

30 January 2008

By Paul Killerby, Strategic Planning Manager, APR Consultants Ltd

Community outcomes consultation... here it comes again

The review period for local authorities' long-term planning is every three years, with the next Long Term Council Community Plan (LTCCP) due for adoption by mid-2009. In addition, section 91 of the Local Government Act (LGA) requires councils to carry out a consultation process not less than once every six years to identify community outcomes in their local area. The resulting information is intended to be considered by council staff and elected members during LTCCP preparation and should also be available as a planning resource to other organisations and groups.

There have been mixed reactions to the section 91 requirements by councils around the country. Some see it as an opportunity to foster civic participation, improve decision-making and boost the feel-good factor in their community. However for other councils, particularly smaller ones that struggle to provide traditional services, community outcomes consultation is seen as a 'woolly' process that deserves only enough attention to keep the auditors satisfied.

Some councils began their initial round of community outcomes consultation during 2003/04. Strictly speaking, most local authorities don't need to re-consult for another year or more. However, the intention of section 91 is that community outcomes should "inform and guide the setting of priorities" in relation to the council and other organisations. This means having the best and latest information available prior to development of the 2009 LTCCP. It could be argued that at least some degree of review of community outcomes should be completed before the end of 2008. At a minimum, council planners should become familiar with any available new information that might add to their knowledge about local aspirations and issues.

Here's some questions you might like to ask of your own council in the lead-up to the 2009 LTCCP:

1. What consultation results can you readily put your hands on that weren't available prior to the initial community outcomes round? Some local authorities have compiled past resident survey results, submissions and consultation reports into an on-line collection that staff and the public can access.
2. What key issues are highlighted in council's community outcomes report (prepared in compliance with section 92 of the LGA)? What community needs and priorities emerged in relation to long-term trends and

comparisons with regional and national indicators? This information has the potential to help identify “the right debate” in the words of the OAG.

3. What is your plan for engaging stakeholder organisations and the public, if consultation is scheduled to occur within the coming year? How could you make the process fresh and relevant? For example, there may be an opportunity to not only review the community outcome statements but also:
 - Reiterate key issues identified through council’s community outcomes monitoring programme.
 - Distribute information about how individuals and communities can make a difference in these key areas.
 - Ask for input into the choice of indicators – is council monitoring and reporting the right information?
 - Discuss possibilities for improving communication between agencies and keeping the community informed.
 - Brainstorm new opportunities to pool agency resources for improved community benefit.
4. If consultation is scheduled during the coming year, how can you get the biggest bang for council’s buck? Were there specific community sectors that were not adequately represented in the initial consultation process, such as Māori, young people or the business community? Can you develop a consultation plan that puts more resources into likely sources of new perspectives and less money into generic consultation methods?

The forthcoming community outcomes review – whether it happens before or after the release of the 2009 LTCCP – will help redefine what is important for your local community’s future. However it will not necessarily lead to a substantial shift in strategic plans and work programmes. Agency collaborations and managing for outcomes are occurring all the time throughout New Zealand, influenced by a wide range of information and agendas. The level of ratepayer funding applied to councils’ six-yearly section 91 obligations should balance the cost of consultation against the benefits of more accurate and up-to-date knowledge about community wants and needs.