

2005 NZ POST MANAGEMENT EXCELLENCE AWARDS

Community Relationships Award: Grass-Roots Community Consultation

BANKS PENINSULA



DISTRICT COUNCIL

The needs & benefits:

This project was driven initially by the consultation requirements of the Local Government Act 2002, its directive to consult on community outcomes and to make links between community priorities and the activities in the long-term plans of the Council. This was underpinned by the fundamental belief that “He who pays the piper, calls the tune” and Banks Peninsula District Council therefore made the decision to pursue a process that would define the needs of its communities.



The factors that further contributed to this decision were perhaps true for most local authorities, for example: The realisation that a quantum shift in thinking for both community and Council would be required to truly address longer term issues. Other factors were more localised. The response to the 2004 Community Plan gave us an early indication that our communities understood the implications of the new emphasis on local government accountability and were keen to have their say. There was also a clear message that the unique topography of the Peninsula means that some communities feel a very local sense of place and identity. One final but substantial factor was recognition of the pressures of change exacerbated by proximity to a major city, by a higher global profile for NZ and by the accessibility of information about Banks Peninsula as an iconic visitor attraction.

The potential benefits of this project were many and became a set of objectives:

- Building on positive relationships between community and Council
- Helping identify/reaffirm elected representation
- Promoting the sense of community
- Engaging with people who don't usually contribute their thoughts and ideas
- Helping to define the uniqueness often quoted in relation to Banks Peninsula
- Getting people thinking and talking about what was special to them
- Making people think about the need to manage change and about a long-term, sustainable future

Council's vision & strategic direction

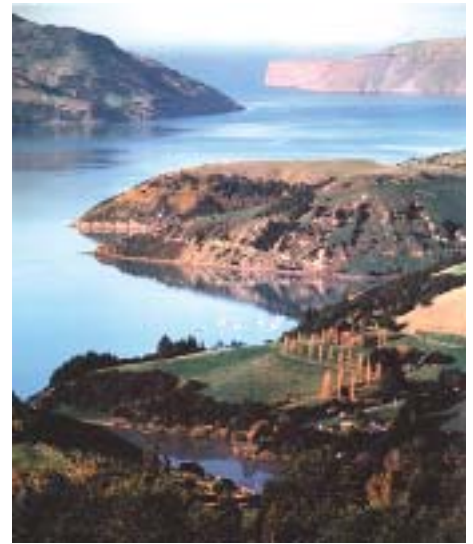
Our Councillors had a very clear vision early on of a long-term council community plan that would reflect the needs and wishes of Banks Peninsula ratepayers to a degree that had never been achieved before. Our elected representatives (including Community Boards) therefore pushed for a “what, where, when and with whom” consultation plan that would help them understand their community's needs and be reassured that those priorities would be captured and ultimately translate into action. They could see that fully inclusive community consultation would create a framework for decision-making according to the predominant views of Banks Peninsula people. The results were to confirm or in many cases, revise the views of both staff and Councillors of what was important to the people they serve.



Effective project management techniques

The process was mapped out on a GANTT chart (see attached) for the Council/Community Boards and staff to ensure they had a handle on the whole programme, its timing and how the process pieced together. Charts were also produced for the processes that would spin-off from community consultation, ensuring that the timing was appropriate for the production of the 2006 LTCCP and other plans.

Dedicated staff were assigned to organise meetings, liaise with community groups and produce publicity and other communications. Posters, newspaper ads, bulletins and mailouts kept the process alive and in the public eye. Staff who were directly involved were approached well in advance to discuss the level of commitment needed in order to ensure that this consultation fitted within their own work programme. Those expected to facilitate a group discussion or take notes at a meeting were given a briefing pack and attended a discussion meeting before the event.



As local authorities often work on a number of plans simultaneously, it was important to clarify the purpose of this work, so that various consultation events didn't clash or confuse the messages being given to ratepayers. Meetings were held in the evening or on a weekend, according to what the best suited each community. Community groups (local associations, special interest groups, schools etc.) were written to, phoned and reminded to ensure they did not miss out on an opportunity to be heard.

Participatory approach to gaining stakeholder buy-in

One of the most important factors in the design of the process was to make sure communities understood that they were participating, rather than being talked to. At the core of the consultation were a series of public meetings, but in a format that centred around small discussion groups in order to attract a range of participants. Staff too were recognised as "stakeholders" and were briefed on what was required, on the feedback received at each meeting and ultimately, informed of the final results of this programme.

Discussions amongst Council staff and elected representatives highlighted the need for the provision of information in advance of any meetings, so that the ten year context could be affirmed and to ensure input was informed. To this end, detailed information packs were produced and sent out to all identified agencies and organisations and offered in advance to anyone who expressed an interest through newspaper ads, fliers and posters.

The information pack contained:

- An explanation of the purpose of the series of meetings
- Details about the "areas of common interest" (part geographically based in recognition that people will only travel so far, and part in consideration of whether settlements were remote, holiday homes, urban or rural)
- Population projections by area, helping to emphasise a ten year context for planning
- Issues for each specific area that had been identified previously, either by the Council or by residents.

There were originally seven meetings scheduled, but in response to interest from individual communities this expanded to twelve. The meetings themselves comprised of two short presentations, one outlining the previously identified community outcomes, the other on population projections to allow for questions and discussion. Between presentations there were two breakout sessions, dividing participants into groups of less than ten, led by a member of staff with facilitation experience and assisted by a notetaker to allow them to concentrate on managing the group for the best possible input.





The first break-out session provided an opportunity for ratepayers and residents to talk about what was important about the place they live and what kind of place they would like it to be in ten years time.

The second session centred around discussions on local and district-wide services and how people thought their needs might change and develop over the next ten years. Following each meeting, a local newsletter summarising the issues was sent to all addresses in the area, extending the opportunity to participate to those who did not attend meetings. Many contributed in light of the comments they saw from others, so the newsletters acted as a successful catalyst.

After the programme of meetings had been completed, the main points from all the meetings were distilled down into one-line issues and fed into surveys, aimed at helping Council get a true measure of community priorities. The surveys had two components: district wide and local issues. These components were separated out to ensure that local people got a fair hearing on issues in their area and that district wide issues were consulted over the whole Peninsula.

Innovation & originality

This project was ambitious from the start and although we were always satisfied that it was an important and necessary undertaking, we couldn't be sure how it would be received – whether we would get community buy-in or how they might contribute. In the interests of relationship building, it was vital that the Council presented an approachable public face so we set out to involve as many members of staff as we could. Almost a third of all staff participated directly, putting in significant time and effort, others assisted in the preparations, reporting and analysis and we believe it proved to be a valuable and positive hands-on experience for all of them. We knew that public meetings were not everybody's cup of tea and supplemented this project with other approaches. For example: we sent a discussion paper questionnaire (attached) to the larger schools and youth groups, aimed at establishing what was best about living on the Peninsula and what we could do to make it better.

Our ratepayers are interested in value for money and so although our publicity material was clear and inclusive (examples attached), it was not over-elaborate or flashy. The simple "Have your say" message behind it was the most important thing.

Successful results (financial & non-financial)

The feedback from and about the meetings was predominantly positive, the most common comments expressed an appreciation of the opportunity to contribute and making contact with Council staff and representatives. Significant numbers of people followed up after the meetings or newsletters with phone calls or emails to voice their opinions and these can be added to the numbers below:

- Close to 300, (6%) adult ratepayers (from approx. 5000) attended public meetings.
- More than ten percent of the adult population of one rural community came to one. Another, based in a larger population centre had close to 50 participants and we had to form seven separate break-out groups to make sure they all had an opportunity to have their say.
- 20% of households (1500) were sent the resulting surveys (an example is attached) and more than 450 responses were received, representing close to 10% of the adult population. Some of these may also have attended meetings, but most will be contributions from new participants
- Youth groups and schools on the Peninsula were invited to take part in discussion and a survey to ensure their view was also represented. All of the larger schools were sent the questionnaires and 3 of the 6 schools with rolls over 50 made a contribution or sent some response.
- Overall, as many as 20% of adults may have taken an active part in this process, all others would have had the opportunity and information to allow them to do so.

Right thing to do

At the conception stage of this project, it was seen as vital to address the weakest aspect of our 2004 LTCCP – its lack of grass-roots input. Audit NZ had been constructive about the level of linkages between community input and planning in the 2004 LTCCP, but had been clear about how much better these linkages would have to be in the subsequent plan.

Much of what has come out of meetings and the survey has been constructive, positive and has endorsed the deep feeling our community has for the special place they live. We believe there can be no question in the minds of Banks Peninsula ratepayers that there has been a thorough process of public consultation on community outcomes and that they had the opportunity to contribute in a variety of ways. We had some surprises in what people told us, but a thorough process would always present some “curve balls”. Without this process in place, we may have made plans based on incorrect assumptions.

Finally, the numbers of contributors and their commitment to the process leaves no doubt that our ratepayers want to become involved in local government decision-making and this process has given them a unique opportunity to do so.

In summary

It is my personal belief that this community consultation project was worthwhile and invaluable, both as an experience and in terms of the results. I am confident that we have taken the right direction in establishing a set of goals and objectives for ourselves as a local authority and for our communities. Above all that, I believe we have done the right thing by and for the people we serve.

