

Are councils missing the point about outcomes monitoring?

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Every territorial authority in New Zealand is obliged under section 92 of the Local Government Act (LGA) to report progress by its local communities towards their desired community outcomes, which are identified through section 91 consultation processes. Auditor expectations are that councils will also describe and monitor the links between council performance and community progress (Killerby, 2006). However there are worrying signs that many local authorities do not fully recognise the purpose or importance of their section 92 obligations.

One area of concern is that many local authorities are treating section 92 as a tick-box requirement rather than seeking to use community outcomes monitoring as a basis for more evidence informed decision-making. The majority of councils have as yet made little connection between community outcomes monitoring, annual planning, multi-agency strategic planning, and council and community budgeting processes. Steps have been made by some cities, districts and regions to undertake multi-agency planning using community outcomes as a common accountability framework (eg, Craig, 2004), however in most cases the section 92 monitoring requirement is seen as peripheral rather than a central aspect of the community planning cycle. Of note, McKinlay Douglas's influential 2004 report devotes not one sub-section to the potential role of community outcomes monitoring in the community planning cycle.

The overemphasis by some councils on section 91 processes should come as no surprise when one considers the LGA is silent on defining the purposes of section 92. Section 91 has a list of purposes including: "to inform and guide the setting of priorities in relation to the activities of the local authority and other organisations". No such purpose is attributed to section 92, giving the impression that pursuing community desires should take precedence over identifying and responding to community needs.

Recent examples of community outcomes planning and reporting include:

- Cases where councils have put additional resources into community concerns, such as crime and safety, without considering evidence of the issue in a broader community context (for example by comparing criminal offending trends alongside water quality and other trends). Similarly, some multi-agency groups have pre-empted the availability of holistic evidence about regional and local community well-being by identifying priority issues based on (for instance) common issues between agencies and/or across communities.
- Cases where community outcomes reports have been prepared with little or no value as decision-making tools. At least one community outcomes report in 2006 suggested there were no issues of concern in the area and hence no need to re-allocate community resources. The report made no attempt to compare progress between different indicators for the local area, nor did it consider relative regional or national trends.
- Cases where detailed monitoring programmes have been compiled with no intention to link the results into council or collaborative resource allocation processes. This includes at least one sustainability indicators programme that pre-dates the LGA and has yet to be reviewed in a community outcomes context.

On a positive note there are some good examples, such as the Futures Taranaki report and South Waikato State of the District report, which highlight key issues as a guide to decision-makers. Work is also under way by the Choosing Futures Waikato project team and other groups to prepare comprehensive monitoring reports. The challenge is to not only ensure quality information from these initiatives, but also promote the key results to councils and other organisations, use them to help identify community priorities and respond accordingly. At the end of the day, community outcomes monitoring should be about working smarter for community benefit.

References:

- Craig, D. (2004) "Building better contexts for partnership and sustainable local collaboration: A review of core issues, with lessons from the 'Waitakere Way'", Social Policy Journal of New Zealand, Issue 23, December 2004.
- Killerby, P. (2006) "Good practice advice for attributing community progress to council performance", unpublished paper presented to the Waikato Strategic Planners Network, <http://www.paulkillerby.orcon.net.nz/research.htm>.
- McKinlay Douglas Ltd (2004) "Realising the potential of the community outcomes process: A report prepared to assist local authorities and other agencies use the community outcomes process to achieve sustainable improvement in community well-being", prepared for Local Government New Zealand.