Strategic Planning in a Shifting World:
The Akaroa Harbour Basin Settlements Study
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Introduction

Council planning processes are inevitably shaped by governance structures and institutional frameworks. When these structures and frameworks change due to local government amalgamation, unique opportunities and challenges can be presented for strategic planning.

Christchurch City Council (‘CCC’) and Banks Peninsula District Council (‘BPDC’) were adjoining local authorities in Canterbury, New Zealand and were amalgamated in 2006 (refer Figure 1). This paper examines how planning processes both responded to and were affected by the new local government structure. More specifically, the discussion focuses on the Akaroa Harbour Basin Settlements Study (the ‘Settlements Study’) undertaken for part of the new jurisdiction. This Study utilised strategic planning processes to determine long-term work programmes for the local settlements.

This paper explains the scope, process and key outputs generated by the Settlements Study. In particular, the paper identifies the challenges faced by Council staff with a responsibility for a new area; and provides learning points for other Councils undertaking strategic planning exercises when facing amalgamation, changing structures or interfacing with new communities.

Background

In 2006 a Memorandum of Understanding (‘MOU’) was agreed between BPDC and CCC to guide the amalgamation process. The MOU included a variety of projects that had been previously approved and budgeted by BPDC, and were to be implemented by CCC. One of these projects was an ‘Akaroa Community Plan’. However, the new Council was not convinced that a ‘Community Plan’ was the correct starting point.

Due to significant budget restrictions, BPDC had previously been able to do little proactive planning for the Akaroa Harbour area. As a consequence, the new Council had a poor understanding of the issues facing the area, and how these issues might best be addressed. In addition, there were significant information gaps, further compounded by limited institutional knowledge of the Akaroa area. CCC recognised that it needed to improve its strategic understanding of the wider Akaroa area, before any detailed ‘plans’ could be produced for individual communities.
The original ‘Akaroa Community Plan’ project was consequently reshaped with an expanded scope and the ‘Akaroa Harbour Basin Settlements Study’ was commenced in 2007. The purpose of the study was to determine and investigate the issues for the eight settlements of the Akaroa Harbour Basin, and identify the methods available to address these issues, with a view to supporting strong and sustainable communities.

**Project scope and process**

The geographical scope of the Settlements Study was limited to the urban zoning of the eight harbour settlements and the immediate hinterland of these rural settlements (refer Figure 2). The subject matter addressed by the Study was very wide-ranging, incorporating natural, physical, social and economic environments as well as the overarching issues of managing urban change. Although the project had a planning period of 25 – 30 years, the outputs focus on projects for potential inclusion in the current and following two Long-Term Council Community Plans (‘LTCCP’).

The key steps of the Settlements Study are set out in brief in Table 1.

**Table 1: Summary of Settlements Study process**

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<td>A</td>
<td><strong>Information gathering and the identification of issues</strong>&lt;br&gt;A literature review of all the available written information on the Akaroa Harbour Basin was completed, enabling an initial set of issues to be identified. Significant information gaps were then filled by technical experts who prepared reports on a number of topics: landslide susceptibility; historic flooding; coastal erosion and inundation, business land supply; tourism carrying capacity; and the real estate market. Subsequent GIS constraints mapping enabled identification of key areas of constraint to future development.</td>
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<td>B</td>
<td><strong>Identifying and ranking options</strong>&lt;br&gt;A cross-Council approach was used to identify ‘options’ (potential Council work programmes) to address the issues. These were evaluated against a range of national, regional and local criteria to differentiate between the higher, moderate and lower ranking options.</td>
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<td><strong>Final documents and implementation</strong>&lt;br&gt;The final outputs of the Settlements Study, an <em>Issues and Prospective Projects</em> document and an <em>Implementation Plan</em>, were endorsed by the Council in 2009. The Implementation Plan identifies a range of projects to be considered for future years. These projects include district plan changes, recreational facility planning, structure planning, roading upgrades and multi-modal transport initiatives. The first major project identified in the Settlements Study, the Akaroa Places and Spaces Plan, commenced immediately. Discussions are currently underway on a monitoring programme for the study area and work has commenced on developing a protocol to manage impacts of cruise ships visiting Akaroa.</td>
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<td><strong>Community consultation</strong>&lt;br&gt;Two rounds of consultation took place during the course of the study. The community was initially consulted on an ‘Identifying the Issues’ discussion document, with stakeholders questioned as to whether the issues had been adequately identified. A second round of consultation enabled the community to provide feedback on the Options. This involved inviting stakeholders to attend interactive open days to talk with staff and identify projects they considered to be of highest priority.</td>
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Challenges

Council staff working on the Settlements Study faced several significant challenges during the course of the study:

Responsibility for a new land area:
The geology, history, ecology, demography and economy of the Banks Peninsula area differs markedly from the Christchurch urban area that city-based planners had been more familiar with. The majority of the issues arising in the previous jurisdiction of CCC were metropolitan in nature whereas the Peninsula is predominantly rural, with the port and township of Lyttelton and the tourism-based economy of Akaroa being the principal settlements.

Lack of relevant information and institutional knowledge:
Prior to amalgamation, much of the recorded information held by BPDC was of a lesser standard and in a different format to that held by CCC. Following amalgamation, many BPDC staff moved on or retired, resulting in a significant loss of institutional knowledge. This had flow-on effects to all aspects of the Settlements Study.

Distrust:
There was concern by some members of the public that the Council “over the hill” would have a metropolitan bias that would be detrimental to rural communities. There was some apprehension that decisions would be taken at a distant city office without a full understanding of the consequences for small rural settlements. For example, communities spoke out against the ‘urban’ style of kerbing or street lighting creeping into new subdivisions and road upgrades; the loss of local contractor jobs due to the rationalisation of maintenance contracts; and Council-planned festivals or events that were felt to benefit city residents over the local communities.

Expectations:
There was an expectation by some community members that the new Council would fix all the issues that the former Council had not been able to address, and that this would happen immediately. Water supply and wastewater upgrades were particularly ‘hot topics’.

Diverse communities:
Stakeholders involved in the study included two local runanga (Maori tribal councils), residents from small settlements and rural areas, and absentee landowners from beyond the harbour basin. The local residents have a high level of investment in their communities and are more engaged in decision-making processes than Council planners experience in metropolitan Christchurch.

While there was some commonality of views among stakeholders, in general Council staff were presented with a diverse range of ideas as to what was important for long-term community planning. While some people were happy to share their slice of paradise, others were completely against any form of growth. In Akaroa for example, some residents and business owners support year-round tourism to support the economy while others prefer tourism activity to remain seasonal.

Use of planning techniques

Addressing these challenges required new thinking about how the Study would progress. A number of learning points may be useful to other Councils facing amalgamation, changing structures or new communities. In particular, the following processes and attributes gave rise to good outcomes:
Harnessing local knowledge:
Officers were clear from the outset that they did not have a good understanding of the planning issues of the area and during the Settlements Study there were many instances where staff relied on the knowledge of the local community. Particularly useful information sources included the local Community Board members, Council employees based at the Akaroa Service Centre and Akaroa Museum, and a locally-based researcher with a good knowledge of the area. The Community Board also acted as champions for the Settlements Study on several occasions, assisting in its smooth endorsement by the Council. They advised Council planners on the ‘makeup’ of the various rural settlement communities and made useful suggestions regarding consultation processes and document outputs. Information was also obtained directly from residents – for example research into historical flooding was greatly enhanced by residents who were interviewed and able to provide documentation (eg photos and videos) of historic flood events.

Open decision-making regarding future projects:
Priorities for future Council projects are usually decided in-house by management staff and elected members. However, it was more appropriate in this situation to first employ the extensive community knowledge and engagement to ensure that the issues facing the communities were agreed and potential projects well scoped. The effort applied to evaluate potential future work-programme options (refer Row B of Table 1) was far greater than the norm. While this lengthened the overall process, it provided a robust analytical framework where previously institutional knowledge may have sufficed. The success of the detailed analysis was demonstrated through a general agreement from the community that the high priority options were indeed the right ones to focus on. If potential future projects had instead been identified in-house and community involvement limited to Long Term Council Community Plan (LTCCP) processes, there would have been a much higher risk of inadequate project definition and prioritisation.

Building institutional knowledge
The planners working on the study soon gained an appreciation of the differences between the City and the Peninsula, and were instrumental in improving the collective knowledge of the Council regarding Peninsula issues. Staff working on the Settlements Study began to be called upon to advise or review other projects and could ensure that local issues were incorporated into institutional decision-making frameworks (such as strategy development and capital projects). The technical reports prepared for the Settlements Study are being used for a variety of cross-Council purposes. For example, the coastal erosion and inundation report identified few significant issues for the eight settlements themselves but will be an important component in planning for the long-term maintenance and upgrades of the State Highway and local coastal road network. Similarly the constraints mapping report, which identified areas most suitable for future development, will help “future-proof” the planning of key Council services in these areas (eg sewer upgrades).

Appropriate timing and structure of consultation:
Weekend sessions and ‘open house’ events were used so that the majority of stakeholders (including rural residents, business operators and absentee landowners) were able to attend. The consultation techniques enabled people to either quietly hear, view and decide upon their feedback; to discuss matters in groups; or to send feedback in later. For example, an ‘open house’ consultation included booklets of the various options that mirrored the display boards and these allowed people to provide their feedback at a later time after thinking through the ramifications more carefully. The variety of techniques used and locations for the meetings appeared to increase community trust in City Council staff as they enabled people to be involved with the Study in their own environment and to discuss their thoughts, sometimes at length, with both staff and other members of their community.

The issues consultation was so well attended that staff quickly ran out of discussion documents. Because it was a weekend event in a rural area and the documents were large colour publications,
staff were unable to readily produce additional copies. With the value of hindsight, any similar studies would be well-placed to have greater expectations for community attendance at consultation events.

**Communication and a transparent process**

All steps in the process were recorded in printed documents which were also available on the Council’s website. Rural broadband limitations required large documents to be printed and distributed locally rather than simply be available on-line. Printed newsletters ensured stakeholders were kept up to date with decisions and outputs. Transparent consultation methods included publishing the Council’s responses to submissions and asking stakeholders during consultation to identify and display their five preferred projects. The latter method enabled individuals to understand the different viewpoints in the community, to be realistic in their expectations and to assist in determining overall priorities for future work programmes.

**Key Learning Points:**

Any councils facing a similar situation, particularly following amalgamation, would be advised to focus on information-gathering and building trust in the first instance. In particular:

- identify and connect with people who have local knowledge of issues and understanding of community networks (whilst being wary of community advocates who purport to ‘represent’ the interests of everyone);
- ensure decision making processes are transparent and robust;
- identify cross-Council information needs and share information widely;
- create and build institutional knowledge by becoming ‘champions’ for the new area; and
- identify local community needs when organising consultation processes and be flexible, particularly when engaging with small rural communities.

The process would also be eased through a simplified options evaluation process, preferably without losing its robust outputs.

**The outcome**

The outcomes of the Settlements Study for the Council included a much improved information base, enhanced institutional knowledge, alignment across a number of professions and disciplines, a common and clearly prioritised strategic direction and improved community buy-in. The identification and prioritisation of options has provided clear direction to staff and the community as to which projects are most critical and where the responsibility lies for undertaking these projects. Future projects will involve various Council units and include a diverse range of work programmes. As each future project already has a clearly defined scope, this will simplify project commencement and scoping.

All learning points gained from the Study will be incorporated into similar projects for other areas of Banks Peninsula over time, to ensure efficiency gains and consistent methodologies for comparable future studies.

**Conclusion**

The enlarged jurisdiction of the Christchurch City Council, as a result of local government amalgamation, created a Council that was required to respond to the strategic planning needs of small rural settlements in addition to the metropolitan issues it was already facing. Although planning staff faced a number of issues in adapting city processes to achieve optimal results for rural
settlement communities, these were overcome due to persistence, flexibility, a harnessing of existing community strengths and transparent decision-making.

The Settlements Study provides the foundation for the building of strong communities in the basin over coming years, with long-term positive outcomes anticipated for the natural, physical, social and economic well-being of the Akaroa Harbour Basin. Despite some initial distrust of City-based planners, the changed structure has provided improved strategic planning frameworks which can only aid long-term governance of the post-amalgamation jurisdiction.

_The views expressed in this paper are those of the writers and do not necessarily represent those of the Christchurch City Council._

References

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