Enhancing Democracy and Transparency within PPTA Te Wehengarua

A paper from PPTA Western Bay of Plenty Region



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Overview

“Ehara taku toa i te toa takitahi, engari he toa takitini.”
My strength is not as an individual, but as a collective.

Recommendations

1. That the report be received.
2. That Executive conducts a Te Tiriti-led review of current processes in relation to PPTA policy formulation and communication with a view to enhancing engagement within the Association.
3. The Executive report back to Annual Conference 2027, with actionable recommendations based on the outcomes of the review.

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1 Background

1.1 Annual Conference, as a deliberative forum for thorough consideration and evaluation of issues and policy, is a taonga that must be protected and strengthened. Nothing in this paper challenges its role as the Association's supreme decision body. Annual Conference papers have historically arisen from both branch and regional initiatives - for example, the development of Medical Retirement provisions originating in the former Thames Valley Region or the mahi the Hutt Valley Region undertook in developing policy to support Relief Teachers. In addition, the Executive has brought forward papers where issues affect the profession as a whole, such as matters relating to NCEA.

1.2 In the Association's past, the finalised Conference papers were distributed with a formula for determining hard-copies. The more members in the Branch, the more hard-copies were printed. This continued with papers being sent electronically. Recently, this practice seems to have ceased with minimal printing - sometimes only one set per Branch even when the Branch is over 100 members. For some members, they prefer paper as opposed to screen. For others, it is simply more convenient to 'flick through' a Conference paper on a staffroom table while sipping their coffee, as opposed to opening yet another email and yet another attached document. So, the Branch reps step in to print more. This then becomes a cost for the school or the Branch, rather than being borne by the Association to reflect the true cost of a robust, democratic Conference.

1.3 Insufficient access to Conference papers in accessible formats, limited time, and few structured opportunities to discuss papers can act as a systemic barrier to member engagement in democratic processes. In some cases, despite the best efforts of our union delegates on the ground, members may be unaware of the items to be deliberated at an upcoming Conference. Worse still, they don't know what has been decided until it reaches the media. For example, in 2024, PPTA Te Wehengarua adopted the Peace is Union Business policy at Annual Conference. While the policy reflected values of justice and solidarity consistent with union principles, some members reported becoming aware of the policy only after it was referenced in national media.

1.4 Prior to the media controversy, many members were unaware that Peace is Union Business had been debated or passed at Conference, nor that it had become formal PPTA policy. Online discussions revealed frustration and disillusionment from members, in an active Facebook forum,[1] who felt they had not had a chance to voice their opinion on this topic. Some threatened to leave PPTA and have since left. For whatever reason, it could clearly be seen that there was a disconnect between an important policy that had been passed at Annual Conference, and understanding of how that policy came about. The genesis of this paper is from reflection on this example and a desire to seek improvement in the interest of our collective strength in the Association.

[1] https://www.facebook.com/groups/155548535160439

2 Valuing and inclusion of members' viewpoints

2.1 It must be strongly reiterated that the intention of this paper is not to 'redebate' any paper, including the aforementioned paper, but rather to 'take a good look under the hood' and check that PPTA Te Wehengarua's democratic processes are just that. As a union that expects fair democratic processes from those we elect, we must also ensure we continuously strive to reflect on and model sound democratic structures and processes. We must be transparent and seek to close potential gaps by our members in their understanding of how policy is formed, and ultimately provide space for members to have a voice and feel heard. Technology can rightly have a role in supporting member engagement, as well as kanohi ki te kanohi, while not forgetting 'tried and (proven to be) true' union organising methods.

2.2 PPTA Te Wehengarua values all members' viewpoints. Belated responses such as, "If you want your voice heard, get involved, attend meetings, engage with the system" etc fail to address the systemic barriers that might prevent many members from active participation. If PPTA loses members through perceived or real lack of inclusion, their voices can no longer be heard at Conference - reducing the diversity, inclusiveness, and ultimately the strength of the union.

2.3 Regional distribution of papers can vary widely. Some regions have well attended pre-conference meetings, with robust and in-depth discussions on conference papers. Their delegates are able to take a stance and attend Annual Conference fully representing their region's views. However, we know that some regions find it difficult to engage members to read the papers, often due to teacher fatigue and lack of time in Term 3. Geographical reasons can also be a barrier for members to get together for discussion. Different or dissenting views can be lost in this process. As a result, conference delegates may attend Annual Conference not knowing or representing their region's viewpoints accurately on some of the more controversial papers. Those with varying views may feel that their opinion on controversial papers is not being heard, and possibly not carried to or recorded at conference.

3 Action required

3.1 A taskforce established to review current processes and investigate ways to enhance democracy and transparency, accountability and inclusiveness within the Association would demonstrate to the wider membership, and observers, that PPTA Te Wehengarua is serious about protecting and strengthening our own democratic processes. A review would investigate how papers are written and formed, whether papers are widely distributed and discussed, the barriers that could prevent involvement, and how viewpoints are recorded and included. Lastly, a review could seek to analyse how accurately the wider membership views are represented at Annual Conference by regional delegates at conference, and finally, what level of awareness the wider membership has of the above processes.

3.2 A report back to Annual Conference 2027 would provide valuable guidance, depending on the results. Included in that report would be consideration of a constitutional change, where any papers carried, but with 50% to 66% of the vote, are then returned to the wider membership for discussion and a ballot vote. This approach would reflect a direct-democracy principle, giving members a further say on issues where support is significant but not overwhelming, while preserving Conference authority on matters that are clearly and strongly endorsed. It also aligns with research[2] suggesting that referendums and similar member-ballot mechanisms can strengthen legitimacy, mobilise the membership, and help organisations test the depth of support for contested positions.

3.2.1 Note: This would mean that papers that are 'widely held and deeply felt', passing with more than 66% of the delegation's votes, would not need to be returned to the membership for a ballot. Thus,

[2] Mendez, F., & Mendez, M. (2017). *Referendums on EU matters: Study*. European Parliament. https://doi.org/10.2861/082838

the Annual Conference would still remain as the supreme decision-making body for PPTA Te Wehengarua.

3.3 The taskforce may explore whether additional resources and structural support are needed for regions to effectively engage members prior to Conference. Research on member participation in unions highlights that structured opportunities for engagement - such as facilitated meetings, surveys and dedicated time - significantly improve the quality and representativeness of member input[3].

3.4 Practical ideas to overcome barriers to engagement could include enabling branches or regions to run member surveys, and providing release time for branch representatives to attend regional hui during work hours. These hui could be used to either work through Conference papers in advance or to gather member perspectives kanohi ki te kanohi before Conference. In addition, the provision for a paid union meeting offers a formal mechanism to engage members more broadly, including those in currently dormant or less active branches, ensuring their voices can inform regional positions. Such measures would recognise workload at a very busy time of the year, while giving regional delegates a more accurate picture of the views of their regions on issues that could become PPTA policy and direction.

3.5 The taskforce's work will need to be resourced appropriately. This may include provision for up to two in-person hui and reasonable release time for member representatives to participate. In addition, the taskforce will need resources to carry out the work required. Initial estimates of the cost of a taskforce are $8-$10,000, however, this is largely dependent on whether additional outsourcing is required. The taskforce will be asked to consider cost-effective options, including digital first consultation tools and existing communication channels, so that any recommended changes enhance democratic principles without creating disproportionate cost or administrative burden.

[3] Gomez, R., Bryson, A., & Willman, P. (2010). Voice in the wilderness? The shift from union to non-union voice in Britain. In A. Wilkinson, P. J. Gollan, M. Marchington, & J. Burgess (Eds.), *The Oxford handbook of employee voice* (pp. 287–306). Oxford University Press.