

Measuring Sustainable Communities

Leigh Gatt – Manager Strategic Initiatives Manukau City Council, Project Director Quality of Life in NZ 6 Largest Cities report.

Sustainability – what is it?

New Zealand has come a long way in its development over the past decade. However along with development, comes pressure on resources¹. There is now a tremendous need to find a balance in the struggle to achieve a sustainable New Zealand and it is in the cities that this is most evident.

The biggest set of issues faced by our cities is sustainable management against expected population, economic and infrastructure growth, in a way that maintains and ideally improves quality of life. These factors interact in complex ways affecting social, economic and environmental outcomes. For example:

- the health status of the population affects peoples ability to socialise and also the ability of children to succeed at school,
- the composition and education of the population affects whether the business sector can take advantage of the opportunities in growth industries,
- industry growth puts pressure on the transportation network,
- this network affects the quality of the natural and built environment....and so on.

A sustainable community is one that addresses these matters by looking for solutions that provide a balance between cultural, social, economic and environmental conditions. It is one where the needs of the present are met without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.

Indicators

To measure the impact of the different pressures and assess whether the current policies and practices are sustainable, indicators to measure the quality of life in New Zealand's six largest cities have been developed. The Councils of these cities (Auckland, Christchurch, Manukau, North Shore, Waitakere and Wellington) are concerned about the growing pressures of urbanisation. Monitoring through use of these indicators highlights issues that should be addressed to ensure the balance and quality of life in these cities.

They wanted indicators that could be used as a tool to:

- quantify & monitor changing social, economic and environmental conditions,
- emphasise an outcomes based approach,
- develop holistic responses to emerging issues,
- promote collaboration in monitoring and improving city wellbeing outcomes.

Framework

¹ The world's cities take up only 2 percent of the Earth's surface. However cities account for around 78 percent of the carbon emissions from human activities, 76 percent of industrial wood use, and 60 percent of the water tapped for use by people, reports an analysis of the global environmental impact of cities from the Worldwatch Institute, a Washington, DC - based research institute.

A complex project such as this needed a structure that would help maintain clarity of purpose and so achieve the desired result. The 'big cities' work consisted of the following structure that now provides a model for such work.

- ✧ **Agree the purpose e.g.**
 - i. Indicators that could monitor quality of life and be used as a tool to:
 - quantify & monitor changing social, economic and environmental conditions,
 - emphasise an outcomes based approach,
 - develop holistic responses to emerging issues,
 - promote collaboration in monitoring and improving city wellbeing outcomes.
- ✧ **Decide the guiding principles e.g.**
 - i. Aligned to purpose
 - ii. Holistic in approach
 - iii. Participatory
 - iv. Suitable for ongoing assessment.
- ✧ **Develop an approach e.g.**
 - i. Goal based,
 - ii. Issues based
 - iii. Pressure-state-response
- ✧ **Identify a methodology e.g.**
 - i. Stocktake of currently used indicators
 - ii. Consultation on an initial set
 - iii. Reduce number based on selection criteria (e.g. indicators must: meet international standards, and be measurable, cost effective, understandable, comparable, responsiveness to change, valid, time related, repeatable, relevant to the overall framework, and able to be dis-aggregated (by geographic location, age, sex, ethnicity etc).
- ✧ **Select final set**

The six city quality of life project included around 60 indicators grouped around the sectors of housing, health, education, employment and the economy, safety, urban environment, community cohesion, democracy and included demographics.
- ✧ **Gather data**

Centralising this helps with administration and to keep track of costs and progress
- ✧ **Analyse**

This is based on the purpose. The analysis of an indicator project is one of the critical factors that define one indicator project from another.
- ✧ **Report**

Key Learnings

These include:

- the need to ensure adequate time and resources for the project
- the need for a framework and clear purpose
- The value of collaboration and information sharing
- The value of involving people in a participatory process

Conclusions

Quality of life indicators are about:

- 'joined-up-thinking'

- looking at the multiple impacts of policies, and changes on the ground
- looking for a balance between social, economic and environmental conditions
- promoting a cross sector, cross departmental, and cross layers of government approach to monitoring and solutions planning

Planning is now underway for the next quality of life report which will involve up to 12 cities.

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Figure 1

