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## Participatory inclusive mechanisms to set the civic improvement agenda in Palmerston North, New Zealand

by JANET REID

### Introduction

Community consultation is well accepted by local government in New Zealand as a requirement in decision making and the development of policy. However, it has only been in recent years that New Zealand City Councils have sought to use participatory approaches to gain the active inclusion of community members and their views into the decision making processes within Councils (as opposed to relying on listening to elected representatives and un-elected loudest voices). The participatory consultation described in the following notes was undertaken in 1999 in the city of Palmerston North, at the southern end of North Island, and is one of the early examples of the use of PRA methods in New Zealand. The Palmerston North City Council (PNCC) set out to gather Palmerston North city residents' views on what they value about the physical and natural characteristics of the city, or in official-speak 'amenity values'. The assignment was commissioned by the PNCC strategic planner and was undertaken by a group of individuals independent of the City Council (of which I was one).

### Background

The PNCC was interested in gaining an understanding of the City's 'amenity value' from the perspective of the community. In particular, they were looking for indicators they could use

to guide and monitor progress towards those aspects of the city people like and value. The official definition of the term 'amenity value' is 'those natural or physical qualities and characteristics of an area that contribute to people's appreciation of its pleasantness, aesthetic coherence and recreational attributes'. With the agreement of the client, the objectives that were developed to guide the assignment were:

- to capture from a broad cross section of people in Palmerston North their ideas and views on physical and natural characteristics of the city that they value and like; and
- to capture and present information in a form that is useful for the PNCC.

### The participatory assignment

Two residential suburbs of the city were the focus for the consultation: Hokowhitu and Takaro/Highbury. These two suburbs were chosen because they are situated in opposite parts of the city relative to the central business district. Hokowhitu is situated in the South East near the Manawatu River and Takaro/Highbury is situated to the North West of the city. Also, the socio-economic circumstances of the residents in the two suburbs are quite different, with Hokowhitu generally considered at the higher end of the city's socio-economic scale and Takaro/Highbury at the lower end.

Two teams of five people worked intensively over two

**Map and post-it comments produced at a community workshop in Hokowhitu suburb. A selection of likes and dislikes are reproduced.**



- Likes/Value**
- Shows of the Regent
  - Hokowhitu Lagoon
  - Walking by the Lagoon
  - Walking, cycling
  - Esplanade
  - Race gardens
  - Esplanade rose garden
  - Rugby Oval
  - Riverside activities: cycling, Picnicking & walking.
- Dislikes/ Don't Value**
- A reliable cheap bus service to keep cars out the Square
  - Lack of parking / dangerous drivers
  - Bay racers
  - Square Clock tower
  - Lack of security in Square
  - Cycling not defined enough
  - Untidy streets
  - Failure to use River

**Example H-diagram generated during community workshop. Selection of positives and negatives from H-form are reproduced.**

What do you think about the physical environment of the square?

**Positives**

Council has removed some obstacles and greenery  
Council say they will upgrade in 2000.  
Square is the hub of the city.  
Attracts youth into CBD  
Open space greenery within CBD.

**Negatives**

Dangers of youth crime and negative influences in the square.  
No clear access for use, walkways not enough lighting  
Closed in environment attracts undesirable, negative behaviour.  
Youth should have alternative venues to attract age groups.

days to gather information from the communities in each of the respective suburbs. Although community workshops were held in each suburb, we accepted that most of our energy would be directed at capturing community views from less formally organised activities over this period.

**Community workshop**

A community workshop was held in each of the two suburbs. Both workshops were promoted through newspaper and radio announcements along with public notices and flyers being posted around the community prior to the meetings. Turn out at the public workshops was poor. Seven members of the public took part in the Hokowhitu workshop and four at the Takaro/Highbury workshop. Many of the people who attended these meetings were elected representatives of the community or were well known for their public interest in particular issues.

Mapping, identifying likes & dislikes, prioritising, and then H-diagrams formed the basis for the consultation process. At the community workshops, following a very brief introduction, we asked people to draw a map of Palmerston North indicating the physical features that they thought defined the city. Using the maps as an initial reference, individuals in the groups were then asked to identify things about the physical and natural environment of Palmerston North that they liked and valued, and things they disliked and did not value. Firstly, we asked individuals to identify and write on separate pink post-it notes, three things they liked about the city, and then on separate blue post-it notes, three things they did not like. The post-it notes were then placed on the map onto the relevant areas.

Next, we asked participants to identify the most important like or dislike from all those indicated on the map. In a group situation we gave each individual three beans and they

placed one bean on each of the three things they felt to be most important. According to the number of beans allocated to likes and dislikes the most important aspects of the city were identified and noted.

A partial H-diagram (Guy S. & Inglis A.S. 1999) analysis was then completed by participants on aspects of the city identified as most important. The H-diagram enabled us to gain an in-depth understanding of people's views about an aspect of the city they thought important. Depending on the aspect a question was developed that allowed the participants to respond in terms of a score of between zero and ten, zero usually being the worst or most negative and ten the best or most positive. As we could not make any commitment to the community as to how the information we gained was going to be used by the PNCC or what they would decide to act on, we did not ask people to identify what they would like to see improved, a normal final stage in the completion of the H-diagram.

**Field work**

The order of methods within the process remained consistent throughout the consultation. The extent to which any person or group of people completed the whole process depended on the amount of time they were willing to give us. If an individual had limited time we encouraged them to contribute post-it notes to an existing map and possibly complete an H-diagram on an aspect they were particularly passionate or vocal about. If individuals were not comfortable writing comments down for themselves we would do it for them making sure that what we had recorded was in fact what they meant. Children who participated drew maps of the city highlighting places and things in the city that they thought important, and if they were able, also recorded what they liked and did not like.

A number of different activities and initiatives proved to be fruitful in terms of gaining community input. During the

**Map with attached post-it comments after input from people during fieldwork.**



two days, team members proactively sought to gain the input of a range of community members. We took the maps generated at the public meetings to a range of sites in each of the suburbs where people were known to gather; e.g. the community centre, sports clubs, shopping centres, pubs. We used the maps to first attract people's attention and then to provide a basis for people to add ideas using post-it notes, or if they had the time and were willing, to generate more maps and/or continue through into H-diagrams. Through contacts we gained from Council staff, from people we spoke to during the day and from our own personal contacts we arranged a variety of group and individual meetings throughout the two days. These included groups of young people, school pupils and staff, retired people, shopkeepers and members at the local bowling club and golf club.

### Final reporting and follow-up

Information gathered from the community was reproduced and formally documented in a report for the PNCC. A description of the demographics, ethnic background and gender of those who contributed to the process were recorded. In addition, any particular sector of the community we identified as not being part of the consultation is acknowledged in our final report. An overview of the approach and methods was described along with the objectives that guided our activities.

Following on from this consultation using participatory methods, PNCC staff from other areas in the Council have commissioned similar types of processes to provide community perspectives into aspects of the Council's decision making and activities. Based on feedback and discussions with Council staff, in the final reports we also included an executive summary. This summary outlines the key themes that have emerged from the consultation exercise. In addition we also commented where possible, on the similarities and differences between the views and ideas we obtained and those expressed in official documents of the PNCC and other relevant agencies.

As the use of these approaches has increased, the willingness and acceptance of local government staff and Councillors to be involved, and to view as worthwhile the outcomes of these processes, has positively increased. We have learnt that it is important however to package and present the material in a manner that does not compromise the input of the community, and but also enhances the possibility that officials and councillors will read and take on board the information gained from the community.

#### REFERENCE:

Guy, S and Inglis A.S. (1999) Tips for Trainers: Introducing the 'H-form' - a method for monitoring and evaluation. *PLA Notes 34*. IIED, London.

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