

Strengthening communities

Councils are required to make decisions and set directions for promoting the social, cultural, environmental, and economic well-being of their communities. Councils also have to collaborate with the community, local businesses, government agencies and, in some cases, other councils, to avoid duplication and to enhance collaboration in decision-making, service delivery and achievement of shared outcomes.

An important role of local government is to reflect and recognise the diversity within each community. Communities of interest have different wants and needs for their public facilities and services. These differences arise from a mixture of circumstances, aspirations and distinct community identities. For large councils the challenge often exists to identify the smaller individual communities within the larger city frame and to work with that community and other agencies to enhance well-being at a local level.

Case study: Waitakere City Council – partnering for success

Waitakere City Council began improving the city well-being back in the early 1990s and over the years has developed and refined its approach to collaboration and to partnering. The council has adopted a philosophy of being proactive and taking a long term holistic view – working inclusively with local communities and other agencies to promote change.

Tony Rea, Group Manager Social and Cultural Strategy, says just providing funding to communities is not enough. The council, after all, is part of the community and needs to be part of solutions at the local level.

“In some communities, there is often a lack of capacity and skills which makes it really hard to do community planning alone. Councils have so much knowledge and resources that it makes more sense to partner and work together with the community.”



Part of refining the way the council collaborates with others has seen an acknowledgement that partnering is a continuum including everything from co-existence to partnerships and that not every collaborative relationship will be a full blown partnership.

A Partnering Continuum ...

Coexistence Networking Cooperation Collaboration Partnerships

Massey Matters

Megan Courtney has been involved in Waitakere’s collaboration and partnering culture from near the beginning. She is excited to be heading up Massey Matters – a new sustainable development project led by the council

The project aims to work alongside the local community and other partners to develop long-term, sustainable neighbourhood renewal and development in the Massey area.

Ms Courtney says the partnering approach has to be organic “as you can’t always pre-determine the projects and paths that will lead you to your outcomes”. She says it takes time to get things off the ground, but what counts in the long run is all parties working together for common outcomes. The council has taken a leadership role to facilitate the community and other agencies to get involved.

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Massey is a sprawling residential area within Waitakere with a motorway running through the middle of it and a population of 25,000 – around four times the size of most Waitakere suburbs. Ms Courtney says problems had started to emerge like social isolation, transient school population and growing perceptions of a widening gap between ‘the haves’ and ‘have nots’. On the other side of the road a major new growth area will be developed where 20,000 new people will move over the next fifteen years.

She says Massey was not well planned with no real town centre, a poor public transport system and few community facilities.

“There are lower rates of community participation and neighbours just don’t know each other like they once did. This isn’t helped by a large number of families having to travel two hours each way to work at low paid jobs – they really are time poor and do not have the same time to spend in the community. With the new communities coming to sit alongside Massey, we literally have five years to get more community action and better services and facilities happening so these existing communities don’t get left behind.”

Before the Massey Matters project got started researchers talked to people in the community to assess the issues. The research showed there was strong support for a Massey project. The locals saw the project as an opportunity to develop a stronger Massey identity, increase community connectedness and positive vibes, have more Massey-owned events and activities, more community-owned spaces and places, and to take the best from the past and develop a new future for Massey.

Ms Courtney says partnering takes time and that it realistically takes three years to get decent community based interagency projects set up and in a position to really deliver. “It certainly all doesn’t happen in the first year!”

Recognising this, Waitakere City Council has made a 10 year commitment to Massey Matters in its Long Term Council Community Plan, with around \$100,000 included annually.

Given the long time commitment required for successful partnering, Ms Courtney says it is important to get some quick runs on the board so the community and the council can start to see things happening. People can then get a sense of success and the benefits of working together for the long haul.

For example, the project has initiated a 16-page newsletter about what’s going on in Massey to fill the information gap with a local newspaper. This has been delivered to 7,000 households under the Massey Matters rather than the council’s brand. Megan says that once you set something up like the newsletter or an event, other agencies and community people come on board and help out with the next one.

Another core part of the project has seen the establishment of a \$25,000 Massey Matters Fund. This is a new local grants pool to support community-led projects that contribute to the Massey Matters goals. At a recent Massey Matters Forum, one of the recipients of the community grant money, the

Vasa Pasifika Creative Learning Trust, discussed its work with the First 15 rugby team at Massey High School. The Trust has set up a homework centre for the team, provides the boys with food, organises guest speakers and leadership training for the boys – encouraging them to realise their full potential. Ms Courtney says one of the 14-year-old boys spoke about the difference the homework centre had made to his life. She says that now that the Trust has had Massey Matters funding and been able to demonstrate the positive work it can do, it will be easier for them to access other funding.

On an ongoing basis the council’s resources will be directed toward project co-ordination, funding a community development co-ordinator based in a local community organisation, brokering involvement of other agencies and funding other community led collaborative projects that encourage local participation and action to strengthen Massey’s future. “It’s also about getting council’s own house in order too – to facilitate this, a cross council group now meets monthly to talk ‘Massey’. Reflecting that the council already spends large amounts of money on local parks, roads, libraries, footpaths and facilities, this process is about improving the local co-ordination of council’s more traditional ‘core’ expenditure.”

Ms Courtney says a significant number of government and community agencies have signalled an interest in being involved in the project and it’s hoped that many new collaborative projects will emerge as Massey Matters gets established.

Mr Rea says at times it has been a struggle to try and get the rest of council on board with the concept of partnering. However, he says it is now an accepted way of working and it has helped politically to be able to sell partnering as a cost effective way of working. “We can show a strong return on the money spent – for every \$1 the council spends there is an additional \$9 investment by other agencies in the community.”

He says partnering is about sharing a vision and working together towards common goals – it’s not about having a contract, setting performance targets and demanding others meet those targets. A partnering approach requires a change in attitude and behaviours at all levels.

Mr Rea is the first to say that Waitakere doesn’t necessarily have all the answers and hasn’t necessarily got it all right but that they have come a long way in the ten years.

“The keys to success in partnering are focusing on trust, honesty and relationships, picking some ‘go now’ projects so you can demonstrate success early on and being adaptable and open to new opportunities that might arise.”

