

# Engaging the public with Parliament in Aotearoa New Zealand

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## **BEGINNINGS OF PARLIAMENTARY ENGAGEMENT WORK IN AOTEAROA NEW ZEALAND**

Since 2016, increasing public awareness of the role of Parliament and members, and public participation in the work of Parliament has been the major strategic focus for staff of the New Zealand House of Representatives. In the face of declining participation in key democratic processes,<sup>1</sup> low trust of politics<sup>2</sup> and an apparent decrease in the relevance of Parliament to the lives of New Zealanders, the Clerk of the House made building engagement with Parliament the strategic priority. Despite low levels of corruption and generally well-functioning civic institutions,<sup>3</sup> members of Parliament are consistently regarded as one of the least-trusted professions in Aotearoa New Zealand. In a democracy, public feedback and consent to be governed

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<sup>1</sup> Voter turnout declined from a high of 93.7% in 1984 to 77.9% in 2014. Voting is not compulsory in New Zealand.

<sup>2</sup> 'Trust survey results revealed: MPs, journalists least trusted', *New Zealand Herald*, 9 June 2015. Accessed at <<https://www.nzherald.co.nz/nz/trust-survey-results-revealed-mps-journalists-least-trusted/UA6ZFS62NMZKNP5MV3NDACA6MA/>>.

<sup>3</sup> Transparency International, *Corruption Perceptions Index 2021, 2022*. Accessed at: <[https://images.transparencycdn.org/images/CPI2021\\_Report\\_EN-web.pdf](https://images.transparencycdn.org/images/CPI2021_Report_EN-web.pdf)>.

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gives legitimacy.<sup>4</sup> This is why building greater levels of trust and participation in parliament was a crucial focus for the Office of the Clerk.

Parliament's engagement work began modestly. Initially, the focus was on improving the reach and accessibility of existing means of communication, such as the Parliament website, Hansard reports, and captioning of Parliament TV. Webcasting of select committees was piloted in 2015 but discontinued because of a lack of funding.<sup>5</sup> Social media channels were tentatively explored with the use of Twitter to communicate and the establishment of select committee Facebook pages. In 2018, the Speaker and Clerk launched the first engagement strategy with a focus on connection, engagement, inspiring future voters, and making it easier to be involved in Parliament.<sup>6</sup> A second iteration was launched by the Office of the Clerk and the Parliamentary Service in 2021,<sup>7</sup> laying out the three-year plan to achieve the vision that everyone understands how to engage with Parliament, and has access to the right tools and information to do so.

## RESOURCING AND RESEARCH

Public engagement is a parliamentary function jointly resourced by the Office of the Clerk and the Parliamentary Service, and has been recognised by both agencies as a shared strategic challenge.<sup>8</sup> This shared function evolved as an extension of the Office of the Clerk's secretariat work in relation to the House and committees, petitions, broadcasting and publishing, and of the Parliamentary Service's responsibilities for welcoming visitors to Parliament and maintaining Electorate and Community Offices around Aotearoa New Zealand. This led to the establishment of a dedicated Parliamentary Engagement team in 2018, jointly resourced by both agencies, which is focused on strengthening the connections between citizens, their Parliament and their elected representatives, and supporting greater levels of public participation.

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<sup>4</sup> P Gluckman, A Bardsley, P Spoonley, C Royal, N Simon-Kumar and A Chen, *Sustaining Aotearoa New Zealand as a cohesive society*, Auckland: University of Auckland, 2021.

<sup>5</sup> Office of the Clerk, *Annual Report*, Wellington: Office of the Clerk of the House of Representatives, 2016.

<sup>6</sup> Office of the Clerk, *Parliament Engagement Strategy 2018-2021*, Wellington: Office of the Clerk of the House of Representatives, 2021.

<sup>7</sup> Office of the Clerk and Parliamentary Service, *Parliament Engagement Strategy 2021-2024*, Wellington: Office of the Clerk of the House of Representatives.

<sup>8</sup> Office of the Clerk and Parliamentary Service, *Parliamentary Sector Annual Report 2020/21*.

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No matter their function, staff across both agencies recognise the strategic priority to engage more citizens with the work of Parliament and contribute to this goal as part of their work. The Parliamentary Engagement team works across the agencies and has four streams dedicated to increase engagement:

- Communications, which creates information to support public understanding of, and participation in, parliamentary business, and which works with news media.
- Digital, which maintains Parliament's website, social media channels and online video (including live and on-demand digital coverage of proceedings and engagement videography).
- Education, which runs educational programmes and activities such as school visits and community outreach, supports members with their work with young people, and provides training and seminars on Parliament for public servants.
- Inter-Parliamentary Relations, which is responsible for Parliament's relationships with overseas parliaments, inter-parliamentary organisations, and other organisations.

Members and their Electorate and Community Offices also play a key role in connecting Parliament and the people, and their support is critical to the success of parliamentary engagement work. A cross-party Member Parliamentary Engagement Committee act as a reference group providing feedback on engagement activities, championing initiatives with their caucuses, and providing recommendations on the implementation of the Parliament Engagement Strategy.

Research has been fundamental in the development of the engagement strategies. In 2017, the Office of the Clerk and Radio New Zealand commissioned joint qualitative research to provide insight into what people valued and understood about the democratic process, how they accessed and interacted with information, and their perceived barriers to engaging with Parliament.<sup>9</sup> This informed the vision and focus of the first Parliamentary Engagement Strategy. Subsequent annual research measures

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<sup>9</sup> Office of the Clerk, 'Exploring New Zealanders' understanding of, and engagement with, Parliament and the democratic process', *Radio New Zealand*, 5 October 2017.

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public perceptions of Parliament, the effectiveness of the engagement work, and helps inform the focus of future work.<sup>10</sup> This research has been critical for providing up to date data on attitudes about Parliament, the drivers of advocacy for Parliament, the channels through which people hear and learn about Parliament, and the awareness of and participation in parliamentary processes.

## **PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT**

The following areas have been the focus of engagement efforts.

### *Engagement at Parliament*

Visiting Parliament, whether to watch from the public gallery, attend a committee hearing, tour the buildings, or enjoy the grounds is a way that many people engage. Around 100,000 visitors a year participate in public tours and school visits. To help demystify and make Parliament more relatable, public events are now hosted at Parliament. Events of this nature have included Children's Day, Suffrage Day and Matariki celebrations, featuring a range of family activities, entertainment, specialised tours, and have even involved clowns and ice cream trucks.

School visits form an important part of our engagement activity, are offered at all levels from primary to tertiary, with activities and resources linked to the school curriculum. The goal is that every young person will visit Parliament during their schooling, either physically or virtually.

### *Engagement in the community*

Engagement with the work of Parliament frequently takes place in members' Electorate and Community Offices (ECO's) across the country. These are often the most accessible way for the public to raise issues, ask for assistance, or learn more about Parliament. Offices are supported with a toolkit of resources to help constituents engage with Parliament and supporting ECO's with parliamentary engagement is a focus for both the Office of the Clerk and the Parliamentary Service.

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<sup>10</sup> New Zealand Parliament, 'Engagement research' Parliament of New Zealand: 2022. Accessed at: <[www.parliament.nz](http://www.parliament.nz)>.

To reach a wider and more representative audience, and in particular groups that might not connect with Parliament through more formal channels, the Parliamentary Engagement team has begun to have a presence at a range of markets, festivals, and events around the country. These include smaller community festivals, larger events such as Pasifika Festival and Field days, and conferences like Festival for the Future.<sup>11</sup>

Introduced three years ago, the Speaker's Outreach programme has seen the Speaker and cross-party groups of members visit schools and community groups around the country.<sup>12</sup> The programme usually involves visits to one or more local schools, and a tertiary institution or community group that provides the public with the opportunity to meet and talk to members. Outside of this programme, members of Parliament often visit schools, and parliamentary staff offer assistance for these visits in the form of training and resources.

### *Digital engagement*

Parliament's website serves around 3 million users each year<sup>13</sup> and is operated by the Office of the Clerk with technical support provided by the Parliamentary Service. Content on the website includes official records and proceedings, information about parliamentary business and rules, contact details and biographical information for members, general information for visitors, resources for educators and students, and access to live and on-demand video. The website now offers online tools for the public to create petitions and electronic submissions to select committees.<sup>14</sup> Public participation by these methods is now significantly more common and has led to a huge increase in volume of submission and petitions.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Office of the Clerk, 'Parliament is coming to YOU!', Parliament of New Zealand: 2021. Accessed at: <<https://www.parliament.nz/en/get-involved/features/parliament-is-coming-to-you/>>.

<sup>12</sup> Office of the Clerk, 'Speaker's Outreach Programme', Parliament of New Zealand: 2021. Accessed at: <<https://www.parliament.nz/en/visit-and-learn/speakers-outreach-programme/>>.

<sup>13</sup> Office of the Clerk and Parliamentary Service, *Parliamentary Sector Annual Report 2020/21*, p 9.

<sup>14</sup> Office of the Clerk, 'Have Your Say', Parliament of New Zealand: 2021. Accessed at: <<https://www.parliament.nz/en/get-involved/have-your-say/>>.

<sup>15</sup> Between 1 July 2021 and 30 June 2022, 159 petitions were presented to Parliament. The Justice Committee received over 107,000 submissions on the Conversion Practices Prohibition Legislation Bill, the most submissions ever made on a bill. Office of the Clerk and Parliamentary Service, *Parliamentary Sector Annual Report 2021/22*, p 9, 14.

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On behalf of the House and its committees, the Office of the Clerk operates more than 20 social media channels, with over 100,000 followers across Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn and YouTube.<sup>16</sup> Social media accounts publish content intended for a general audience, such as information about tours, current business, opportunities for public participation, video guides to Parliament's history and processes, and livestreams of events and ceremonies. They also provide information to more specialist audiences about matters of interest, such as when a bill receives Royal assent.

Use of online video content has increased dramatically and is getting high audience uptake. Videos produced include guides to accessing parliamentary tools or information, explanations of parliamentary procedure and history, video reports on events such as inter-parliamentary delegations, calls for select committee submissions, and feature-length documentaries on issues of historical and parliamentary significance.

Parliament can also be experienced through 360 virtual reality tours (which have supporting education resources), augmented reality filters to see elements of Parliament in a new interactive way, and an immersive Virtual Debating Chamber experience.<sup>17</sup>

### *Select committee engagement*

A great deal of engagement and communications activity relates to select committees, including the use of social media, videography, live broadcast, and written content. Each committee has its own page on the Parliament website, and (with few exceptions) its own stand-alone social media presence. Select committee social media is used primarily for livestreams of public hearings, notifying when items of business open for submissions, explanatory videos (often featuring committee members), and other information and news about committees' work.

New technologies, such as electronic submissions through Parliament's website or witnesses giving evidence remotely via video conferencing, have reduced the barriers

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<sup>16</sup> Office of the Clerk, 'Connect with Parliament on social media', Parliament of New Zealand: 2022. Accessed at: <[www.parliament.nz](http://www.parliament.nz)>.

<sup>17</sup> Office of the Clerk, 'Experience Parliament virtually', Parliament of New Zealand: 2022. Accessed at: <[www.parliament.nz](http://www.parliament.nz)>.

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to public participation. This has contributed to a significant and ongoing increase in the volume of both written and oral submissions, and a growing public awareness of the committee process.<sup>18</sup>

In 2020, the Standing Orders Committee recommended that select committees encourage alternative forms of public engagement to reach a wider range of New Zealanders and address these barriers, with four guiding principles for this ‘alternative engagement’:<sup>19</sup>

- Target engagement efforts at groups whose interests are most relevant to the business at hand, or who tend to be overlooked by traditional engagement.
- Make it easier for people to submit in the way that best suits their needs.
- Gather information in order to add value to consideration, not just for its own sake.
- Provide updates or feedback to people who submit, so they know that their information was considered, and their contribution mattered.

Alternative engagement campaigns of this kind were piloted in 2021 and are now offered to all select committees for use in suitable circumstances. The structure of each campaign is tailored to the item of business and the areas the committee wishes to explore, but typically features modes of participation like simple surveys, interactive social media content, informal question-and-answer sessions, and direct contact with relevant groups.<sup>20</sup>

### *Reference group engagement*

Reference groups focused on demographic groups have been established to support engagement work. These are the:

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<sup>18</sup> Phil Smith, ‘Submission rising: Parliament’s feedback flood’, *Radio New Zealand*, 17 October 2021.

<sup>19</sup> Standing Orders Committee, *Review of Standing Orders 2020*, Parliament of New Zealand: 2020, I.18A pp 29-30.

<sup>20</sup> See e.g. Office of the Clerk, ‘Parliamentary Engagement (Briefing on survey results)’, Advice provided to Justice Committee on Harmful Digital Communications (Unauthorised Posting of Intimate Visual Recording) Amendment Bill, Parliament of New Zealand, 31 May 2021. Accessed at: <<http://www.parliament.nz>>.

- Teachers' reference group, formed to provide feedback and guidance on our programmes, resources, and delivery.
- *Rito*, a youth reference group, established to work with young people in co-designing initiatives that increase youth engagement with Parliament.
- Accessibility Reference Group, comprising of people who have lived experience of disability and a working group of staff from across the Office of the Clerk and the Parliamentary Service to drive suggested changes.

These reference groups have helped reach a wider range of communities than would traditionally engage with Parliament. In addition to this work, engagement resources are available in te reo Māori, New Zealand Sign Language, and Pacific Languages. Through continuing to develop engagement opportunities with disadvantaged groups, it is hoped that this work will continue to empower people to connect with Parliament and further enhance the functioning of, and engagement with, Parliament. This mahi (work) is key to enhancing trust in important institutions and increasing civic participation.

## **ENGAGEMENT WITH DEMOCRATIC INSTITUTIONS MORE IMPORTANT THAN EVER**

In 2022, efforts to engage the public with Parliament seem more important than ever. Social, political, and economic disruption in recent years have made the future of democracies less certain. Democratic norms have shown signs of weakening across the globe. In some well-established democracies, disruptions have exposed institutional weaknesses.<sup>21</sup> Newer media platforms cater to human's instinctive attraction to information that matches their perspectives and prejudices.<sup>22</sup> Algorithm-targeted

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<sup>21</sup> R Wike and J Fetterolf, 'Global Public Opinion in an Era of Democratic Anxiety', *Pew Research Centre*, 2021. Accessed at: <<https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2021/12/07/global-public-opinion-in-an-era-of-democratic-anxiety/>>.

<sup>22</sup> A Anderson and L Rainie, '*The Future of Truth and Misinformation Online*', *Pew Research Centre*, 2017. Accessed at: <<https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2017/10/19/the-future-of-truth-and-misinformation-online/>>.



messaging can take intentional disinformation to a new level<sup>23</sup> and the issue will only grow more complex over time.

Global trends in misinformation and the undermining of democratic norms are present in Aotearoa New Zealand, though they have been slower to take root.<sup>24</sup> In recent research into views on political reform in developed countries, New Zealanders were the least likely to consider that their political system needed complete reform or major changes.<sup>25</sup> However, dangerous and anti-democratic trends are certainly present. The recent occupation of Parliament grounds by a diverse range of conspiracy theorists, white supremacists, prosperity gospel-preaching fundamentalists, and other fringe groups shows there are people in Aotearoa New Zealand with no faith in democratic institutions and little regard for societal norms. While the occupation was ended by police action, it would be naïve to think that the protestors, or their grievances, have gone away. A poll conducted at the time of the occupation found that 30 percent of respondents supported elements of the protest,<sup>26</sup> though their reasons were not recorded.

In the current environment, it is essential that Parliament does everything it can to make itself relevant, accessible, and responsive to the public. Underlying societal issues and overseas influences that may give rise to radical, anti-democratic activity are beyond the ambit of the Parliament to address. But it can certainly play its part in countering the sense that transparency and inclusiveness of our democratic processes has been declining.<sup>27</sup> It can do that by partnering with the public, continuing to change to remain relevant, and showing people that Parliament is their House.

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<sup>23</sup> William Dutton, Bianca Reisdorf, Elizabeth Dubois, and Grant Blank, 'Social Shaping of the Politics of Internet Search and Networking: Moving Beyond Filter Bubbles, Echo Chambers, and Fake News', *Quello Center Working Paper*, No. 2944191, 2017. Accessed at: <<http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2944191>>; Elizabeth Stewart, 'Detecting Fake News: Two Problems for Content Moderation', *Philosophy and Technology* 34(4), 2021, pp. 923-940.

<sup>24</sup> G Palmer, 'Rethinking Public Law in a Time of Democratic Decline', *Victoria University of Wellington Law Review*, 52(2), 2021, 413-462.

<sup>25</sup> Wike and Fetterolf, *Global Public Opinion in an Era of Democratic Anxiety*.

<sup>26</sup> Luke Malpass, 'Parliament protest: New poll shows 30 per cent of Kiwis support anti-mandate protest' *Stuff*, 18 February 2022. Accessed at: <<https://www.stuff.co.nz/national/politics/127808790/parliament-protest-new-poll-shows-30-per-cent-of-kiwis-support-antimandate-protest>>.

<sup>27</sup> Gluckman et al, *Sustaining Aotearoa New Zealand as a cohesive society*.