



Ideas for how to work with central government to affect positive social change

Positive social change can start at the kitchen table - family by family, community by community. It can also start in the legislative chamber - law by law, policy by policy. Best of all is when they occur simultaneously, informing and reinforcing each other.

At the [Todd Foundation](#)'s February 2014 Partnership Funding hui we invited a panel of experts to share their most effective strategies for working with Central Government to enable "inclusive communities where all families, children and young people thrive and contribute". Panel members were [Helen Kelly](#) (President of the Council of Trade Unions), [Tracey McIntosh](#) (Head of Sociology, Auckland University, Tuhoe), Lady Susan Satyanand (Patron, board member and volunteer, attending for previous Governor-General Sir Anand Satyanand) and [Russell Wills](#) (Children's Commissioner and Pediatrician).

Here are some of the common themes that emerged for working with government to create change:

Clear Goals:

- Everyone involved in your change effort should have a clear, specific and shared understanding of what you want to achieve
- Be prepared to talk to and work with anyone who can advance your goal

Sound Evidence:

- Robust, well-researched evidence is vital and increasingly important for influencing government.
- You need to "know your issue inside-out" – including the counter-arguments
- Be honest about evidence and counter-evidence – don't be selective or exaggerate as this undermines trust
- Unfortunately, ideology can trump evidence. Don't expect evidence to be enough on its own.

Strong relationships and targeted communication:

Governments tend to follow the public mood, so building relationships widely and communicating appropriately is the most important thing to do. Engagement can include:

- People affected by the issue:
 - Every issue has "a face, a name, a story"
 - Take time to get to know people, build trust, and be prepared to change what you do on based on what you learn

- Let people do their own talking
- People and organisations who agree with you:
 - Build alliances – many voices work better than one
 - Support infrastructure for people to work together
- People who strongly disagree with you:
 - Find spaces where dissent happens (eg Talkback Radio)
 - Have the generosity to listen to other opinions even when people respond with fear and loathing to your idea – and understand why they are responding in this way
 - Starting a real conversation is the first step. Having a reasonable response and replying politely to negative engagement, even hate emails, can help.
- Politicians and people in power:
 - Identify the people who make the decisions and work directly with them if you can
 - Don't assume people in power won't want to talk to you – make the contact and see what happens
 - Big messages work best
 - A no surprises approach is vital
- Government Officials:
 - Usually more interested in the “how to”, evidence-base and detail of the issue
 - Providing information and perspectives that expand the focus of debate can be helpful
- Media:
 - Use this cleverly – find out what your audience reads. For example, a regional buy-and-sell magazine might be a better way of reaching local communities than a mainstream newspaper.
 - It's hard to get attention without naming the problem – but by having positive solutions you can keep your idea strengths based.
 - You may need to stand up for your principles and say things that are unpopular or ahead of where public understanding is

Be there for the long haul:

- Change takes a long time
- If an attempt to change legislation fails, there can still be opportunity to influence the policy and implementation
- Being there for the long haul is easier if there are many voices working together so the idea can continue after your contribution has been made

Compiled by Kate Frykberg, Executive Director, Todd Foundation, March 2014