



Getting Started: Growing what Waitara wants

Initiative: Waitara Community Development Project, Waitara

Theme: Working Together in Place

The Waitara story is one that comes from a hard place. Yet their story is one of strength and resilience, especially once local people started working together in place. Already known for its many talented locals, the recent growth in the arts offers a spotlight in Waitara for those more inclined to performance of a creative nature. Getting to this place has been a joint effort, and one that has been gently nurtured by the WDCP, amongst others.

Waitara is on the site of significant battles during the New Zealand wars and the subject of much grievance. The deprivation index of the area is nine (second worst on a scale to ten), the town has decile one or two schools (worst and second to worst on that scale too) and cyclic unemployment (three generations). On top of that several major local employers have closed down over the years and there have been two major crimes in last decade.

Not surprisingly, all of this left negative impressions on the community and it meant that the Waitara population was the recipient of significant government monies in terms of service provision and intervention. Communities were involved in these services and interventions but the same people found themselves confronting similar situations over and again. So, after a series of arsons back in December 2008, it was time to do things differently.

This time, when the community was asked for solutions, they responded by making decisions, setting goals and establishing a steering group for the Waitara Community Development Project (WCDP). Waitara knows it can not make fundamental changes on its own but this time government and other funders were invited to be a part of what Waitara wants, rather than the other way around.

With this mandate WCDP was successful in gaining Department of Internal Affairs funding and began to make a difference, building on the strengths, assets and aspirations of the people and town. One of the ways the WCDP works is by linking with people who have ideas they want to flow and grow. This means being flexible to what the community needs, supporting and nurturing those involved and letting community ideas take on the life the community wants. DIA regional CLD Supervisor Billy Tipene, who held the initial three year contract on behalf of DIA to oversee the project, says that solutions come from within: "People have tried in the past to put solutions into places, based on outside knowledge, but what is happening here is the community is coming together to find the solutions that will work for themselves."

Initial Project leaders developed four main goals for the project: improving community connectivity, identifying and promoting community values, ensuring community is well placed to work together in the future and working towards less crimes and well supported youth. Community Development Advisor Melissa Willis was employed to help the community give life to these goals. Melissa has been instrumental in the development of the Waitara Business and Promotions Association and in the initiation and development of numerous projects such as AmeriCARna, a Youth Driving for Change Roadshow, street barbeques and a shop theft network.

WCDP has also provided a funding conduit, guidance and support for other initiatives including the 'Take a kid fishing' event and development of a creative theatre and arts space in Waitara. Many of these things were not in a pre-prepared business plan, although they still delivered on the purpose of the WCDP. Being responsive, creative, flexible and 'good enough' means the 'solutions' are part of the community. Such actions also work with the capacity and capabilities available to that community, and in that way stand a good chance of being relevant, useful and sustainable within that community.

As an example of how the WDCP works, the creative theatre and arts space evolved out of a previous art gallery initiative to become a new Trust that has already put on two shows within six months of establishment – the Waitara Wearable Arts Show and a play about the Rugby World Cup 'Ruggernology'. This evolution from gallery to theatre and arts space was guided and supported by the WDCP who helped to identify leaders who could become trustees, provided advice and support for funding avenues and sponsored some of the Trust's local initiatives.

In even a very short term, there have been many great benefits to having a successful theatre and arts vehicle operating in Waitara. It has provided a space for a set of newly established leaders up and coming in Waitara to show what they have got and this means new talent, new inspiration and giving the 'same old' volunteers support (and a break!). This creative space has also provided a positive avenue for 'troubled' youth to explore and express themselves using the arts rather than crime or bullying tactics. More broadly, the Creative Theatre and Arts Trust is creating an arts scene in Waitara, which is adding a vibrancy to the town that was previously lacking. Waitara has always been a town known for local talent and this Trust has created a new spotlight for them to shine in.

Alongside the emerging creative spaces and variety of other activities, the WDCP is becoming known for its ability to support things to happen. It is key to have a highly skilled and flexible convenor to seed, guide and 'hold' ideas generated locally so they can link with others and flourish. These 'things' don't have to be in a business plan. In fact supporting ideas that are self seeding in the community is just the type of thing WCDP thinks will grow a strong resilient community in Waitara.

Intent:

The Waitara Community Develop Project never had the intention of telling the community how to better itself, instead the first task of Melissa as the Project Advisor was to ask the people what they felt would make Waitara Stronger and from this point, develop a project plan to guide our activities. The resounding feedback from this consultation was 'For Waitara, By Waitara' - it was ok to work for the community but only by working with them. This was also the intention of the Creative Theatre and Arts Trust, to be both a facilitator and a conduit of creative projects in Waitara. Effectively both projects create a starting point, platform and support for Waitara people to achieve their goals from.

Key Learnings:

- Listen first, last and in the middle! Good conversation is key to working with people and their ideas to strengthen their community in ways they can relate to, and that means listening and hearing as well as talking.
- Take a lead. The Waitara Community was tired of having things done **for** and **to** them and not **with** them. Taking the lead meant the local community have had a more equitable voice in decision making. The journey is now one that is together, and this has meant that local capabilities and capacity has strengthened along the way. Taking the journey together is, in itself, a successful outcome.
- Have a clear vision of where you are heading but be flexible about how you might get there. Supporting the development of an Arts Trust was not in the WCDP business plan. It was an opportunity that emerged. There were no guarantees and many chances taken, but it offered possibilities for the betterment of Waitara, and to grow new leaders, and that was good enough for WCDP to commit time and resources.
- Capitalise on what else is going on. Creative Theatre and Arts Trustee, Cheryl Rapira said "Piggybacking on the Rugby World Cup helped get some quick runs on the board. In just a few months people already know we exist, and a bit about what we do! Some of them have even offered to help with what is next."
- Be patient and be flexible. Community development takes time and is often not immediately visible. Supporting those with seeds to plant them, nurture them, harvest and re-sow is about sharing ideas, dreams and visions, allowing these to evolve, contributing resources and being patient and flexible enough to notice what emerges and how it grows.
- Love the work you do, love the community you're in!

Key Outcomes:

- New opportunities in the arts for local Waitara people that help increase capacity, capability and provide new avenues for local expression. These may also contribute to other positive impacts in the community, such as a reduction in crime, because people are busy elsewhere and also because they are gaining positive feedback and self-esteem.
- A growing culture of working together. The development of new entities is enhanced with the contributions of many others in the community – WCDP, businesses, schools, clubs etc. Local ideas become local solutions that generate within the context of the town and those supporting us. At the same time, these local ideas and solutions help shape that context towards greater capacity and capability. Working together helps to network our town, no-one needs to be on their own and we are stronger this way.

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