Participation in Practice: Hamilton Community Outcomes Consultation

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Introduction

Burke's (2004) review of community outcomes processes shows that many territorial authorities take an inclusive approach to community consultation. One challenge involved in engaging thousands of community members is how to make sense of such large amounts of descriptive data.

The process of sorting consultation results into themes often makes use of a database or spreadsheet package, or may be performed manually using large sheets of paper and colour coding. The task is typically performed by a mix of staff, consultants, councillors and key stakeholders. Some local authorities have attempted to use qualitative software such as NVivo to assist the process, but with limited success.

This article describes how an adapted version of Classification System data mining software was used to assist in summarising consultation results from more than 3,000 Hamilton residents and visitors into a one-page statement of community outcomes for Hamilton City.

Hamilton's community outcomes process

All New Zealand local authorities are obliged under s. 91 of the Local Government Act (LGA) 2002 to "not less than once every 6 years, carry out a process to identify community outcomes….". Hamilton's community outcomes process was an opportunity to build on lessons learnt from the city's Local Agenda 21 strategic planning process in the 1990s. In particular, an evaluation of this earlier process concluded that:

> "The creation of an overall multi-disciplinary stakeholder [group] to guide the process in Hamilton might have minimized the feeling in the community that the plan belonged to the council. It would have also added more varied ideas and input, and a greater 'buy-in' from the organizations represented in that group" (ICLEI, 1998, p. 25).

Therefore in late 2004, the Council invited a range of community-based organisations, iwi/Maori and Government representatives to form a Consultation Steering Group to develop and oversee a community consultation process. Invitations were based on representation from the four well-beings in the LGA (social, economic, environmental and cultural) plus iwi, Government and youth.

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Each Steering Group member brought extensive knowledge and networks relating to their particular area of representation.

Overall administration and funding was provided by the Council, including the commissioning of an experienced independent facilitator. The Consultation Steering Group met on an approximately monthly basis from January to October 2005. A Project Support Team of Council staff met in parallel, and meeting notes were shared between the Steering Group and Support Team. The role of the Support Team was to oversee Council's contribution to the process, serve as a link between the Steering Group and Council staff, and support the process through communication with Council and external networks.

Collecting ideas

The Consultation Steering Group designed and managed a visioning process that included dozens of focus groups with a wide variety of sector groups, individual surveys with thousands of people (via telephone, face-to-face, self-return and on-line returns) and a hui hosted by mana whenua. In total, more than 3,000 people had their say about what would make Hamilton a better place.[2] A core set of key questions was supplemented with additional questions tailored to different settings (e.g. young people, Maori, environmental groups). Overall the process used an inclusive, community-based approach. Although not everyone's initial expectations could be met due to time and resource constraints, the process has been positively evaluated by most participants.[3]

In total the consultation results encompassed 2,846 individual survey responses, 38 focus group and hui transcripts, three unsolicited submissions and one response in poster format. This translated into tens of thousands of discrete but related ideas. Survey demographics were broadly representative in terms of gender, age group, ethnic group and location of residence.

Making sense of what the community said

While many of the Steering Group members were closely involved throughout the consultation process, the relatively specialist aspects of coding and reporting were contracted to Hamilton-based consultancy firm Martin Thomas & Associates. The consultant submitted a proposal based on an adaptation of Reel Two Classification System software (www.reeltwo.com). Reel Two's data mining software was originally developed to help extract meaning from data in large document collections such as medical and genetic literature.

Reel Two Classification System is a data mining product that enables users to organise unstructured text according to customised topics. The software can be trained to recognise categories of interest and the relationships between them.

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[2] Reports from each stage of the consultation are available at www.myhamilton.org.nz.
[3] An evaluator worked alongside the Steering Group and Project Support Team throughout the project and undertook interviews at key stages. This evaluation component was jointly funded by Hamilton City Council and Waikato District Health Board.

For example, in the case of the Hamilton community outcomes results, the software was trained to link comments about traffic congestion to other concepts such as cycling, walking and public transport. The assignment of initial categories was undertaken by the consultant and subsequently assessed by the Steering Group. Links between related ideas were reinforced by permitting individual ideas to appear under multiple themes, for example cycling and walking were related to both health and traffic issues.

Prior to the coding process, data entry was done in Excel in a way that would maintain the context of related ideas. Wherever there was an obvious link between consecutive ideas, the data entry operator inserted a hyphen. Full-stops, question marks and exclamation marks were used as data dividers. The Reel Two Classification System software subsequently treated all text between dividers as a single idea.

Initially the consultant took some time to become familiar with the software and database content and to work with Reel Two to adapt the software to suit the project's purpose. The software was then trained on the basis of emerging themes. For this an initial sample batch of around 800 responses was used for each question, and the remainder of the database (approximately 3000 responses including focus group results) was sorted automatically according to the themes developed. Because the data mining was largely automated, a larger sample size could have been accommodated with little extra cost or effort. Some manual checking was undertaken to sort items too complex for trained statistical processes to recognise without full human understanding.

The full report, including contents and introduction, is 623 pages long. It contains a wealth of information that can be referenced over the coming 5-6 years on a wide variety of topics. The report can potentially provide base information as a supplement to subsequent consultation on specific topics.

Polishing the community outcomes

A number of subsequent steps in the community outcomes process were undertaken to ensure a robust method of summarising the data. These included:

1. Consultation Steering Group members familiarised themselves with the full report and met to cluster the individual themes into six broader themes (quality/ spirit of place, arts and events, traffic, infrastructure & form, services & amenities, business & economics, leadership & decisions).
2. At the direction of the Steering Group a 20-page summary report was developed manually by a sub-group of consultants and Council staff from the Project Support Team on the basis of the above themes, taking care to preserve common phrases and context.
3. The Consultation Steering Group reviewed the summary report, developed a standard format for the community outcome statements (i.e. themes, narratives and statements) and summarised the report into an initial set of draft community outcomes. At this stage the themes were

refined and split by the Steering Group into seven areas on the basis of emerging clarity about the clusters of ideas (sustainable & well-planned, vibrant & creative, unique identity, safety & community spirit, healthy and happy, progressive city, working together).

4. Following further revision by the Consultation Steering Group, a draft set of community outcome statements was distributed to all households for feedback. Approximately 260 people commented on the draft statements. The Steering Group considered and deliberated this community feedback through small-group work, plenary discussions, and e-mails before 'signing off' the community outcomes in October 2005. Changes due to this community feedback stage were mostly minor, ranging from small wording changes to re-allocation of some outcome statements into alternative themes.

The result of the overall process was a one-page list of 38 community outcomes statements that were agreed by the Steering Group and Project Support Team to be an accurate and concise reflection of the aspirations of Hamilton communities. These statements will be used by the Council to describe, through its Long Term Council Community Plan 2006-16, its own contribution to community well-being in the city. They will also be made publicly available and promoted to Government, community and iwi/Maori organisations as a basis for their own strategic planning.

Having arrived at an agreed set of community aspirations for the city, the next challenge is to use Hamilton's Community Outcomes as input to a collaborative strategic framework or "common accountability platform" (Craig, 2004) and develop a core set of indicators for monitoring progress towards achieving the outcomes. Discussions are underway to develop an integrated strategic framework that gives context to the long-term plans of the Council and other organisations and supports progress towards a more sustainable and vibrant city.

Conclusion

This article describes a community outcomes process that was initiated, supported and administered by Hamilton City Council but designed and driven by a Steering Group of key community stakeholders. Features of the process included inclusive community consultation, a focus on building communication, cooperation and trust between the Consultation Steering Group members and with Council staff, and appropriate use of data mining software. This last aspect represents a new tool for making sense of large amounts of qualitative data. Traditional challenges in summarising qualitative data include potential biases of the analysts, inadvertent omission of key ideas, or loss of context due to related ideas being separated during the analysis process. Appropriate use of data mining software can play an important role in clustering large amounts of data into a more manageable form and representing relationships between ideas. Martin Thomas & Associates' adaptive use of Reel Two Classification System

software in Hamilton helped to reliably and transparently refine thousands of ideas into a single page of community outcome statements.

References

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