



▶ Submission to Open Government Partnership

Submitted via email, 17/10/18

▶ Contact Details

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► **About Us**

Volunteering New Zealand

Volunteering New Zealand is the “voice of volunteering” in Aotearoa. Our vision is for a New Zealand that promotes, values and supports effective volunteering for the benefit of individuals and communities – and our mission is to promote, support and advocate for volunteering.

We are the only national organisation in New Zealand that focuses purely on volunteering. We hold the ‘big picture’ and are in a position to liaise, work with, and advise volunteers, government and business sectors. This helps ensure that volunteering occurs within a positive environment where it is encouraged and fostered.

Over the past 17 years, VNZ has raised the profile of volunteer groups, activities, and management. We promote volunteering and its value to New Zealand society through advocacy, sharing stories, and producing tools like the Best Practice Guidelines and Competencies for Managers of Volunteers.

We have a membership of over 80 national and regional member organisations that involve volunteers in their work programmes. Our membership organisations are typically associations or “peak bodies” that in turn represent a large number of local and regional volunteer involving organisations. We advocate on behalf of these organisations and for other groups that are not members but are aligned to our mission and values.

New Zealand’s Voluntary Sector

New Zealand has 114,000 non-profit institutions (NPIs). NPIs contributed \$5.96 billion to GDP in 2013, the last year this was calculated. This was 2.7 percent of New Zealand’s total GDP. The same year, the value of (formal) voluntary labour in New Zealand’s NPIs was estimated to be \$3.46 billion. This is on a par with the construction industry and increases the contribution made by NPIs from 2.7 to 4.4 percent of GDP.¹

The most up-to-date data on the volunteer sector states that in New Zealand there are more than 1.2 million volunteers who give more than 157 million hours of unpaid labour to the sector. 91% of New Zealand NPIs employ no staff, and rely solely on volunteers.²

¹ Stats NZ, *Non-Profit Institutions Satellite Account: 2013* (Statistics New Zealand, 2015), 8.

² Ibid. 18, 20.

1. INTRODUCTION: VOLUNTEERING, TRUST AND CIVIC PARTICIPATION

Volunteering New Zealand (VNZ) appreciates the opportunity to comment on the Open Government Partnership draft National Action Plan 2018-20.

The organisation of the Draft Plan is sensibly organised around three themes: participation in democracy; public participation to develop policy and services; and transparency and accountability. The most obvious entry point for volunteering is the first theme though clearly some overlap exists, given the extent to which advocacy work relies on volunteer labour.

Trust and participation work together. VNZ notes that, against a background of declining trust in government in many comparable countries, New Zealand continues to perform well in metrics such as low levels of corruption, the effectiveness of the public service, the transparency of central government's budgeting process, and the health of our courts and other democratic institutions. New Zealand remains a high trust culture, something that is essential to volunteering and explains our high rates of volunteer participation historically.

While it is possible to improve trust in individual institutions or government as a whole (indeed a large swing towards government favourability was recorded this year),³ generalised trust is a more stable and fundamental value. There is evidence that generalised trust is tied to levels of wealth inequality,⁴ something that has dramatically increased in New Zealand over the last forty years. Absent any conception of economic citizenship, the root causes of exclusion are unlikely to be addressed. The large gaps between the levels of trust currently reported by older and younger generations should prompt concern for future democratic participation since metrics such as voter turnout have already fallen sharply since the 1980s.⁵

The Plan's conception of democracy is largely limited to developing cultural competencies within the public service, making information more accessible and service design more collaborative. These are laudable goals but even within the Plan there are gaps between the rhetoric and the actuality. For example, the Plan notes that the parameters of public consultation are often set by government agencies themselves at an early stage in the process. Yet, this is exactly what has occurred with the proposed State Sector and Crown Entities Reform Bill, undercutting confidence that the reforms will deliver "meaningful change" as promised by the Minister.

Overall, the Plan could be more ambitious and specific. VNZ's feedback (which is somewhat limited by time constraints) points to two outside resources. The first document, *Bridges Both Ways*, proposes several big ideas that we believe would really leverage the power of volunteer labour and citizen decision-making. The second document, the *Civics and Media Project*, gives dozens of specific

³ A Colmar Brunton poll recorded a 17-point swing in the trust towards government doing "what is right for New Zealand" from 48% in 2016 to 65% in 2018.

<https://www.nzherald.co.nz/nz/news/article.cfm?c_id=1&objectid=12068414>

⁴ Eric M. Uslander, "Trust as a Moral Value," Paper presented at the Social Capital: Interdisciplinary Perspectives conference, University of Exeter, UK, September, 2001.

⁵ The same Colmar Brunton poll recorded a large gap in trust between young and old: "Of those aged 60 or older, 62 per cent reported a high level of trust generally in people, compared with 38 per cent high trust in the 18-29 year old group, and 44 per cent for those aged 30 to 59."

<https://www.nzherald.co.nz/nz/news/article.cfm?c_id=1&objectid=12068414>

suggestions, organised around the notion that civics and media are inseparable elements of democratic participation.

2. BRIDGES BOTH WAYS

In 2017, Max Rashbrooke of Victoria University's Institute for Governance and Policy Studies produced a paper entitled *Bridges Both Ways*.⁶ VNZ endorses the five key ideas contained in *Bridges Both Ways*, each of which brings together the spirit of volunteering with citizen decision-making. Rather than serving as an adjunct to parliamentary or council process, each idea turns decision-making over to ordinary citizens in a way that represents a genuine renewal of governance. Respectfully, in VNZ's estimation, the five ideas outlined in *Bridges Both Ways* have a much greater chance of meeting the stated goals of the Draft Plan: namely, for people to understand, feel ownership, connect and engage with government.

1. Crowdsourced Bills

Copying successful models overseas, the public could be allowed to submit proposals for bills via a secure online platform, giving detailed reasons and evidence to support their proposed law. Those receiving enough signatures - over 35,000, say - would have to be debated and voted on by Parliament, having first gone through the Office of the Clerk to be drafted and improved. This would open up law-making to direct public involvement, while retaining vital checks and balances.

2. Participatory Budgeting

Locals councils could set aside 10 per cent (or more) of their annual budget to be decided directly by citizens, again building on successful models overseas. Councils would work with residents throughout the year, holding multiple meetings at neighbourhood and ward level, as a build-up to a major end-of-year meeting in which residents would vote on how to allocate the funds. Such processes are increasingly used overseas, and have proved highly effective in engaging citizens.

3. A Public Opinion Budget

At the start of each year a group of representatively chosen citizens, advised by experts, could draw up a rough Budget, indicating areas of funding priority - such as whether they want to see more or less spending in broadly defined categories such as health, education and defence - and what tax increases or reductions would be needed in consequence. This would help inform official Budget diverges from citizen' expressed preferences.

4. A Kōrero Politics Day

Around two to three months before every general election, there could be a public holiday dedicated to discussing politics and the upcoming vote. This 'Kōrero Politics' Day would be marked by community events, town hall meetings, festivals that combine music and politics, and other gatherings designed to foster discussion. This would underline the importance of politics, give people time and space to think about issues, and encourage a more reflective citizenship.

⁶ https://www.victoria.ac.nz/_data/assets/pdf_file/0006/1175244/WP17-04-Bridges-Both-ways-for-Print.pdf

5. Democratising Party Funding

To improve the integrity of political party funding, donations could be capped at \$1,500 per person per year, as is done in Canada. The shortfall could then be made up with democratic public funding: a \$20 'electoral funding voucher' giving every citizen a small amount of money to give to the political party of their choice, once every electoral cycle. This could create a strong incentive for parties to engage with the public, while spreading influence more widely.

3. THE CIVICS AND MEDIA PROJECT

In 2015, the *Civics and Media Project*, a non-partisan cross-institutional initiative, held three workshops, the proceeds of which are published on the McGuinness Institute website.⁷

Roughly fifty different ideas on how to improve civics and media in New Zealand were generated in the course of the discussion. It is notable that some of the ideas from the Project are now under consideration by Ministers while others are contained in the Draft Plan. VNZ does not endorse every idea but we do think that this document contains a more thorough-going examination of the issues.

In the first instance, a contemporary understanding of civics cannot be divided from a discussion of media ecology. While increased funding for public media is most welcome, the root causes of the media's financial weakness should be examined. The reasons for this are complex: technological disruption certainly but also media deregulation, anti-trust enforcement, problems of scale in a small media market and the cultural devaluation of quality journalism in what is, ostensibly, an information age.

Secondly, civics cannot be divided from media literacy. This is a topic that has become even more urgent since 2015 with the realisation that election campaigns are now "hackable" social media events. Absent strong media literacy skills, students are more likely to be vulnerable to filter bubbles and disinformation. While social media is invaluable in terms of its capacity to mobilise interest groups and facilitate self-expression among diverse groups, consideration should be given to how the long-term health consequences of social media usage (anxiety, poor sleep habits, negative body image) can be mitigated through education.

Thirdly, civics should be citizen-centric rather than centred around Parliament. Though the Draft Plan acknowledges that improvements can always be made, it has never been easier to learn about Parliamentary processes, access official records or watch video of Parliament sitting. Many of the suggestions in the Draft Plan seem to suggest that closing this information gap is an end in itself. Yet the latest Electoral Commission report cited lack of interest, not lack of information, as the main determining factor for non-voters.⁸ Before bringing Parliament to the people, government needs firstly to address the reasons why large sections of the population feel excluded from their peers.

⁷ <http://www.mcguinnessinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/20170227-Civics-and-Media-Booklet-WEB.pdf>

⁸ https://www.elections.org.nz/sites/default/files/plain-page/attachments/report_of_the_2017_general_election.pdf

Finally, civics education should not be given over to a dry discussion of "legal, political and constitutional topics" as the Draft Plan seems to suggest (this was in reference to the proposed School Leaver's Toolkit). While students should of course acquire a basic understanding of the political system, the oppositional political culture that is built into the structure of Parliament is off-putting to many people. By contrast, a political culture that emphasises participation over bureaucracy, demonstrating how like-minded people can collectively affect change, has a greater chance of engaging younger voters. At the same time, participation builds human and social capital. VNZ notes that this division between formal process and active participation is acknowledged in the Ministry's own information release on the School Leaver's Toolkit from May 2018 but it is posed as an unresolved question rather than a specific solution.

Aotearoa has a strong civil society, much of it built upon volunteer labour. Youth participation in charity work, formal volunteering and cultural groups is also high by international standards, although the uneven distribution again points to persistently high levels of inequality. In our vision of civics and media education, the government could support genuine civic engagement by creating a space for students to take up formal volunteering opportunities or advocate for causes through citizen journalism. Students could create their own groups, document their development and publish the results of their collaborative efforts. Furthermore, these initiatives could also be joined up with the kinds of initiatives imagined in *Bridges Both Ways*.

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