

Open Government Initiative – Dialogue

Focus Group Sessions EE007D and EE006D

Q1. What works well with the way government engages the public/community stakeholders?

- Minister Kent is good at Twitter.
- Done a good job disseminating information out to the public (not so much in).
- The Fiscal Framework sessions were good. The format allowed for discussion and an opportunity to flush them out a little more.
- Focus sessions. Good interactive sessions (i.e. Rural Secretariat and Fiscal Framework) Sessions that allows for dialogue, discussion and exchange of ideas.
- Land Use Planning session at the Comfort Inn. Great engagement and a mix of people in the room. Youth Retention Policy was another good one. The marketing Tourism did promoting NL that got worldwide attention. This can be used for other initiatives.
- Early invites with follow up reminders. Small group discussions. VPI organized a session in March at Holiday Inn that was extremely effective. Panel and discussions.
- During the black-out Fire & Emergency services did a good job of engaging around the warming centres. They are also doing a good job with social media.
- Don't really have an opinion – haven't attended any recently.
- Opportunity to learn from others.
- Use of technology. People who use keypads get valuable information. Participants enjoy as well. Speaks well that the gov. designated the OPE. Collaborating with other partners (outside gov.) to do engagement.
- Integrating Technology (Using keypads, getting valuable information). Example: Connected virtually with other sites and doing the same session in three sites.
- Having gov. go to the regions when rural areas don't have the resources to travel to town. Sharing experiences and learning from each other and other stakeholders in the room. Example: MNL roundtable discussions, reflecting on the discussions and using turning point to vote.
- Don't have experience but think it is important to talk to citizens. Example: Really like the way Conne River do their consultations/engagements. Engagement at school.
- Information sharing and the fact that they are having the consultations (agree with what was said above). Example: CMHC, Habitat for Humanity, NLHHN coming out and connecting with local groups.
- Talking and learning from each other.

- A way that various sectors can connect. Networking. Online opportunity for those that can't attend. Informal relaxed manor that allows for open discussion.

Q2. What isn't working with the way government engages the public/community stakeholders?

- Not enough notice (recently given less than 24hours to participate in a session (poverty reduction session)).
- Budget consultations – I wouldn't consider this an engagement session.
- As an ordinary citizen I don't have an avenue to participant and have a voice.
- My opinions are not valued. We have ageism. Youth are not listening to the voice of experience.
- If government really wants to know what the average Joe thinks they need to have more town halls. At least twice a year organize a town hall meeting in a geographical area that may include 10 or more towns. Ensure good representation from each town. Full day session that explores very important topics.
- Consultation fatigue. The Fogo Island process was innovative at its time. We need a new innovative approach.
- Some sessions only allow for the louder voices and grand standing.
- Ambulance Review Process – I went there to talk about the service but it was more about the cost of operators. Another participant thought there was repetition in the process; doing engagement over when the consultant already did it.
- Not engaging those that are impacted. I.e. the decision to remove snacks in long term care facilities.
- Reference to PE guide. Inform – Consult gov is doing so so. Co-create needs to be worked on. Feedback from the sessions is not good. This needs to be improved. Gov. does a good job on short term decisions but not so well with engaging in the longer term directions.
- Accessibility – locations are not always accessible. Public Sessions are not geared or accommodating to persons with disabilities. Logistics need to be accessible to individuals with disabilities (physical, hearing, seeing)
- Many government sessions involve too much information out and not enough listening. I wonder if they want to hear from us.
- There is apathy out there and people think it is pointless to get involved.
- Need to engage before the announcement. Filling seats for an announcement is not engagement. How do we do more of engagements? We need to disseminate the information better and be better prepared to avail of opportunities.

- We are asked to attend sessions but there's a feeling that the decision has already been made. We come with the list of issues/concerns that are so meaningful to our organization. Example: Budget Consultations are painful. We were asked to skip over material and get to the point.
- Most times I think that it is a done deal. It's more optics. It's disingenuous, not open enough and no follow up.
- An example engagement was given on the future of a local centre (arts and culture centre). It was implied that there would be change. It took two years for the document to come back to the group on the result of the engagement and nothing ever changed in the end.
- Advisory Councils - I sit on two. Lack or little interest by leaders doing the engagement. Often leaders are saying "we can't change that with all that's going on now!" Makes me question the value of these advisory councils and if I should continue to be involved.
- Don't need to be rigid. I.e. If a session is for two hours and if good discussion is going don't shut it down just because the two hours are up. Don't schedule so you have to run to the airport or another meeting. Everyone needs to know their thoughts are important.
- Need to do a better job explaining the intent of the session. More upfront on the purpose and intent of the engagement. Engaging youth is a challenge. Need to figure out a better way.
- Short notice lots of time (more than one week – two to three weeks). Two weeks minimal. 30 days if you have to prepare documents/information and expect stakeholders to represent an organization.
- Accessibility. One time I got to a meeting and a person wasn't able to access because the building wasn't accessible to them.
- No acknowledgement from government that your opinions were received or of any value. If you pay money to consult with the public then it would be nice to get some form of acknowledgement that what you had to say was heard. And not a basic form letter.

Q3. When should the public be engaged? When would the public want to be engaged?

- Not an easy question. Information should be readily available. Being posted all the time. Budget process is important. Regional issues.
- Before the decision is already made. When you actually want to hear from us. When there are clear choices A, B, or C - but no one wants to pick.
- Agree it's difficult to answer. When the decision impacts the people. Need to have a vision of when and how to engage. Then you need to be consistent.
- When it impacts citizens. If it's high interest or emotional then people need to be engaged.

- Can't engage everyone all the time. Individuals that are going to be impacted by the change. Might be hard to contact everyone but at least those that will be impacted most. I.e. if it has regional impact or if it's a program that will impact a certain sector then they need to have an opportunity to have some say, and in a timely manner.
- Depends on the topic or issue. Analogy – it's like parenting. "Sometimes the decision is the way it is because of safety, or financial so it's a non-issue and no need for discussion. Other times you want to hear what they have to say on an issue and it's an opportunity to educate them. Other times, I don't have a clue and I need to ask them how to go about it." A similar approach can be applied here.
- Advisory groups need to be more representative and ensure diversity across the spectrum they are dealing with.
- Government needs to be continually improving and being innovative in their approaches to engaging the public.
- Discussion: One participant suggested there is a vast part of the public that just don't care and thinks our government should call these people out. Perhaps we need a campaign. Others around the table argued that people don't participate because they don't think they are being heard. Others questioned if we can really validate that the public don't care.
- When it has direct impact on a person's quality of life.
- When it directly affects the quality of life of citizens, communities, regions or province as a whole.
- Government is often reactive but we need to be proactive in our thinking and engaging. Have a vision that is created with the people in the area/region. Short and long term plan that is co-created and revisited from time to time.
- Where you can get the best bang for your buck. Meaningful engagements a couple of times a year in each district (MHA). Topics could include economics, healthcare, etc.
- MHA's should be meeting/engaging in their districts each year (minimal) to hear issues. Another participant said more than MHA, there should be a team (I.e. MHA, University).
- Engage individuals and groups when requested for engagement.
- When public are un-informed (public has limited knowledge) on a policy, program, or service.

Q4. How do we encourage strong attendance at government engagement sessions? How can we make it easier for the public to participate?

- Public dialogue sessions but also an opportunity for you to provide an email or submission after the session when you've had more time to think about the ideas/topics.

- Getting the voices in rural areas and using technology (i.e. videoconferencing).
- Careful thinking and planning before going out. Should be done with community leaders. Use people in communities to help get people involved. Nothing worse than doing it and not getting the best bang for your buck. Need to ensure it the most productive, quality session possible.
- People will participate if you can prove that government values what people are saying.
- Utilize local events and festivals. Natural gatherings. Could have a booth or other approach. Have a list of questions that government would like to have answer to.
- The session needs to be meaningful and participants need to feel valued.
- Personal invites. Seek individuals out. Target audiences for the voices that you need.
- Use media and local communications tools. Open Line, VOICM, community channels.
- Don't be afraid to spend some money on promotion, like the tourism advertisements, if it is an important topic.
- Adequate notice. However, it is usually organic and gets momentum when it is a hot topic. Government is doing a good job already, but then, it is up to the people to attend.
- People will usually only show up if it is a topic that they connect with.
- Public sessions are intimidating; will I be asked something, how do I dress, will I be smart enough, Etc. We need to be creative of how we advertise, announce (frequency of announcements) and be non-intimidating.
- Personal invite vs. open call. We need to target individuals. We also need to be flexible with time (working vs public) and location (cross section of urban centres and rural settings)
- In each setting or location, have an afternoon session and an evening session so that individuals can attend one or the other if they have a work or personal conflict.
- Adequate time when the notices go out.
- A backgrounder on what the engagement is going to be about. Getting the message out there, schools use Centre Voice.
- Have people register with government on how they would like to be notified about future sessions.
- Ask them if they would like to be notified via email, mail, voicemail etc.
- Make it easier.
- Put notifications in the church bulletins.
- It may be difficult to engage but you need to base decisions on evidence (evidence based decisions) so we need some evidence based decisions from engagements. Incentives/prizes to encourage people to attend (it

- works!). Go where the people are: malls, churches, not just hotels. Decisions need to be evidence based not just personal decisions.
- Offer child care and travel subsidies. This also backfires because people only attend for the travel subsidy.
 - If we went to sessions, meeting, etc. and heard results from them, then we would be encouraged to attend again.
 - Advertisement and preliminary information is often in complex language. Needs to be simplified. Employers should support employees that serve on boards to attend sessions. The OPE should have an app that people should be able to download and have push notifications.

Q5. Do you have any additional comments on how government engages the public?

- Will this information or initiative be utilized by the new government?
- We spend time, money and resources to get individuals together to discuss concerns with government officials and at last minute the government officials cannot come.
- There is tremendous opportunity for community forums and utilizing several mediums to collect and build on information. Source information prior to the engagement session, share information at the session and then discuss and debate the topics to take action on. Explain why actions can't be taken.
- Good practice is to send out invites a couple of weeks in advance and then send a reminder a day or two before.
- Public sessions should be a mixture of evenings and days, rural and urban. Sometimes travel subsidies should be considered.
- I always get the impression that they don't want to hear what you have to say.
- Communications positions in each department are important. There would be better engagements if there were less "spin" and more communication and engagement.
- I don't get the logic of Ministers changing positions. We just engage a Minister and then they change again.
- Senior bureaucrats also need to be bought in. It's a change in attitude and a culture change.
- Respond to emails, calls, letters....respond, respond, respond...just let me know you go it!!!
- Will elected leaders be exposed to the Public Engagement Framework as well as departments? There is value, buy-in and learning, when leaders engage.
- What's the next step in this process – when will the information reported?
- Timely reporting and follow-up needs to be a priority (within a matter of weeks or a month). This sometimes takes more time than the setting up.

- I think the public have lost faith and government needs to work hard to reinstall faith.
- Many people don't really understand how government works. It's not taught in schools and also the broader public doesn't understand.
- Evidence based decisions vs. decisions for votes. Politian's can stand behind decisions that are based on evidence.