

CREATING SOCIAL INFRASTRUCTURE FOR COMMUNITY LED DEVELOPMENT IN THE QUEENSTOWN LAKES DISTRICT

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A process of community engagement was established in the Queenstown Lakes District as essentially a student project for learners in the Graduate Programmes in Sustainable Practice. Programme manager Steve Henry was committed to learners working on real projects that would develop individual and collective capability within system constraints while building real transitions towards sustainability. Shaping Our Future emerged as a model that continues to improve seven years after conception and that has engaged community and agencies such as the local council and the national transport agency. Shaping Our Future still has connections with the Graduate Programme as students occasionally offer internship services, but it has been fully independent since 2013. Shaping Our Future today is a thriving incorporated society that offers real benefits to the communities of the Queenstown Lakes District through following a proven process of strategic sustainable development. There are 10 'live' forums considering an agenda ranging from the visioning of small communities through to energy use across the district, transportation issues and the district's economic futures (Shaping Our Future, n.d. c). Its processes have proved robust throughout many challenges and it has successfully maintained its 'arm's length' position from the local council while gaining trust within the community. The organisation is held in high regard by both the community and the agencies that serve it, as evidenced by report inclusions in planning processes, demand for 'forums' and attendance at events. Shaping Our Future wasn't invented in Queenstown, it's a model from Whistler, Canada, based on a model developed in Sweden, but its flexibility and robust processes mean it has relevance for any community anywhere that desires strong lines of communication between the community and its agencies.

HISTORY AND ESTABLISHMENT

In November 2010, Alexa Forbes and Steve Henry began conversations with newly elected Queenstown Lakes District Mayor, Vanessa Van Uden, about harnessing the wisdom of locals in decision-making. Vanessa had campaigned on questioning the quantum of ratepayer money spent on external consultants given those who lived locally had the knowledge and the passion to guide their own future.

Along with Senior Planner Scott Figenshow, Steve and Alexa proposed a methodology to develop a new community-led decision making process which defined the Council a partner, not the partner. This process was based on an example, Whistler community (Whistler Municipal Government n.d.) in West Canada, which faced growth and tourism challenges similar to Queenstown. Whistler had used the Natural Step's Framework for Strategic Sustainable Development (The Natural Step, n.d.) to guide its process and Steve, Vanessa, Scott and Alexa were keen to do the same. Queenstown already had a relationship with Whistler through a local developer, Alastair Porter, so it was a good fit for the town and relatively known.

The project was presented to the learners in Otago Polytechnic's Graduate Diploma in Sustainable Practice (Otago Polytechnic, n.d.) in 2011. Several of the learners picked up the challenge developed a process to bring the project

to life. The goal was to inspire future thinking conversations in the Queenstown Lakes District. Mayor Van Uden insisted the “S” word, (sustainability) was not to be used in the process, so the name *Shaping Our Future* was eventually assigned to the programme. A Mayoral Task Force was appointed and it endorsed a plan for public meetings in the district's 12 community centres. The meetings were facilitated and the goal was for each community to articulate its own high level vision of success. Funding was secured through the Council for professional facilitation and collation (Otago Daily Times, 2011).

On the back of a Council-led 2020 visioning process that had happened a decade earlier, the meetings were well received with more than 1000 people taking part. The 2020 process had influenced planning across the Lakes District and was well referenced in the District Plan and other plans and strategies. However, there was a feeling that this needed to be updated and the idea of a continuing, cyclic process that sat *outside* rather than *inside* the council, proved popular. The Queenstown Lakes District had enjoyed a long period of significant employment, visitor, and population growth that was now concerning to many residents. The growth was forecast to continue at an increasing pace, and each community worried about relentless, increasing pressure on infrastructure, environment, and community and how this might alter local ways of life. *Shaping Our Future* aimed to ensure community voices were heard and acted upon by local government and other agencies, and that the process would allow for continual updates. The methodology centred on the collaborative creation of long term community vision and a continually updating roadmap that could guide the current and future generations. The challenge for the process was that it needed to convince Council, and other agencies, that it was adequately robust and representative to be included as reference in local planning and strategy and therefore, acted upon.

This was addressed by setting up a steering group with governance experience and a commitment to using the Whistler-proven process to ensure authenticity and representation beyond that of any focus group or consultation process, facilitation that ensured inclusivity that could not be captured by interest groups and step-by-step process that ensured completion of projects.

By the end of 2012, *Shaping Our Future* was set up as an Incorporated Society, had an elected (by members) Steering Committee, a paid coordinator (Alexa Forbes, who had worked on setting up *Shaping Our Future* as part of her Graduate Diploma in Sustainable Practice) and an annual grant to consider at least one identified ‘issue’ each year:

The first forum, and testing ground for the process, was Events. There was some annual plan money tagged in the Queenstown Lakes District plan to look at how events in the district could be better coordinated and so less disruptive to the local community. Road closures, noise and congestion had started to seriously impact on local life with the success of events such as the NZ Golf Open at Arrowtown, the Queenstown Marathon and Warbirds Over Wanaka. The latter attracted over 100,000 people in a community that had (at the time) a population of just 7000. The Queenstown Lakes District Council had developed a strategy in 2006, but this hadn't solved the issues of a fragmented and rapidly growing industry. The first public forums were held in Queenstown and Wanaka with 65 and 130 people attending respectively. A combined Task Force produced a suite of recommendations, including the formation of an Events Office and the establishment of funding grants to enable the collaborative ownership of shared infrastructure such as stages and sound equipment (*Shaping Our Future*, 2012). The report was presented to the QLDC in 2012. The recommendations were accepted and the *Shaping Our Future* model considered viable. In 2016, as part of the cyclic re-visitation of forums, a second Events Forum was established (*Shaping Our Future*, 2012).

Since then, the following areas have been considered through this process: Economic Futures, Energy, Innovation, Wanaka Transport, Queenstown Transport, Upper Clutha Conservation, Arrowtown Community Visioning, Glenorchy Community Visioning. The forum documents now regularly inform the Queenstown Lakes District Council and other agencies such as New Zealand Transport Agency and Otago Regional Council. The Forum final documents form part of the body of evidence for several decision-making processes and the development

of strategic plans, many of which have since been actioned. Thousands of people have taken part and the process continues today without reliance on the individuals that began it. This is considered important by the authors because long-term sustainability requires such projects, particularly where volunteers are relied on, to be able to continue long after the founders have retired. Steve Henry regularly exhorts his students and colleagues to “design themselves out of the process” if they want their project to succeed.

THE PROCESS IN ACTION

Following the establishment and agreement of an overall district vision in 2012, a process for working through chosen issues was agreed and enshrined in the governance. This was a simple loop process (Shaping our Future, n.d. b) of public forum (meeting(s) and online feedback), volunteer task forces, strategy reports and recommendations (Shaping Our Future, n.d.). Of particular note is the upside down pyramid – this process begins with blue sky community thinking which ‘turns on its head’ the usual process of beginning with a council or consultant produced plan which is then offered to the community for feedback.

The process begins with the Steering Committee setting an agenda of issues to be considered based on agreed community priorities and invitations from the community to consider a particular issue (Shaping Our Future, n.d. a).

A professional facilitator independently facilitates the Public Forums. Other views are collected through on-line forums. Current challenges, key issues, ideal outcomes and potential solutions are identified at the public sessions. The format ensures the ‘loudest’ voice is not the only voice heard in our community (through a process of voting on which challenges, issues, outcomes and issues are most important). At the forum, a Volunteer Task Force is formed. A brief, terms of reference and a timeline of up to a year are negotiated between the Task Force and the Steering Group. The Task Force works with the forum information and further research, often with the help of experts, for example, an NZTA traffic engineer and QLDC transport manager were made available to provide technical information to the Transport Forum Task Force as required. The Task Force develops a strategy report that includes high level baseline analysis, long term vision and actions recommended to achieve the vision. The volunteers are community members dedicated to representing the widest possible range of views and achieving long-term goals. The taskforce presents its findings for feedback and ratification to the Second Public Forum (again, online views are accepted). The recommended actions are then presented to the relevant agencies by the Steering Group for consideration, further debate, and action.

The process followed at each stage is grounded in The Natural Step (TNS) Framework for Strategic Sustainable Development (FSSD). The way this is used is in the background so that the ‘S’ word doesn’t offend! However, progress towards sustainability principles is maintained through using the process (Shaping Our Future, n.d. b). Inaugural Steering Group chair David Kennedy termed the approach, “sustainability by stealth” (Kennedy, 2017).

EVIDENCE OF THE VALUE OF THE PROCESS

Shaping Our Future has continued to gain strength and influence over the 7 years of its existence. It is valuable in providing a platform for community views, for balancing ‘loud’ voices and allowing for quieter ones to be heard, and for offering direction and informal consultation to local and national agencies. Task Force and Steering Group members are often regarded as sources of news and Shaping our Future events are considered newsworthy – this is evidence of a high degree of respect for the organisation.

The Queenstown Lakes District and other agencies seriously consider the finalised forum reports and these documents are often referenced within their planning processes. This is an important indication of the success of this project in influencing decision makers and the willingness of those agencies to consider well constructed community led projects.

The Shaping Our Future transport report was used as part of the programme assessment in the NZTA, Queenstown Lakes District Council and Otago Regional Council Queenstown Integrated Transport Strategy Programme Business Case (New Zealand Transport Agency, 2017).

Earlier in this same document, Shaping our Future is referenced as one of four documents to display alignment with the Queenstown Lakes District Council (New Zealand Transport Agency, 2017).

Another benefit links back to the original support from then QLDC Mayor, Vanessa van Uden whose desire was to see people around the table instead of in court.

“By getting people into a room and working out a way forward, we can stay out of court” (van Uden, 2017).

Alexa Forbes, summed up the benefit in a similar quote published in the *New Zealand Herald* in October 2013 “Argument is very expensive and agreement is cheap. Shaping our future is a process that looks for agreement” (*New Zealand Herald*, 2013).

An unexpected benefit of the process is beginning to emerge – that is the slow convergence of community and agency agenda. This is evidenced in consideration of the controversy around approaches to Queenstown’s increasing congestion issues:

The transport forum meetings attracted record numbers of people bringing concerns ranging from long term land use, to congestion, to perceived incorrect siting of the new Kawarau Bridge. A large task force (15 people) was established. It included local Councillors (no voting rights, observers only), past Councillors, a roading engineer from a private company, representatives from two private bus operators, an NZTA representative (no voting rights observer only) and many others. Over the year of its work, the taskforce independently arrived at a set of recommendations (Shaping Our Future 2017) which dovetailed into the QLDC’s own integrated transport strategy (New Zealand Transport Agency, 2017). Essentially, both parties had cross communication, access to the same materials and ended up coming to pretty much the same conclusions, without the community battles along the way. Essentially, the Shaping Our Future process had taken the community on journey that was parallel to the Council one. Each informed the other with truly collaborative recommendation outcomes that in other circumstances may have been unpalatable or unpopular.

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