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CASE STUDY

Future Taranaki

Taranaki Regional Council, New Plymouth District Council
South Taranaki District Council
Stratford District Council



Presenter

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Future Taranaki

Executive Summary

In 2003 the four Taranaki local authorities agreed to collaboratively identify the “community outcomes and priorities” required by the newly enacted Local Government Act 2002. These community outcomes were to be identified at a regional and district level. The process settled on has won national awards and the resulting priorities have strong buy-in by local, regional and national organisations.

As a result of the community outcomes process a group of service delivering agencies was formed to explore ways of furthering those outcomes. This group, called Future Taranaki comprises a core Facilitation Group and a wider Future Taranaki Partners group. Three years later these arrangements are still in place, actively formulating regional projects to address pressing issues, e.g. region wide skill shortages, with continued strong cross-sectoral buy-in.

The arrangements are not without weaknesses, however. In particular, from a local authority point of view elected member awareness of, input into, and ownership of Future Taranaki needs to be stronger and has at times raised questions in some local authorities about its make-up and mandate. The lack of regular meetings of the wider Partners group has led to Future Taranaki not actively involving representation from the totality of organisations with responsibilities around the outcomes. And the absence of one or more dedicated full time people leaves progressing projects to people who are very busy with their day to day jobs. None of these issues are insurmountable and solutions are being actively pursued from within the Future Taranaki group.

The Problem or Issue / Initial Environment

Why a regional approach to community outcomes?

To its credit, the Taranaki Regional Council convened a meeting of the four Taranaki local authorities in January 2003. The Local Government Act 2002, requiring the identification of community outcomes and the exploration of collaborative arrangements to achieve them, had only passed into law a month earlier in December 2002.

At the January 2003 meeting, Taranaki's four local authorities agreed to collaborate to identify the “community outcomes and priorities” required by section 91 of a new Local Government Act. That act clearly required that local authorities identify these “outcomes” through a consultative process, that they were to be community-centric (as opposed to council-centric) and that collaborative approaches to achieving the outcomes were to be at least considered. The Taranaki local authorities are:

Taranaki Regional Council (TRC)
New Plymouth District Council (NPDC)
South Taranaki District Council (STDC)
Stratford District Council (SDC)

Taranaki is a distinct region whose residents have a strong sense of regional identity alongside local area (city, town or rural area) identities. Territorial local authority “district” identities are weak or non-existent. In contrast to a strong regional identity, the four local authorities had quite divergent corporate cultures, and highly variable resources available to each of them.

In joint councils to stakeholder consultation, the region’s major service provider organisations voiced a strong preference to develop collaborative possibilities at a regional, rather than district, level. For efficiency and effectiveness, these organisations did not want to deal separately with three district councils and a regional council, all with potentially different outcomes due to different outcome identification methodologies, when most issues do not begin or end at local authority borders.

For these reasons, and because pragmatically the regional council also did not want to deal with differing district outcomes as well as its own, the four Taranaki local authorities agreed to take a collaborative single approach to identifying their community outcomes.

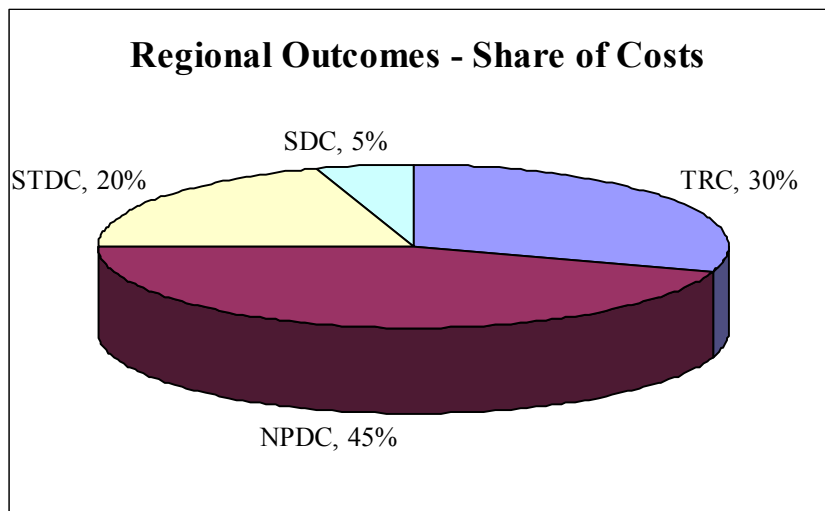
Description of the Project / Response

An arms-length outcomes identification process

Throughout 2003, the Taranaki Regional Council initiated and convened several meetings of the four Taranaki local authorities to discuss how the outcomes identification process should proceed. These small meetings were attended by local authority chief executives, policy/strategy and corporate planning staff.

The local authorities agreed to fund the project on a joint basis with contributions based on the resources of each local authority, with the Regional Council paying a greater share because of its region wide jurisdiction.

A dedicated part time coordinator was employed by TRC to advance the process on a day to day basis. This resource, as well as payments for various support and incidental expenses was also paid according to same basis as that referred to above. Meetings of the local authorities’ officers were usually chaired by the Chief Executive of Taranaki Regional Council.



The local authorities quickly agreed the key characteristics of the process, these were:

- An independent market research firm would be identified through a tender process.
- The exercise would be at arms length from the local authorities to ensure community-centric, as opposed to council centric, outcomes.
- The community outcomes must be identifiable at district, as well as regional, level. That is any differences in nature or priority of the outcomes between districts needed to be identifiable. This allowed each local authority to meet their individual obligations to identify outcomes for their own jurisdictions.
- The process would need to be very robust and defensible. This led to the use of multiple market research techniques, including public meetings, stakeholder meetings, a regional hui, focus groups, a randomly selected sample telephone survey and a questionnaire distributed to every mailing address in the region.

Agreement on the process was sought and received from a wide variety of stakeholders including the major government departments operating in the region, industry/sector groups, the district health board, NGOs and the voluntary sector.

Market research firm AC Nielsen won the tender process to carry out the research and implemented the research brief over late 2003. In identifying their outcomes the Taranaki local authorities, through AC Nielsen:

- held public meetings in each district
- held a regional hui
- carried out a large statistically robust telephone random survey
- held several randomly selected focus group meetings in each district
- sent a questionnaire to every mailing address in the region.

The councils and consultants also held meetings with the following stake holders:

- 52 Businesses & business sector organisations
- 24 Services organisations & community groups
- Environmental groups
- Education providers
- 36 Govt Ministries, Depts & Crown Agencies
- Members of Parliament
- 25 Iwi/hapu organisations
- 48 Maori business & service organisations
- 201 entities in total

Local authorities elected members were invited to and many attended the public and sector group meetings and the regional hui.

There was a high degree of commonality in the type of attributes the participants wanted to see in their communities. The result was a clear set of thirty eight statements or attributes, detailing what sort of district/region our citizens wanted to live in.

The level of support for each of the statements was discernable at a district level. These statements were then sorted into seven major themes according to how similar their subject matter was. The seven themes are: Prosperous, Connected, Skilled, Sustainable, Secure and Healthy, Together and Vibrant.

The Regional Hui

It would be remiss not to mention the difficulties that arose around the regional hui. It was held at the Owae Marae in Waitara. This venue was chosen because of the mana it holds in the region, it is seen by many tangata whenua as a pan-Taranaki marae, rather than belonging to a specific iwi and because it is a large, attractive marae with good facilities. Unfortunately, however, the meeting was quite acrimonious for two apparent reasons:

- Some tangata whenua attendees were not comfortable with discussing their kaupapa on what they saw as someone else's role
- There were unresolved issues between some attendees and one of the local authorities and while these were not aired directly, they clearly affected the tone of the meeting.

As a result, little that could be fed directly into the outcomes process was discussed. NPDC was unhappy about this and for the preparation of the 2006/16 community plan asked its Iwi Liaison Sub-committee to draft additional statements to be added to the existing thirty eight that sat under the seven outcomes. This was achieved successfully over two meetings.

Local Authorities and Community Outcomes

As stated a view was taken that the community outcomes should be the priorities of the community, rather than council priorities. This point was made to the New Plymouth District Council in a report on the LTCCP process in August 2003...

"The way the Local Government Act 2002 is set out, these are community outcomes, rather than council outcomes, and the council does not adopt them as such. While the council must run the process that identifies the outcomes and, therefore, interprets the community's input, it does not have any explicit right to decide what the outcomes should be, or to overrule the results of the consultation. The process of outcome identification therefore needs to be highly public and to directly involve the community in identifying and refining the outcomes at every stage of the process."

This view is worthy of defending. Local authority elected members and staff have incentives to put interests of their own organisation ahead of the interests of the wider community. This is particularly true of council management who are held accountable to the success or failure of their organisation's operations. For instance they are more likely to favour activities that use their own facilities and services and bring revenue into their own budgets, than competing

activities which might offer larger community benefits but do not add to council revenue, or contribute to other performance measures.

Elected members are probably more community conscious than council staff because they are accountable through the electoral process. This provides incentives to align their priorities with those of their communities. They are, however, also responsible for the success of the council organisation, incentivising them to some degree to place highly visible council performance ahead of often diffused but real community benefit. The most graphic examples of this are the competitive behaviours elected members engage in when the location of businesses, events and other economic activity might be located within their own borders or those of their neighbouring local authorities. Little consideration is given to issues such as where the benefits flow to, compared with whose district is it located in. For example the Parihaka Peace Festival is closer to New Plymouth city than to Hawera and it is quite possible that, to the degree that economic benefits matter here, most benefits flow to businesses in New Plymouth District.

Future Taranaki

It was clear from the seven broad themes, and the thirty eight underlying statements, that achieving them was beyond the traditional operations of any or all of the 4 councils and that many of them were not the responsibility of any one agency. For example, achieving progress on the “skilled” outcome would likely require effort on behalf of employers, the Western Institute of Technology in Taranaki (WITT), the Tertiary Education Commission, the education cluster “Education Taranaki” the regional economic development agency “Venture Taranaki” and possibly coordinating activity by the local authorities¹.

In order to explore how progress might be made, two meetings of the major service delivery organisations operating in the region were convened in July and September 2004. Again, these organisations placed a strong emphasis on regional, rather than district level action. The very diverse group of attendees at these meetings agreed that it was too large to move effectively on the community outcomes and decided to form a smaller representative group of organisations (“Future Taranaki Facilitation Group”). The wider grouping (The Future Taranaki Partners) was to remain and be convened from time to time as necessary. The smaller Facilitation Group comprised the following organisations:

- Ministry of Social Development
- New Plymouth District Council
- Stratford District Council
- South Taranaki District Council
- Taranaki District Health Board
- Taranaki Regional Council
- Te Puni Kokiri
- Venture Taranaki Trust

¹ New Plymouth District Council was already in the business of recruiting overseas for its own purposes and for those organisations that expressed an interest in using the councils human resources personnel to recruit for them.

Future Taranaki Terms of Reference

The Future Taranaki Facilitation Group was charged with the following terms of reference (abridged):

Purpose

- To work on behalf of the Future Taranaki Partners to provide a framework through which organisations can collaborate to deliver the seven community outcomes identified for the Taranaki region.

Objectives

- To enable strategic discussions amongst the Chief Executive Officers/ senior managers of key organisations in Taranaki on matters relating to the delivery of the community outcomes.
- To provide a forum for organisations to share information and ideas.
- To facilitate opportunities for collaboration and co-ordination.
- To set targets, define benchmarks and to take part in the formation and monitoring of performance indicators to measure progress towards achieving the community outcomes.
- To direct professional, technical and operational staff to work in partnership towards achieving the community outcomes.

Membership

- The Facilitation Group will be comprised of the Chief Executive Officers/ senior management representatives of the member organisations listed above (or their delegate).

Organisation and procedures

Meetings

- To take place not less than once every six months and more frequently if required.

Convenor

- The Convenor will be elected annually and it is expected that the role will be evenly shared amongst the members of the Facilitation Group.

Member responsibility

- Facilitation Group members should participate actively in the Facilitation Group and recognise that its success depends on a group effort. Members should recognise that the nature and scope of their roles, responsibilities and experience varies and that each member has a valid contribution to make.

Relationship to the Future Taranaki Partners and Reporting

- The Facilitation Group assists the Future Taranaki Partners to work towards the community outcomes. It does not direct other organisations how to utilise their resources.
- The Facilitation Group acts on behalf of the wider Future Taranaki Partners. As such, communication and feedback to the Future Taranaki Partners is critical. A copy of the Minutes of each Facilitation Group meeting is to be forwarded to each Future Taranaki Partners member as soon as possible following a Facilitation Group meeting.
- The Convenor of the Facilitation Group shall prepare a written report (i.e. a brief overview) of the work of the Facilitation Group to the Future Taranaki Partners annually in December.

The (lack of a) Political Dimension

A significant issue, for at least some of the local authority members, remains unresolved. Future Taranaki Partners and the Facilitation Group are almost entirely made up of staffers, rather than elected representatives.

Having an elected, as opposed to technocratic, membership of Future Taranaki is made difficult by the regional nature of the group in that each council would probably need to formally agree the terms of reference and make fresh delegations if elected members were to be appointed. Appointed elected members would then find themselves in a forum with paid professionals from the other organisations – especially government agencies, rather than with the governance of the organisations - which in the case of government agencies will be members of parliament with no direct connection to Taranaki.

The issues to be progressed, however, are strategic and are precisely the type of issue that elected members are rightly interested in and are accountable for. This lack of a political dimension has caused a degree of tolerated, but persistent, unease among some elected members. This is understandable given that it is their role to determine the nature and priority of actions in delivering on the community outcomes.

Other elected members appear to be uncomfortable with the use of community outcomes per se. Informal discussions with individual elected members reveal a number of reasons for this:

- They do not believe that they are necessary as they, as elected members, have been active in and close to the community for decades and they do not need consultants from elsewhere, or council professionals, telling them what is important to their constituents.

There is more than a grain of truth to this. New Plymouth District is a very stable community, large enough to be well resourced and small enough to allow for good communication and shared understandings around the community. The elected members in question have been involved in many facets of community life, including councils for long periods of time. They are also people with impressive track records in championing quite “strategic” projects over the years.

- They think that the outcomes are “motherhood and apple pie” and as such they are obvious to any sensible person. It is common among NPDC elected members and senior managers to refer to the outcomes as “The Seven Pillars of Wisdom”.

This is more difficult to agree with. Some of the underlying thirty eight outcome statements were the first indication of issues not previously seen as fundamentally needing to be addressed. The “Skilled” outcome was the first documented realisation that the region was facing acute and probably chronic skill shortages across the employment spectrum. There was also a clear call for work to be done on defining the “regional identity”. This has come up many times since and has led to a successful and popular branding exercise – not so much for marketing as for regional pride.

- Some elected members and managers do not want explicit outcomes based strategy, backed up with long term action plans because they believe it reduces their ability to be flexible in response to changing circumstances or new opportunities. This, however, is a major reason for having strategic goals – so that direction does not continually change in reaction to short lived passions and circumstance.
- It appears that some oppose outcomes based strategy because it makes prioritisation a more participative process, when they see it as their role to make decisions on behalf of their community.

Solutions to this need to be found is Future Taranaki is to achieve its full potential, as ultimately local political decisions will need to be made if resources are to be committed to Future Taranaki proposals. Possibilities include:

- a shadow “higher chamber” of elected members with sufficient delegations to commit to regional initiatives. (This to some degree already exists in “Team Taranaki” which is an informal and occasional meeting of the 3 mayors, the regional council chair, the electorate MPs whose constituency is wholly or in large part in Taranaki and the list MPs who have been given Taranaki purview. Team Taranaki has met twice in the last year and has received a briefing on the community outcomes).
- reporting back proposed initiatives for approval to individual council committees
- a mixed elected/officer representation on the Facilitation Group.

Is This the Right Model?

Along side the unease about the absence of political membership, there are also questions around the inclusivity of both the Future Taranaki Partners and the Facilitation Group.

New Plymouth District Council has come under direct criticism from some voluntary groups for not including them in the list of strategic partners in its Long Term Council Community Plan (LTCCP). This is in part due to the wording where Future Taranaki Partners are referred to as strategic partners without sufficient explanation as to what this group is. It has not been made clear that this is a regionally agreed grouping and the NPDC does not have the right to unilaterally appoint members. Some organisations have insisted that they are “strategic partners” and that they should be included as Future Taranaki Partners.

Explicit criteria might assist Future Taranaki to determine which organisations are natural partners in achieving its terms of reference. Sufficient, but not necessary conditions could include that the organisation should:

- Produce outputs that contribute significantly to progressing the community outcomes.
- be regional in operational scope unless there are good reasons for more localised interventions,
- be significant delivery in its own right, rather than one financially dependent, or dependent in other ways, on the Future Taranaki Partners for its resources (some demands to be included appear to be in order to position the organisation to make calls on financial and other resources)

The Future Taranaki Facilitation Group

The nature of the Facilitation Group is arguably more important in the short term than the wider Partners group. This is because it meets more often and calls for meetings of the wider group originate from within the Facilitation Group. There have been no meetings, however, of the wider group since late 2004. There is also concern that the makeup of the Facilitation Group is too narrow to address the breadth of even the larger issues facing Taranaki.

For example, the outcome that the community rated as highest priority for action was the “Prosperous” outcome. It has become clear that the best way to achieve further prosperity (the Taranaki economy has grown remarkably in the current decade) is to deal with skill shortages. That is - to progress the “Skilled” outcome. Many of the agencies that are most relevant to this outcome are not part of the Facilitation Group.

The Facilitation Group has discussed these shortcomings and issues scheduled to be discussed at the next meeting in April 2007 include:

- Structure
- Membership
- Convening of a meeting of the wider Future Taranaki Partners Group to discuss progress.
- The value of a full-time employee(s) to further the group’s activities on a daily basis. A major weakness of the Future Taranaki model is that all its members are very or relatively senior in their own organisations and therefore have pressing day jobs. This relegates Future Taranaki activity to the “when you’ve got the time” category.

Future Taranaki Facilitation Group Progress

The Facilitation Group has made progress however. In early 2007 the group agreed three projects to be progressed by Future Taranaki. These were put up in the form of written proposals by individual, or a number of, Future Taranaki members. Facilitation Group members were asked to prioritise three of the proposals in order of importance and “do-ability”.

The priorities that emerged were in order of importance:

- A labour market strategy to address skill shortages. This was a joint proposal by New Plymouth and South Taranaki district councils and is seen as the single most pressing economic and sustainability issue.
- Smoking cessation programmes. The Taranaki District Health Board (DHB) proposed this in 2006 and was asked to come back with some “intervention logic”, i.e. evidence that proposed interventions have worked elsewhere, or were likely to work in this case. The DHB has now done this and the Facilitation Group believes that this programme is likely to be one of the most effective means of securing health gain in the region.
- Domestic violence. This is a national objective of the Ministry of Social Development (MSD), which now incorporates the Children, Youth and Families Service (CYFS). The intervention logic needs to be developed further if it is to be a Taranaki tailored solution to the local nature of the problem. If the interventions are to be more or less the same as those being rolled out nationally, it begs the question - why does Future Taranaki need to be involved?

Has Future Taranaki Made a Difference?

Collaboration between service delivering agencies, such as government departments, local authorities, NGOs and the voluntary sector, has a long and successful history in Taranaki. Major collaborative exercises occurring outside of Future Taranaki’s activity include:

- a joint purchasing arrangement for regional tourism promotion services by the three district councils
- a cadet scheme for long term unemployed youth by MSD, NPDC, Te Puni Kokiri, Tertiary Education Commission and Ngati Tama
- a joint oversight committee on Port developments (Port Areas of Mutual Interest) comprising NPDC, TRC, Port Taranaki and Ngati Te Whiti.
- a regional sport and recreation strategy group including Sport Taranaki, the three district councils, the regional council, the Taranaki DHB, Venture Taranaki and the Department of Conservation.
- NPDC owned, but effectively a regional museum funded through partnerships with TRC, Taranaki Newspapers Limited, Port Taranaki, Shell Oil NZ, the Ministry of Culture and Heritage and Paranihi Kaunihera O Waitotara (a Maori investment company).
- Shared services arrangements between local authorities, e.g. NPDC and South Taranaki for engineering and asset management services.

The direction toward collaboration contained in section 91 of the Local Government Act has however underlined and added impetus to the collaborative culture that already existed in the region. There is a danger, however, that local authorities and other service delivering agencies will begin to seek collaborative ventures for collaborations sake, rather than because they're the optimal arrangement for addressing an issue or delivering a service.

Cross-sector buy-in

An interesting observation, for anyone interested in the operation of the new Local Government Act, is the enthusiasm with which the community outcomes have been picked up by non-local government organisations in Taranaki. The Future Taranaki process and community outcomes have been advanced by a diverse range of organisations with at least as much enthusiasm as that shown by the local authorities.

These include the:

- Ministry of Social Development's Taranaki regional office
- Taranaki District Health Board
- Sport Taranaki
- The Bishop's Action Foundation
- Tertiary Education Commission
- Ministry of Culture & Heritage
- Department of Conservation
- Local Tourism Operators Groups
- Department of Internal Affairs Relationship Managers

Prospects / the Future

Logic says keep going

It cannot be said yet that Future Taranaki is an unqualified success, as success can only be ultimately measured by progress on the community outcomes.

Given the common practice of good collaborative arrangements in Taranaki, it is difficult for Future Taranaki to make a sudden quantum improvement in such arrangements. Collaboration, however, has been ad-hoc and opportunistic, rather than strategic (outcomes focused) and working to purely local priorities.

Having a project identification process starting with a relatively blank sheet of paper, apart from the communities strategic drivers (the outcomes), is new however. This has the potential to lead to a more optimal application of resources in that, to the degree they are outcomes focussed, should result in resources being applied to community priorities, rather than single group/person agenda and national priorities.

Future Taranaki shows no sign of slowing, with the newly identified key projects at least creating an increased level of activity among the members.

It is believed, by NPDC staff at least, that appointing a full time staff member whose sole objective is to further the community outcomes through Future Taranaki, is essential to ensuring momentum and meaningful progress. This issue will be proposed at the April meeting.

Certainly the community outcomes identification process itself is a demonstration of the qualitative gains through collaboration. The entire exercise was expensive at \$130,000, but none of the local authorities on their own were likely to have been willing to pay for the quality of result the combined exercise achieved.

Adaptability / Transferability

A common regional approach to community outcome identification and progress makes sense in cohesive regions like Taranaki, where the community is more clearly defined by regional and local (city, town and rural area) identities and issues rather than by almost non-existent territorial local authority boundary identities. It might not make nearly as much sense in a region like Manawatu-Wanganui with quite disparate local identities, e.g. Palmerston North, Wanganui and Taihape.

Regions such as Southland, Northland, Hawke Bay, Canterbury and the West Coast might find similar benefits to those beginning to emerge in Taranaki. Conversations at national conferences give the impression that Taranaki has travelled a little further down this road than most regions or districts. Future Taranaki members appear happy to share their experiences.

Conclusions

Key lessons from the Future Taranaki experience

- Community-centric (as opposed to council-centric) community outcomes offer opportunities for the major players to plan for and carry strategic actions.
- Most of the major issues facing your community will require action from more than one agency and some won't involve local authorities at all.
- A formal regional forum for collaborative approaches to achieving community outcomes makes sense in regions that have a strong common identity and common outcomes across their territorial local authority borders.
- The role of local elected members in a context of collaboration with mainly paid officials from other organisations needs to be resolved.
- In order to avoid capture by sector, national and demographic interests their needs to be a sincere focus on the community outcomes.

- Criteria for membership are advantageous in that some groups might attempt to gain membership to better position themselves to obtain community resources.
- A full time dedicated resource is seen as multiplying effectiveness as current Future Taranaki members are often too busy to give it the attention it probably deserves on a day to day basis.
- Don't underestimate the willingness of other major service delivering organisations to understand and want to participate in outcomes based strategic planning and action.

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