

Harnessing Capacity from Within: *Community groups' expo strengthens connections between local groups and new comers to the Island.*

Community: Stewart Island/Rakiura

Theme: Building community

Background

Whether they are crib owners, local fishermen, school children, families that have resided here for generations, or recent immigrants, Stewart Island's 400 residents are passionate about their place. On Rakiura there's a real 'can do' community spirit, with 68 community groups and projects currently underway to help make the Island and its environment a better place to live. In many cases, the Island's busy community leaders are involved in multiple initiatives, meaning there's significant pressure to sustain a heavy workload, and sometimes never quite enough available willing hands.

In recent times, pressure on the local volunteer base has also been affected by the growing importance of tourism within the local economy. With its summer season peaks, local tourism employment opportunities are very seasonal in nature meaning previously larger proportion of seasonal or temporary workers in our community. Casual workers, usually younger people, are now becoming a larger and larger part of the island's workforce – especially during warmer months, with ongoing implications for community structure and dynamics.

To date, our local community still hasn't worked out how to truly incorporate these shorter term community members into the total fabric of Island life. Indeed, many long time Islanders feel that new temporary resident workers aren't a *real* part of our community, not in the long-term anyway. A kind of 'us and them' mentality has unintentionally emerged.

Given that temporary staff will continue to be a significant group on the Island into the foreseeable future, we started to get our heads around how this perceived challenge could be instead be viewed as an opportunity. Working from this new perspective, we began to see things differently.

Within the Island's new casual workforce are individuals who are also passionate about Rakiura. This got us thinking about what we could do differently to better engage with temporary residents and make them feel more part of Island life. We also started thinking about new ways we could tap into their skills and talents to help strengthen the Island's community group infrastructure and capacity. We hoped that if temporary residents felt a greater sense of belonging to Rakiura, they might even stay for a much longer period of time. The question was how to do it.....

A special event to connect people and contributions

We'd heard that some of the new summer work force wanted to be more involved in community activities and were quite happy to help out with fundraising jobs or working bee events, rather than be on actual committees.

At the September 2011 'Snack and Yak' gathering of community groups based on Rakiura, the idea of holding a community expo was proposed – a way for local groups and projects to promote

themselves and their needs to others in the wider community. We also saw that this event could be a way to reach out to those new-ish to the Island, enabling them to find out more about what was happening and how they could get more actively involved in community activities.

A small team was put together to organise the event which was held at the Community Centre on a Saturday November 12th 2011 from 11am-2pm, with a BBQ lunch cooked by the local Lions Club.

The Centre was bustling with stalls and displays –with the organising group wrapt that so many local groups shared their goal of trying to attract and engage new people in Stewart Island community life. Around 100 people attended the event and there was a real buzz in the room as people shared stories, experiences and plans for the future. The local business promotions group had a very fruitful time capitalising on this by running around and collecting information about all the different groups for the main Stewart Island website.

Everyone that was there learnt something new that morning and also found out about something they didn't know was going on. In terms of attracting and connecting new residents to the Island, a few particular lessons were learned. Firstly, the 'new comers' group we were hoping to connect with turned up relatively late, when stall holders had started to pack up. This meant the full impact of engaging with community groups at the expo didn't really happen as it might have. Secondly, watching them come in, made the organising team more fully appreciate what a daunting thing it is to just 'front up' to an event where you don't really know anyone – especially when so many other people there know each other quite well. We wondered if arriving later was a safer option for people – with a higher chance that things would have been humming by then. Finally, we also noticed that new people came together as a small group, rather than alone.

We reflected that next time an event like this was run we would:

- put people at the door to act as 'meeters and greeters' and maybe have designated hosts for new residents as they walked in the door.
- before the event, encourage longer term residents to personally invite/bring a new comer to the expo. This way, new comers could be confident that they would know at least one face there.
- recruit younger community group members to bring along other younger people from their broader social circles.
- personally invite some key local businesses to attend – so their role within the broader community fabric could be promoted too.
- look at different ways of tapping into people who didn't come this time – we now know we need to do something different to get them there.

Intent:

Holding a 'one stop shop' community groups expo to promote information sharing, engagement and potential new contributions between groups and new 'temporary' residents to the Island.

Learnings:

- An expo can be a relatively low cost way to connect people, organisations and activities – all that's required is a hall and some kai to share.
- There was as much sharing and learning between stall holders as there was with attendees.
- Having a clear purpose for the expo helped engage local groups and attendees alike.
- The fact that people are being engaged needs to be met with the fact that those same people want to be engaged. Readiness for engagement is a two way street!

- Make personal approaches and invite people to attend – don't assume that people will read flyers and just come.

Outcomes:

- Positive feedback from community groups who attended, with increasing energy to keep connecting, talking and working together as a whole Island community.
- Individual organisations benefited in different ways for example:
 - Rugsrats early childhood group picked up 5 volunteers to come in and talk to the children about different topics - like living in Sweden and what kind of animals are found there.
 - Search and Rescue gave out information packs – which showed people who'd contributed what their fundraising had resulted in.
 - The district nurse did free health assessments at the event with follow up visits arranged for those who needed them.

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