ensuring inclusive participation and meaningful outcomes for the community.



Unison Community Choir – sing and submit!

Relationship Management

During the ‘Because of You’ campaign, it was important to use the right mix of communication tools in the knowledge that the target groups had not taken the opportunity to engage previously. What could we do that was different to before? A change of tact was needed. The approach was to take the project to the community rather than wait for the community to come to Council and engage, or not, as past data informs us.

Council employed a mix of communication tools, including:

- Social media campaigns with ‘Because of You’ branding – using photos of everyday tamariki and rangatahi from our district which was aimed at resonating with our target audience
- In-person presentations which were delivered at planned events at schools, community hubs and community facilities – these were both structured in times and audience, and open to the public sessions
- Use of TikTok – compiling video footage following engagement sessions to use as promotion of the LTP process and how to engage
- Live Q&A sessions
- Simplified materials, including QR-coded business cards for easy online access.

Council focused on Māori, Pacific Peoples, tamariki and rangatahi through careful pre-planning and collaboration. This included traditional and contemporary engagement strategies:

- Kanohi ki te kanohi (face-to-face) engagement, presentations and talanoa
- Partnerships with Unison Community Choir and Muaūpoko Iwi
- School-based workshops and Council-led electives, in particular Levin Intermediate where a “Council Elective” was created which enabled students to choose to be part of the LTP engagement process.



A wall of ideas and thoughts.

Project Success

Prior to this engagement, community participation was skewed towards older residents and minority groups were underrepresented. By embedding the ‘Familiar Faces, Familiar Places’ strategy, Council saw a 40% increase in submissions from individuals aged 25-35, 499 formal submissions which surpassed previous years and an increase in the number of oral submissions from first-timers, both individual participants and groups, in the LTP process. It was also the first time all three of the district’s colleges had been engaged at this level, and Levin Intermediate’s elective was on debut.

Amplifying the Voices of Tamariki and Rangatahi

A key focus of 'Because of You' was ensuring tamariki and rangatahi had a voice in the future of their district. Council introduced a range of targeted initiatives to engage rangatahi, including school partnerships, direct outreach and innovative submission formats such as video presentations.

A major success was the Council Elective, a five-week program developed in partnership with Levin Intermediate School. The elective was designed to educate students about Council's role, involve them in the LTP process, and empower them to make submissions. The sessions included:

- Intensive learning about local government and its impact on their lives
- Understanding key LTP topics such as waste management and community services
- Making their first formal submissions, including recorded video submissions
- Engaging directly with the Mayor, Councillors and Council officers.

Students participated in Council tours, interactive activities and role-playing exercises that mirrored real decision-making scenarios. It included designed 'fun and engaging' activities to assist in making the learning relevant to rangatahi. The program not only provided students with a voice but also fostered long-term civic engagement, with many rangatahi expressing a newfound interest in local government. A majority of students gained confidence, presentation and leadership skills, and a deeper understanding of the role of Council in shaping their futures.

Beyond the elective, engagement extended to three colleges and community youth groups, ensuring rangatahi voices were heard across multiple platforms. The use of interactive and technology-driven engagement methods helped break down traditional barriers to participation.

Council officers and elected members demonstrated innovation in their approach to engaging with the Unison Community Choir. Comprised of members aged 4 to 20, along with their aiga, the engagement team met them where they felt most comfortable—their fale, their place of community. Taking a 'back to basics' approach, elected members immersed themselves in the experience, joining in lotu, sharing mea'ai, and most importantly, listening.

Through small-group brainstorming sessions, everyone had a voice, fostering meaningful dialogue. With a high team-to-participant ratio, tailored talanoa sessions sparked genuine interest and deepened their understanding of local government, creating a truly impactful engagement.

Key barriers to tamariki and rangatahi participation included lack of awareness and intimidation by the formal submission processes. These were overcome by:

- Providing simplified submission guides and video walkthroughs
- Council utilising familiar settings such as schools and community hubs to host engagement sessions, this meant that elected members and officers were the guest and the rangatahi who were to be engaged with were the hosts – an opportunity for hosting responsibilities
- Encouraging peer-led discussions and collaborative submission writing – whilst elected members initially led these discussions, this evolved into being student-led with natural leaders emerging, the creation of videos and writing of submissions.

Impact on Decision-Making

Submissions from tamariki and rangatahi had tangible impacts on the final LTP decisions, including:

- Gender-neutral signage: Levin Intermediate’s submission led to a \$5,000 allocation for inclusive signage in public facilities
- Public infrastructure planning: Unison Community Choir’s advocacy resulted in consideration of a Pacific fale in long-term infrastructure projects
- Tamariki and rangatahi engagement continuity: Council committed to maintaining school partnerships and expanding tamariki and rangatahi engagement initiatives.

Integration into Business-as-Usual

There are several facets as to how this project could be integrated into business as usual using the success of this engagement approach. This has prompted Council to establish ongoing school partnerships, with discussions underway for a science-based elective focusing on Council operations, services and the decision-making process. This engagement will continue and not just apply when Council ‘wants’ something back from a group or community.

We will continue to use video submissions as an accessible way for tamariki and rangatahi in particular, to engage. There is likely to be other groups interested in submitting in this way as this is more relevant for some sectors than writing a formal submission.

As good practice, the engagement team continues to further develop engagement models based on the insights gained from this process.

One thing we know for certain when reflecting on ourselves, is that we as officers and elected members made it happen. However, without diversity of thought within our organisation, we wouldn’t have reached the level of engagement we achieved.

Transferability to Other Local Authorities

Combining traditional consultation with innovative, accessible engagement methods, sparks interest from non-traditional audiences. To achieve meaningful buy-in, engagement must go to the audience—meeting people where they are, breaking down the complexities of Council, and making its role and impact clear from the start.

This approach could be easily replicated by other councils seeking to boost civic engagement and participation in democratic processes. Prioritising direct community relationships and trust-building is the key first step in connecting with tamariki, rangatahi and minority groups.

Long-term, councils should embed engagement tools and practices for these groups into strategic planning. Normalising engagement from a young age fosters understanding, builds trust and integrates Council into everyday life—laying the foundation for lifelong civic participation.

Because of You

By amplifying the voices of tamariki and rangatahi, Council strengthened its relationship with the community and reaffirmed its commitment to inclusive decision-making. This model represents a significant step forward in participatory democracy and community-driven governance.



Levin Intermediate deliver their oral submission at the Hearing.



Council deliberate with walls of 'post its' front of mind, from tamariki and rangatahi sessions.