

**DEVELOPING COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS -THE KEY TO ACHIEVING
SOCIAL WELLBEING WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF LOCAL AUTHORITY
COMPLIANCE TO THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT ACT 2002**

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Abstract

The Local Government Act 2002 requires New Zealand local authorities to become actively involved in the development of social wellbeing. This Act is a major shift for local authorities and their communities as they are now required to engage with their communities to develop shared community outcomes.

Recent research indicates that the community and social services sector are cynical of local authorities' ability to work with them to achieve improved social wellbeing. Without equal, effective partnerships with the community and social services sector the process of developing community outcomes will be weighted toward the needs of the local authority and therefore is in breach of the Act. In this article I argue that if local authorities undertake the groundwork required to

develop effective relationships with the community and social services sector they will be in an ideal place to achieve the intent of the Local Government Act 2002, that of empowering their communities.

Introduction

Under the 1974 Local Government Act the level of involvement by New Zealand local authorities in community development and support of the social services has varied greatly between councils, due in part to a lack of clear direction from this legislation. In recent years however the passing of the Local Government Act 2002 has resulted in a legislative requirement for all councils to engage in activities that foster social wellbeing. As a result local authorities are now required to engage with their communities to develop a shared vision for wellbeing. This new requirement to develop and monitor agreed community outcomes represents a significant shift in attitudes for many local authorities. In this article I discuss local authorities responsibilities under the Act and argue that in order to fulfil these requirements councils need to develop active partnerships with the community and social services sector to ensure an alignment of expectations is achieved.

This article outlines the recent changes to the legislation governing local authority activities, notably the requirement to promote social wellbeing. Further it looks at the relationship between local authorities and the community

and social service sector; in particular focusing on a case study of the Dunedin City Council. The case study outlines how the Dunedin City Council has begun to address social wellbeing within its long term council community planning process and the extent to which local community and social service providers have felt included in this process.

This article concludes by outlining two theoretical approaches to partnership building and consider how this may inform the development of effective relationships between local authorities and the community and social services sector. The article argues that the development of effective relationships is essential to ensure that the setting of community outcomes is a shared process therefore fulfilling the intent of the Act.

The Local Government Act 2002

Prior to 2002 the requirement for local authorities to engage in social wellbeing was a discretionary activity with initiatives being at the discretion of the individual councils concerned.

The Local Government Act 1974 states that (it) may do all things necessary from time to time for the preservation of health and public

well-being.¹

In addition within the 1974 Act the emphasis on accountability and responsiveness to the community was limited to recognising the interests of different communities. The change in government thinking was evident at the first reading of the Local Government Bill destined to become the Local Government Act 2002. The then Minister of Local Government, Sandra Lee, introduced the Bill's intent as follows:

...this Bill is, above all, about “empowerment”. Not as some might imagine, the empowerment of councils to exert greater influence and authority over their electors, but rather, empowering New Zealanders within their local communities to exercise ever greater control over their lives and over the environments in which they live.²

The Local Government Act (2002) clearly states that local authorities are required to promote social, cultural, economic and environmental well-being. Local Government consultant Peter McKinley sees this as a “major shift” of focus for many local authorities. McKinley notes that under previous legislation councils were rather removed from their communities, attitudes to community consultation often reflected the rubber stamping of a decision already made by councils. New obligations under the Act to develop a Long Term Council Community Plan (LTCCP) means that,

¹ Dunedin City Council 2003

² Sandra Lee quoted in McKinlay 2004:1

...councils cannot say that their role is confined to the traditional roads, rats and rubbish and they are not going to have anything to do with this environmental and social nonsense. If they say that, then they are in breach of the Act.³

The Local Government Act (2002) also allows local councils to work more flexibly to respond to the needs of their communities. Heeding the intent of the Act, to empower communities, this flexibility was accompanied by a process designed to engage community participation in decision making. The Act requires councils to carry out a consultation process to identify community outcomes. These outcomes are the focus for council planning become the basis for a long term council community plan.

Section 91 (2) of the Act states the purpose of community outcomes is:

- (a) To provide opportunities for communities to discuss their desired outcomes in terms of the present and future social, economic, environmental, and cultural wellbeing of he community; and

³ McKinlay 2004:3

- (b) To allow communities to discuss the relative importance and priorities of identified outcomes to the present and future social, economic, environmental, and cultural well-being of the community; and
- (c) To provide scope to measure progress towards the achievement of community outcomes; and
- (d) To promote the better co-ordination and application of community resources; and
- (e) To inform and guide the setting of priorities in relation to the activities of the local authority and other organisations.⁴

While the Act allows councils to determine their own process for identifying community outcomes, this process must include measures:

- (i) To identify, so far as practical, other organisations and groups capable of influencing either the identification or the promotion of community outcomes; and
- (ii) To secure, if practicable, the agreement of those organisations and groups to the process

⁴ The Local Government Act 2002 Section 91 (2)

and to the relationship of the process to any existing and related plans; and

- (b) Must ensure that the process encourages the public to contribute to the identification of community outcomes.⁵

Not only does the Act specify the need to consult but councils must also report against the community outcomes every three years. This reporting process must seek the approval of organisations identified under section 91(3) (a), in developing the monitoring and reporting procedures (The Local Government Act 2002 Section 92 (2)).

In addition to such monitoring, the Act requires councils to consider the effect on community outcomes of any decision it makes (The Local Government Act 2002 Section 77 (b) (ii)).

While the 1991 Resource Management Act has required local government to take into account the principles of the Treaty of Waitangi in relation to resource management issues; the Local Government Act 2002 appears to distance local authorities from meeting Treaty obligations directly by requiring them to recognise and respect the Crown's responsibility with regard to the Treaty of Waitangi.

⁵ The Local Government Act 2002 Section 91(3)

McIntosh offers the view that all organisations who seek collaboration with Maori are advised to understand that for Maori all prospective partnerships "...are understood within the context of this big partnership: the Treaty of Waitangi. ⁶

The Local Government Act does however offer local authorities guidelines for relationship building with Maori by including a special provision for the contribution of Maori to decision making. Section 81 (1) states that councils must "establish and maintain processes to provide opportunities for Maori to contribute to the decision-making processes...and consider ways in which it may foster the development of Maori capacity to contribute..."

In summary, the Local Government Act 2002 has created a significant shift in the way local authorities are expected to engage with their communities. Rather than limiting relationships to the recognise the varied interests of their constituent communities councils must now engage with these communities in order to develop a shared vision in the form of community outcomes. These community outcomes become the basis of a Long Term Council Community Plan (LTCCP) that provides guidelines for resource allocation and must inform all council decision making. The community outcomes are required to be evaluated every three years to assess whether these have been achieved. This process must be undertaken in conjunction with the community.

⁶ McIntosh 2003:5

The Relationship between the Community and Voluntary Sector and Local Government

The Government initiated Community and Voluntary Sector Working Party (CVSWP) saw the role of local government in working with Iwi and the community sector as that of advisor, funder, catalyst, advocate and facilitator⁷

As a result of their consultation however, the CVSWP found that although some communities, organisations and individuals felt that local government should be more involved in the community, some were also cynical of local government's ability to be in touch with community needs. These groups maintain that local government involvement often added another layer of bureaucracy to the central government/community relationship (ibid).

The CVSWP concluded that

...while local government has an obvious interest in the wellbeing of Iwi and community organisations, it cannot and should not replace them. Locally based Iwi and community organisations

⁷ Ministry of Social Policy 2001

contribute more than the provision of services. They also provide opportunities for the participation of citizens and for the growth of community wellbeing.⁸

Case Study: Dunedin City Council

The attitudes expressed to the CVSWP were also reflected in a consultative process commissioned by the Dunedin City Council's Community Development Team. While there was a desire to see the Council take an active leadership role in championing social issues on the whole community and social service agencies appear cynical of the ability of the Council to act as a change agent as they felt that there was no willingness by the Dunedin City Council (DCC) to challenge the status quo (Aimers 2005).

The desire for Councils to take a leadership role, tempered with a lack of trust of the Council's commitment is also reflected in two studies on youth needs in Dunedin. One study recommended that "better communication and co-operation – particularly amongst professionals such as Police Youth Aid, social workers, teachers, health professionals and the City Council" was needed to address youth issues in the city.⁹ They go on to say that the Dunedin City Council should provide leadership to assist in planning and resourcing such networks to work to prevent conditions that lead to at risk behaviour in young people. Similarly, another study found that a number of social agencies criticised a lack

⁸ Ministry of Social Development 2002, Ministry of Social Policy 2001:122

⁹ Smith, Gollop & Smith 2003:5

of commitment displayed by the Council in youth issues, although this document went further by revealing that some social service agencies did not trust the City Council to have a constructive contribution to make (Arai Te Uru Whare Hauora 2004).

This lack of trust has continued to be displayed in relation to the community outcomes process initiated by the Dunedin City Council. The Council was quick to establish its first LTCCP, only one year after the requirement to do so came into law. In part this was enabled by the use of information gained from a consultative process undertaken in 2000–2001 for a strategic planning process (Dunedin City Council 2003). While this may appear to be a cost effective move by the Council, who had already invested heavily in the earlier process, the perception of many community and social service groups consulted in 2005 was that the Council had not developed the resultant outcomes in partnership with the community. Not only did these groups feel they had been excluded from the process but they also felt that the Council's own Community Development Team had insufficient input into the process. This lack of influence was seen as barrier to the Council's ability to act in a leadership role as the communities' main conduit for communication was through the Community Development Team. In addition these community and social agency groups were also unsatisfied with the way Council prioritised social issues. They felt that in general most council departments showed a lack of awareness of social issues and communication channels were not made easily available (Aimers 2005).

Despite being critical of the level of community participation in the community outcomes process the social service agencies consulted felt that Council should have a strategic overview of all the organisations working in the community and social welfare sector. It was felt that this would develop the Council's co-ordination role to bring similar organisations together so they can resolve duplication issues. The need to act as a funding and resource provider was seen as an increasingly important role for the Council, particularly with the retrenching of central government funding and advisory services such as the axing of the Community Employment Group and the reduction of staff at the Dunedin office of the Department of Internal Affairs (ibid).

The Dunedin City Council has set its first community outcomes under 3 areas of wellbeing, these are:

Economic well-being

1. Wealthy community
2. Accessible city

Environmental well-being

3. Safe and healthy city
4. Sustainable city and environment

Social and cultural well-being

5. Supportive community
6. Culture and learning

7. Active city¹⁰

The community outcome ‘supportive community’ has as its vision “a city where residents feel included and connected with their wider community” The commentary explaining this outcome states:

Dunedin citizens told the Council they wanted to live in a city offering a wide range of community and social activities...Recognising the needs of particular population groups is also important for building a harmonious community. Good local governance, information sharing and consultation are also valued. Dunedin people are aware of the importance of a strong community support network. However they are also aware that the Council only provides a small proportion of those things required by communities throughout the city. They appear to be generally satisfied at the Council’s current level of spending on community support, although some agencies are encouraging the Council to spend more.¹¹

This does not appear to align itself with the results of the consultation commissioned by the DCC Community Development Team. Although this consultation was intended to discuss the relationship organisations had with the Community Development Team, the social service organisations consulted also expressed dissatisfaction with the Council’s policy makers over a lack of consultation with them to develop these community

¹⁰ Dunedin City Council 2003:24

¹¹ Dunedin City Council 2003:36

outcomes. These groups also said they would like more commitment from the Council to address social issues including more support for their own Community Development Team.

What these studies tell us is that in the case of Dunedin the community and social service sector would like the Council to have an active role in social change and not just support existing initiatives in order to maintain the status quo. In order to ensure that the community and social service sector feel a sense of ownership of the community outcomes process it is essential that the Council develops strong ongoing relationships with this sector. In this case it appears that departmentalism within the Council structure acts as a barrier to community partnership. This is illustrated by the Dunedin City Council Community Development Team who, despite having good links with the community, were perceived to have little influence due to their isolation from the power structures of the Council structure as a whole.

Developing Partnerships

As already noted a criticism of some local authorities is that they do not take the leadership role on social issues that the community and social services sector would like. Many in the community and social services sector feel that local authorities tend to be reluctant to challenge existing power relationships therefore are not effective as social change agents. However despite this there are calls for local authorities to take a leadership role, provided this is done in a

participatory and co-ordinated way. The challenge offered by the 2002 Local Government Act 2002 is to empower local communities to be active participants in local government. To ensure that local authorities overcome the mistrust of the community and social services sector they need to examine the way in which they engage with the sector and address both cultural and power issues to ensure full participation.

Partnership Theory

A number of theorists offer perspectives that could assist local authorities develop better relationships with the community. Shannon and Young (2004) argue that the characteristics of effective successful relationships are:

- that both can learn and gain from the interaction
- that solutions to the problems which are the focus for the interaction may have multiple facets and can be explored and worked on in an atmosphere of equal trust and respect; and
- that the world views of each will almost certainly be different but can form the basis for ongoing exploration leading to a relationship which looks less like professional-client or expert-novice and more like partners¹²

¹² Shannon & Young 2004:281 - 282

Shannon and Young (2004) advocate local Council involvement in community determined indicators as a way of facilitating relationship building¹³. This process appears to have much in common with the community outcomes process required as part of the 2002 Local Government Act. Shannon and Young argue that to be successful in such a partnership process decision making related to the forming of indicators must start at the lowest participatory level, thereby ensuring maximum participation in the decision making process. This echoes the sentiment offered by Sandra Lee at the introduction of the Act as a Bill, notably that the Act should empower New Zealanders to exercise greater control over their lives.

Craig (2004) also argues for an equal sharing of power within partnerships. Craig offers a model for developing effective multi-sector partnerships that considers two aspects, firstly the political agency (who is represented) of those entering the partnership and their ability to undertake the technical (blend of experience and skills) tasks required. Craig argues that politics “don’t go away” and need to be managed to ensure fair representation by all parties and the appropriate skills must be developed in order for people to participate fully¹⁴.

Shannon, Walker and Walker (2005) offer a similar model. They maintain that successful partnerships or collaborations need individual members to have access to three forms of ‘capital’, knowledge capital (of the issue at hand),

¹³ Shannon & Young 2004

¹⁴ Craig 2004

relational capital (ability to build and create networks) and mobilisation or political capital (ability to initiate and sustain change).

Cultural issues bring another dimension to the partnership debate. McIntosh (2003) explains that the concept of partnership, and expectations of joint collaboration, is considered a part of the Maori way of organising. However like many community organisation's past experience brings with it a certain wariness or cynicism.

Maori are often drawn into partnerships where the other partner has access to both resources and legal authority while Maori engage from positions of scarcity... Certainly, relations of power within a partnership framework are central in determining the real nature of partnership.¹⁵

Walker (2004) has identified two principles to observe when developing of partnerships with Maori, these are: Kanohi ki te kanohi (face to face relationship building) within the context of local tikanga (customs, beliefs or the right way of doing things). Following these principles allows organisations to establish a relationship based on trust and understanding. Among local bodies, Waitakere City has arguably developed one of the most extensive locally based multi-sector

¹⁵ McIntosh 2003:3

collaborations in New Zealand to address issues of wellbeing. The process developed by the council, is dubbed ‘the Waitakere way’.

Craig (2004) outlines the practicalities of implementing consultation in order to develop partnerships. Craig describes ‘the Waitakere way’ as the extensive consultation process undertaken by the Waitakere City Council over a number of years to develop a Waitakere-wide Wellbeing Strategy. The three way partnership refers to the involvement of community, local government and central government agencies. While a significant achievement, those involved in this process maintain that consistent effort is required to sustain effective local action. In order to avoid apathy associated with consultation fatigue Craig notes that councils can use a range of techniques. These include specifically targeted forums, ensure people attending meetings are mandated ready to make decisions, and provide feedback to wider networks.

In summary, local authorities need to understand that for a successful partnership to develop consideration must also be given to a raft of issues. They should spend time seeking ways to develop trust and when negotiating partnership relationships consider how it can ensure all members have access to the various forms of capital to ensure an equal sharing of power in the relationship.

The theorists referred to here all advocate processes that acknowledge that relationship building is influenced by various forms of power, agency or capital. All are clear however that in order to be effective an equal balance must be reached. What local authorities can take from this is that in order to develop effective partnerships all partners need to have access to appropriate technical and relational skills have a community mandate to make decisions and a good knowledge of the issues to be discussed. Local authorities can further support the relationship by considering how they structure consultation and meeting processes in order to minimise possible consultation fatigue.

Finally, when seeking to develop culturally appropriate strategic partnership relationship with Maori local authorities need to engage in the practice of *kanohi ki te kanohi*, observing local *tikanga* and recognising the special place of *Mana Whenua*.

Conclusion

In this article I have outlined how the Local Government Act 2002 requires New Zealand local authorities to become actively involved in the development of social wellbeing. This Act is a major shift for local authorities as they are now required to actively engage with their communities to develop shared community outcomes. These outcomes then become the basis of all council decision making and the focus of a Long Term Council Community Plan. Not

only are local authorities required to seek community involvement in setting community outcomes, but also the Act states that these outcomes must be monitored and evaluated in conjunction with community partners.

In introducing this Act the Government made it clear that the expectation on local authorities is that they will empower New Zealanders to exercise ever greater control over their lives. Therefore in order to comply with the requirements of the Local Government Act 2002 local authorities need to develop active partnerships with the community and social services sector. Without equal, effective partnerships with the community and social services sector the process of developing community outcomes will be weighted toward the needs of the local authority and therefore be in breach of the Act.

Recent consultation and studies discussed throughout this article illustrate that the community and social services sector are cynical of local authorities' desire to take a strong leadership role on social issues and in some cases doubt their ability to engage in an equal partnership with their sector. While this clearly puts local authorities on the back foot with the sector, there is a range of recent New Zealand specific research on partnership building that councils can draw on.

Suggestions offered by the researchers sourced for this article include:

- Seek ways to develop trust and when negotiating partnership relationships consider how they can ensure all members have access to knowledge capital (of the issue at hand), relational capital (ability to build and create networks) and mobilisation or political capital (ability to initiate and sustain change) (Shannon, Walker & Walker 2005).
- Acknowledge that although it has a primary interest in local issues local authorities cannot presume to represent the interests of community organisations, rather they should look for ways in which direct representation of such groups can be facilitated.
- Develop a relationship with Maori using the practice of *kanohi ki te kanohi* within the context of the local *tikanga* and above all recognising the special place of *Mana Whenua*.
- Learn from other local authorities about what works and what doesn't. For example the experience of Waitakere City in developing their 'Waikatore way' encountered apathy associated with consultation fatigue. Craig (2004) found that the use of a range of techniques can overcome this problem. These include establishing specifically targeted forums, ensuring that the people attending meetings are mandated and able to make decisions, and provide feedback of decisions to wider networks.

If local authorities undertake the groundwork required to develop effective relationships with the community and social services sector they will be in an ideal place to achieve the intent of the Local Government Act 2002, being the of empowerment of their communities “to exercise ever greater control over their lives and over the environments in which they live¹⁶”.

¹⁶ Sandra Lee quoted in McKinlay 2004:1

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