

Case Studies Series 2023



Citizens' Assembly on the next source of water for Tāmaki Makaurau/Auckland



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Our project was the first fully empowered citizens' assembly in Aotearoa/New Zealand. A diverse group of Aucklanders came to a consensus on the next source of water for our city, against a backdrop of increasingly divisive conversations about water reform and governance in our country. The assembly was designed and conducted in collaboration between a university research centre and a water utility and involved mana whenua (Māori who have historic and territorial rights over the land) in a decision that will have a significant impact on the future of our city.

Watercare is responsible for providing water and wastewater services to 1.7 million people in Tāmaki Makaurau/Auckland. After a drought and a drawn-out consent application to take water from a neighbouring region, Watercare was committed to finding an alternative source of water. We partnered with Koi Tū, a research centre at the University of Auckland, who needed a complex challenge to develop and test a deliberative democracy process for Aotearoa/New Zealand. In August and September 2022, 37 Aucklanders met in the Fale Pasifika at the University of Auckland to answer the question: '*What should be the next source of water for Auckland?*'

The objectives of the project were:

- Finding a new source of water for Auckland that doesn't involve taking from other regions, that is resilient to extreme weather, and that people will trust enough to drink
- Involving the public in a complex decision about drinking water that will impact them and future generations
- Proof of concept: to demonstrate the value of deliberative democracy for Aotearoa/New Zealand.

Over two months, assembly members deliberated, learned and asked questions of experts across disciplines and institutions. On the final day, the assembly made their recommendations to Watercare: that the next source of water for the city be direct recycled water. The assembly selected this source because it is cost-effective, has a lower carbon, energy and waste footprint, and can provide a secure water supply to the city during a drought. Critical to the success of this project was the championing and involvement of senior leadership at Watercare (Board, CEO, CCO and COO).

Outcomes:

- The decision made was braver than the one that Watercare might have opted for.
- Work based on the recommendations is already underway.
- Through action-learning and evaluation, our assembly demonstrated the potential of this form of democracy for central and local government authorities in Aotearoa/New Zealand.

Key takeaways:

- Our experience demonstrates the potential of deliberative democracy to enhance public participation and promote better decision-making in Aotearoa/New Zealand.
- Watercare took a risk, but this was mitigated by:
 - Having a trusted partner in the University of Auckland
 - Having an established relationship with mana whenua who provided sound guidance to our citizens
 - Earlier deliberative workshops in 2021 across the city were attended by staff, so our internal and external stakeholders trusted the process
 - Confidence in the process and leadership at the Board and Executive level.

We hope this inspires and supports implementation of similar processes in Aotearoa/New Zealand.

Key search words: Water, recycling, citizens' assembly, deliberative democracy, public, utilities, spectrum level: empower, climate change, organisational development

Public, local government, community vision, deliberative engagement, collaborate (example)

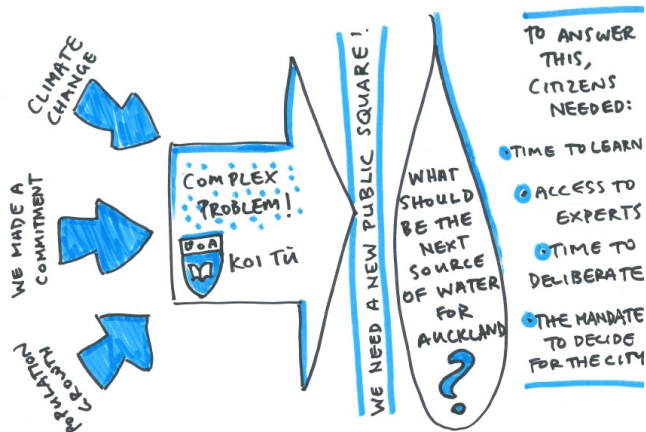
1.0 Objectives

Watercare is responsible for providing water and wastewater services to the people of Tāmaki Makaurau/Auckland. In early 2022, after a significant drought, Watercare was granted a consent to draw 150 million litres a day (MLD) of water from the Waikato, a river in the region to the south of the city. When the consent was granted, Watercare's Chief Executive stated that the Waikato River would not be the ongoing supplier supporting Auckland's growth, and that an alternative source of water would be found.

This new water source would need to respond to predicted population growth in Auckland and climate change impacts on demand and supply. Moreover, water is precious to all people and Watercare needed to ensure that

the public will trust and drink the water that we provide. We wanted our public to get involved with our problem: *what should be the next source of water for Auckland?*

The timing of the question and the requirements of the project suited a collaboration with Kōi Tū, a research centre at the University of Auckland, who were starting a project to develop and test a deliberative democracy process for Aotearoa/New Zealand.



The role of the public and our stakeholders

The public have historically had little input into investment in the water sector. Water providers in Aotearoa/New Zealand have tended to be a 'silent service,' and because of underinvestment in water, wastewater and stormwater management, the country is now undergoing a politicised nationwide reform of the water sector. In future, quality local engagement about infrastructure investment and pricing may be a legislative requirement for new water entities. With significant investment on its way, Watercare was also keen to establish a framework for deep engagement with the public on investment decisions that we will all ultimately have to live with.

In addition, in considering alternative sources of water in the context of climate change, we needed a level of engagement that went beyond the 'common sense' response (i.e. 'just build another dam'). With more droughts, storms and floods looming in the future, water efficiency, desalination and recycled water looked to be the best options for Auckland, yet they would all require having the public behind Watercare. Watercare needed:

- a legitimate and defensible process, which the partnership with the university offered
- representation that reflected the diversity of the city
- a process that enabled the participants to learn, discuss and then agree on a reasonable option that balanced trade-offs that they had never previously considered.

Early in the process, we discussed our intention to trial this form of decision-making with elected members (local government) and mana whenua. It was essential that we discussed the role of new forms of citizen engagement openly with those who hold responsibility for making decisions for Auckland. Feedback from these early meetings made the process more inclusive and the reason for it clearer.

Information and collateral to support the process

For the assembly itself, a comprehensive booklet was developed, providing a background on the water system and options available for Auckland against the environmental, cultural and financial implications. To ensure clarity, the material was tested repeatedly, with images and diagrams used in place of text wherever possible. This booklet and an outline of the process were sent to environmental groups, technical and cultural experts, mana whenua, council colleagues, and interested members of the public. Our engagement was always going to be complex, recognising our commitment to work with 19 hapū and iwi authorities of Tāmaki Makaurau who have their own histories and processes with Watercare and the city. We invited stakeholder submissions to improve and refine our approach.

One of the challenges we faced was in delivering information that was typically written for an audience who were likely to have a mix of learning styles. To support the participants during the assembly, experts from outside the organisation were selected for their ability to verbally communicate complex information in a way that non-experts could understand. To further support participant learning, a website was created to share questions and answers. When questions were particularly complex, or asked by a few participants, two- to three-minute video interviews with experts were conducted and uploaded to the website to help address any confusion or lack of clarity.

2.0 Methodology

Alignment with IAP2 Core Values for the practice of public participation

The assembly placed the decision-making in the hands of the public, with decisions effectively handed over to the assembly. There was little precedent for this in the country, and no process to copy for a specifically Aotearoa/New Zealand assembly. Hence, we needed to be innovative in our approach, particularly in our efforts to embed intercultural capability into the facilitation of the assembly.

Values	
Those affected by a decision have a right to be involved in decision-making	Everyone is impacted by decisions about drinking water. Our process enabled the diverse range of views and backgrounds in Auckland to be heard. To ensure a fair representation of the city's people, the assembly was carefully selected using a sortition process based on census data.
The promise that the public's contribution will influence the decision	<p>At the outset of the assembly, Watercare's CEO publicly stated that Watercare 'would have to have a very good reason not to go ahead with the assembly's reasoned, consensus recommendations'. The assembly took the mandate seriously and felt the responsibility of making this important decision for the city.</p> <p>This commitment was borne out by the response from Watercare's Board after the assembly, which provided a clear outline of the actions Watercare would take to implement each recommendation.</p>
Promoting sustainable decisions by recognising, communicating the needs and interests of all participants	People from all walks of life participated and there were many meaningful conversations between the assembly, the Board and Executive, experts, and staff as well as an ongoing kōrero (conversation) with mana whenua (the people of the land) through appropriate channels. As a result of these conversations, the assembly chose an option that was environmentally sustainable and relatively inexpensive. Our assembly also insisted that Watercare do more to educate Aucklanders on water efficiency and literacy. They were keen to share the knowledge that they had gained during the assembly.
Seeking out and facilitating involvement of those affected	12,000 invitations were sent out and a representative sample of the Auckland population was selected from those who registered an interest in taking part. The pre-assembly survey revealed that many among them had never participated in public consultations.

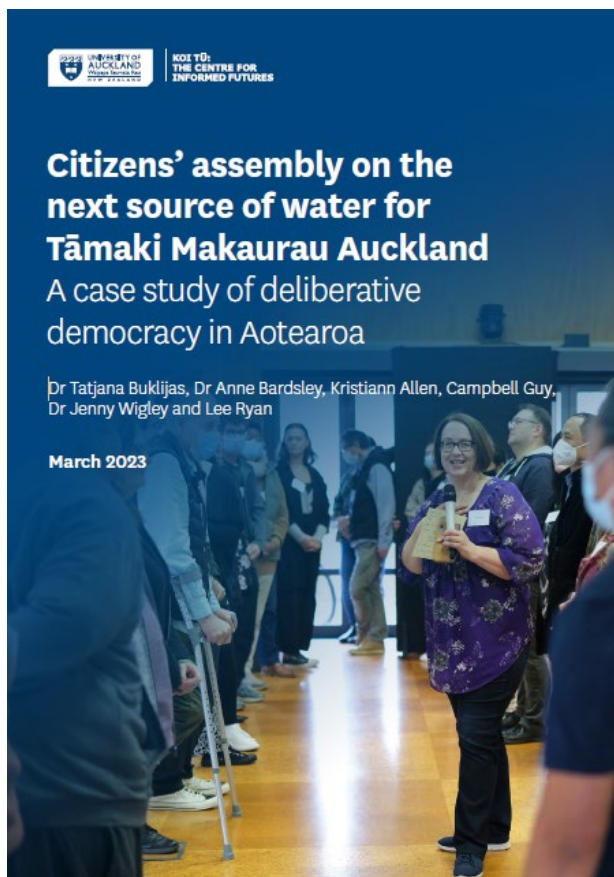
by/interested in a decision	
Public participation seeks input from participants in designing how they participate	<p>Participant input into how the assembly ran was incorporated at many different levels. On the morning of the first day, participants in the assembly decided the rules of engagement that they would abide by during the assembly, with 'treating each other equally, respectfully and fairly' voted the most important. In addition, participants articulated what they would change for the following assembly in a short informal ceremony at the end of each day or by putting a note in a kete (basket).</p> <p>Half of the city are immigrants, and we discovered that this half were looking for opportunities to learn about Māori culture. Significantly, after the assembly was dissatisfied with not having enough information about Māori and especially mana whenua perspectives on alternative water sources, a formal kōrero (conversation) with mana whenua representatives was arranged for the third session.</p> <p>More generally, the opportunity to bless the food before each meal was offered to the assembly and was taken up in many different languages and in different forms, reflecting our intention to bring tikanga (Māori protocols and customs showing respect) into our process in a way that was meaningful in a multicultural context.</p> <p>Small details made a difference too. A Spotify playlist chosen by participants played in the background during deliberations, and a request to have KFC on the menu was accommodated. Having two weeks between each in-person assembly session meant that we were able to keep the agenda relatively flexible and responsive to input from our assembly members.</p>
Providing participants with the information they need to participate in a meaningful way	<p>A booklet providing background on the water system, climate and demographic scenarios for Auckland, and the environmental, cultural and financial aspects of alternative water sources was created. Images and diagrams were used instead of text wherever possible. This booklet was given to each of the participants prior to the first assembly.</p> <p>Experts were chosen from outside the organisation with the requirement that they could communicate well with non-experts. A website was created to house participants' questions and answers.</p>
Communicating to participants how their input affected the decision	<p>Watercare demonstrated a clear commitment to implementing the recommendations from the start. This commitment was reinforced on the fourth day when both the CEO and Board Chair received the recommendations. Five weeks later, the Board invited the participants to formally receive their response to the recommendations, providing detail about the programme of work for water recycling, including a pilot recycled water scheme. Currently, the pilot scheme is already under construction and detailed information about water recycling is now available on the Watercare website. A nominated assembly member attended Watercare's public Board session in April, and the invitation to attend future meetings will be issued twice a year. Participants who took part in the Newsroom short documentary The road to water recycling also attest to the progress being made.</p>



Participants working in groups on their recommendations in the Fale Pasifika at Auckland University



Participants discussing takeaways from the assembly after the decision was passed to the Chair of the Watercare Board



'By involving citizens in an important decision-making process, Watercare has built greater trust and understanding WITH our communities. The deliberative democracy process was a fantastic tool to help us navigate a complex conversation alongside our customers about the long-term future of Auckland's water supply, which will benefit everyone. The process also includes the very important feedback loop to the assembly, which ensures Watercare is held to account in respect of delivery.' (Margaret Devlin, Board Chair, Watercare Services Ltd)

'It was exceptional. As a young person, I didn't really know what I was signing up for and it was a very pleasurable, interactive and informative experience.' (Assembly member, post-event feedback)

2023 Koi Tū Report on the citizens' assembly, available [here](#). See also <https://www.watercare.co.nz/About-us/Information-Hub/Community-engagement-hub/Deliberative-democracy-project> for the citizens' recommendations and Watercare's response

3.0 Manage engagement

Early workshops

Anything new can face considerable scepticism, particularly when it relates to something as precious, universal and poorly understood as water. To test our process, in 2021 Watercare and Koi Tū ran workshops across the city to establish the level of knowledge in the community. We continued to improve an early version of the collateral ('What is the problem?' 'What are some options?') for comprehension and to discern any barriers to participation or issues with the process. These face-to-face workshops, run fortuitously during an interval between Covid-19 lockdowns, helped Watercare decision-makers grow comfortable with the idea of offering the reins to the public, and gave our partners and stakeholders time to come to terms with what we were trying to do.

Designing the process

The citizens' assembly was co-designed by Watercare, Koi Tū, our facilitator and many other contributors. The process was underpinned by the research into participatory and deliberative democracy undertaken by the Koi Tū team and in exchange and collaboration with two Australian organisations, newDemocracy Foundation and the Centre for Deliberative Democracy and Global Governance at the University of Canberra. The design of the process was assisted by scholars with expertise in Māori political participation, and many Aotearoa/New Zealand scholars and practitioners. The 2021 workshops were designed by an expert in knowledge translation and health communication.

The full assembly took place on four Saturdays with three Zoom sessions to support, and our facilitator moved our participants through learning, enquiry, deliberating and writing recommendations over the four days of the assembly. The group met with mana whenua on the morning of the third day, by which time they understood enough about the water system to make the conversation meaningful. The assembly wrote draft recommendations at the end of that day, which were received by Watercare and mana whenua, providing valuable handrails in the process. In the last session, feedback from mana whenua and Watercare was discussed, and the recommendations considered, modified, deliberated over, clarified and confirmed before the final version was presented to the Chair of the Watercare Board.

The final recommendations were received with ceremony and taken by Watercare and mana whenua. A response was prepared that incorporated both parties' feedback. In its response to the assembly, Watercare laid out the regulatory, operational and community engagement commitments we would undertake. The recommendations are all in play. This response was approved by the Watercare Board at the following Board meeting, during which the assembly, facilitator and university staff received the response. All recommendations were accepted and Watercare's commitments were made publicly available on the corporate website:

<https://www.watercare.co.nz/About-us/Information-Hub/Community-engagement-hub/Deliberative-democracy-project>

The assembly is notified of public board sessions going forward, to ensure that progress is being made.

4.0 Outcomes, impact and insights

As the first major deliberative democratic process in Aotearoa/New Zealand, this was a very successful collaboration between a university research centre and a council-controlled organisation. Local government organisations are not famous for their customer-centricity or appetite for risk, and universities have a reputation for a cumbersome and excessive attention to detail. Yet our partnership was agile, brave and focussed on the needs of people. The assembly were given the mandate to make the decision, were supported firstly by Koi Tū and Watercare, and secondly by mana whenua and external experts who made themselves available for free. The assembly chose direct recycled water for drinking as the next source of water for Auckland after 2040, something few politicians would have been comfortable doing, and instructed Watercare to begin engagement on the quality, safety and acceptability of this water immediately. This was a unique and groundbreaking engagement.

When we asked our respondents if the process fulfilled their expectations, they could not provide a definite answer since they were unsure what to expect. However, others said that the process surpassed their expectations. The majority agreed that the assembly should be used again and believed that it would be successful in this format. Even the more critical responses focused on improvements of operational nature (length, type of experts/views represented) rather than questioning the principles and intention of the project. See Rod Oram's [The Road to Water Recycling](#) to hear what they have to say.

For the university team, this process was a proof of concept for deliberative democracy in Aotearoa/New Zealand. To understand the reception of the process among participants, they conducted a post-process survey that asked participants to reflect on specific features of the assembly as well as provide a more general reflection on the use of this process in Aotearoa/New Zealand. Out of the 37 members, 36 completed the survey. Participants described the assembly as well run, professional, and educational. They appreciated the facilitator's performance and felt that their questions were adequately addressed.

It has changed Watercare too. Since the assembly, we are incorporating more deliberative processes to better understand the community's views on levels of service for wastewater and how

to get the public more involved in decision-making and protecting the environment. In a year in which conversations about water governance have been fraught and polarised across the country, Watercare has a new tool to deepen our relationship with our customers and communities. Outside of Watercare, other experts, legislators and commentators have seen this as a test case for more purposeful and meaningful conversations with citizens in a form of democracy as yet untapped in this country.

When we reflect on what we learned, we know that:

1. Our innovation involves everyday people making hard decisions that are complex and traditionally delegated to experts. A diverse set of people, in partnership with mana whenua, were brave enough to make the best choice for both present and future generations. It is unusual in Aotearoa/New Zealand to use everyday people for these types of hard decisions, yet we contend that this is where deliberative processes are most needed.
2. We learned that even in a divisive and highly political context, it is possible for New Zealanders to discuss complex problems respectfully, and work through the implications of the options they wanted. In this we are indebted to our fantastic experts who could talk to non-experts, made themselves available on Saturdays for free, and who made our assembly such a visible attempt to make complex water issues accessible to everybody.
3. We are only at the beginning of our understanding of how Indigenous communities and Indigenous knowledge will impact and benefit deliberative processes.
4. We cannot overstate the importance of the role of senior leaders (Board Chair, CEO, CCO, COO) in making this possible and successful. Their courage was key. As technical or engagement practitioners, we bring passion to our work, but without the commitment to the process and the mandate from our leaders, this citizens' assembly would not have succeeded.

We hope our case study inspires leaders across Aotearoa/New Zealand to consider citizens' assemblies as a genuine option for complex decisions that belong in the hands of the public.

Acknowledgements and to find out more:

This case study was authored by Jenny Wigley on behalf of Watercare with support from Tatjana Buklijas and Lee Ryan.

Jenny is employed by Watercare in the position of Insights Specialist. Jenny has experience in the research, education and water sectors and now supports engagement and water literacy projects at Watercare. Tatjana Buklijas is Associate Director Academic at Kōi Tū: The Centre for Informed Futures and was the Principal Investigator for the MBIE Endeavour Smart Ideas project (2020–2023) trialling deliberative democracy in New Zealand. Lee Ryan from More Things Considered specialises in facilitation, deliberation, research and co-design for public and social innovation.

For more information about this project see:

- <https://www.watercare.co.nz/About-us/Information-Hub/Community-engagement-hub/citizens-assembly-project>
- <https://www.newsroom.co.nz/the-road-to-water-recycling>
- <https://www.complexconversations.nz>
- <https://www.newsroom.co.nz/ideasroom/citizen-assemblies-offer-hope-for-democracy-and-climate-change-challenges>

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