



Three councils, one strategy

Wairarapa Age Friendly case study

With a small population spread across five towns and rural communities, the Wairarapa is governed by three district councils. To help their older people, it made sense for the three councils in this region to take up the baton and work together.

Hot tips from Wairarapa

1. Ensure you have a dedicated resource for the job. If you can't find that in-house, consider applying to the Office for Seniors Age friendly fund as a funding source for a consultant.
2. Provide regular updates to the community so people know you're listening and hearing what they want to tell you.
3. Ensure you bring elected members and staff on the journey with you.

Seated on the south-east of the North Island, Wairarapa stretches from the Tararua Range to the east and south coasts. With its mild climate, flat landscape (surrounded by mountain ranges) and lower costs of living, and a population of nearly 45,000 people, older people are drawn to retire here. Within the next 25 years, one in four residents is expected to be over 65 years.

A Council-led strategy

"We had to challenge our traditional ways of working to bring this strategy through. While it's a Council strategy, we wanted great community engagement."

Gerry Brooking, Carterton District Council

Forgoing the industry norm of using planning teams, the steering group chose the councils' Community Development group to create its ageing strategy. Their reasoning was that it was the best way to engage their communities and work together as three councils. The dream is that future strategies will be a mixed community-council strategy. For now, the initiative was council-led, and all three councils worked together to engage the community and create [Te Hōkai Nuku/Wairarapa Region Positive Ageing Strategy](#).

The Community Development group valued engaging different points of view. In addition to being diverse in its makeup — a senior manager sponsor and community development lead from each council and a Māori Liaison Advisor — the group hired an Engagement Specialist. This pivotal role involved helping the group work together, navigating a complicated political landscape and ensuring that their application for funding from the Office for Seniors was successful.

Starting out

As a starting point, the steering group reviewed research from Office for Seniors, the World Health Organization's age friendly resources and the experiences of other councils in developing strategies. They used their findings to create a plan for engaging their local populations. Tools that were useful in reaching people were surveys, public workshops, interviews, stakeholder meetings, focus groups and community conversations.

Staff and politicians from each Council also participated through an initial survey, key interviews and decision-making workshops. All the while, updates and findings were continuously shared with Councils and community members.

“People really appreciated the engagement. It can take longer and be ‘messier’, but in the long run we ended up with not just a strategy but a whole concept that the community believes in and not just something that lives on the shelf. It makes us more accountable because people ask about it - ‘what happened to this’ and ‘what about that’.”

Gerry Brooking, Carterton District Council

Recognising multiple perspectives

Through resident surveys and community conversations, the steering group learned that residents valued the Wairarapa climate, community, environment, public spaces and activities. On the other hand, older residents were challenged by transport, lack of services and a lack of opportunities for social connection. They were also disappointed with employment opportunities and difficulties with technology.

Consultation with community leaders identified, amongst other issues, a lack of networks or hubs for older people. Smaller organisations described themselves as isolated, heavily reliant on volunteers and working in silos. This made it difficult for them to both make a difference for older people and to adapt to changing expectations and updated models of operation.

Acknowledging the community’s history and addressing its impacts

Māori settled in the area in the 14th century and today the Wairarapa is home to Rangitāne and Ngāti Kahungunu iwi. When Europeans began arriving in the Wairarapa in the 1840s, they leased and bought Māori land for farming and building townships. While there were no wars in Wairarapa, Māori land was mostly sold and many Māori worked as farmhands and migrated to the towns. It was really important for the Community Development group to address not only multiple perspectives, but also acknowledge the present-day effects of their community history.

Iwi and Māori communities signalled priorities around land, as well as relationships between iwi and councils. Also important to older Māori were access to health services, housing, and improving the community’s understanding of Māori history and values.

Understanding the expectations of the community

Both community leaders and residents want to see a culture shift that honours ageing, improved communication with older adults, and better design and accessibility for older adults.

“We learnt about the expectations of older people, that they wanted a healthy, active, connected lifestyle. They expect to take up new sports and new hobbies once they turned 65, didn’t expect that they would sit down and knit and play bridge. They expect that Council will support their lifestyle of being active and healthy. There’s a sense of onus on us to provide that.”

Gerry Brooking, Carterton District Council

Making the strategy work across three councils

While an over-arching strategy has been developed, each council has its own implementation plan and oversight committee. This allows councils to respond to their communities' unique opportunities and challenges. In keeping with local engagement, reporting on [Te Hōkai Nuku/Wairarapa Region Positive Ageing Strategy](#) will be quarterly to both councils and the community.

The three councils have also contributed funds towards a part-time Positive Ageing Coordinator who will co-ordinate the work. Crucially, many of the actions are built into council teams' ways of working. For example, the roading teams will submit their future plans to the Positive Ageing Coordinator to make sure footpath maintenance is prioritised in areas where older people live. By embedding this responsibility in council work, they will be in a better position to help their ageing population access community services.

In addition to 'usual council business', consultation also revealed areas that need advocacy by council on behalf of the community.

"Many of our doctors in Carterton will be retiring, and obviously that's a really important service for our older people and will become more important as our population increases. We now see that while it's not Council business, it's really important that we act on behalf of our community. We wouldn't have known a lot of that without doing our community engagement. We'll be talking to our partners in DHB and the health sector about how we can support that to happen."

Gerry Brooking, Carterton District Council

More Hot tips from the Wairarapa

4. Connect with existing forums, groups and events. For example, the group used the Age Concern annual expo to start their consultation. There was a ready-made audience and it was a good opportunity to get the consultation going.
5. Ensure the strategy is embedded into everything the council does – you don't want a strategy that just sits on a shelf. It should be a lens on everything you do.
6. Use a range of marketing techniques that will match different audiences.
7. Hots tips to prepare for a great community workshop for the best outcomes:
 - Ensure you have an experienced facilitator who is well-briefed and prepared.
 - Provide people with good prior information.
 - Share transparently about what your process is and what you've learnt so far.
 - Be clear about what you are trying to achieve, and the role of each partner organisation involved in developing the strategy.
 - Create interactive opportunities and follow up with regular updates.