



Community Needs Assessment

Description

Community needs assessment is a systematic process to determine community needs in a particular area (for instance, recreation, employment, health, housing, education) or place as a basis for planning and/or bringing about change. It provides the framework for systematically collecting the information necessary (that is, the evidential base) for decision makers to establish priorities and a rationale for action plans that meet the identified need. For instance, a recreational needs assessment could provide the information for more detailed planning such as is required for a [master plan](#) 🌱.

How and when the tool is used

There are several approaches to community needs assessment - but they all need to start from baseline information. Because community needs assessment is about change, it is essential to know the current situation (what to change from) as well as what to change to. And because it is about values (what changes communities want) the process needs to be iterative. Community aspirations are a constantly evolving thing.

Relevant agencies might be required legislatively to seek community input to define their needs. Or they may want to carry out needs assessment in order to stay informed about community aspirations. For instance, if the needs assessment related to recreation and leisure, the agency might collect information about community-wide (or specific group) needs, attitudes, opinions and behaviour (for instance, use) generally or with respect to specific places, programmes, services and facilities.

More attention is being given to the importance of community input into needs assessments.

Community Appraisal is one way to ensure community involvement. It is similar to a range of other participatory methods such as rapid rural appraisal, as outlined in [participation models](#) 🌱. These support and facilitate community understanding and action rather than just record information and rely of qualitative techniques of interviewing and listening to people.

Community needs assessment is an iterative process that needs to reflect the changing aspirations and circumstances of the community or group that is the focus of the process. It also needs to reflect the changing context within which the assessment is applied. For instance, changing agency roles or resourcing levels may affect the extent to which agencies can respond to community needs - for the better or the worse.

Application


Recreational needs assessments are reasonably common. While they can be initiated and conducted by communities themselves, either independently or in partnership with agencies, they are usually initiated and carried out by agencies, often through sub-contractors. For tourism and related activities, these organisations most often include local and regional government ([Long Term Council Community Plan processes](#) 🌱) are, essentially, needs assessment processes) and the Department of Conservation (for instance around management plans, etc [Conservation Act Framework](#) 🌱).

The steps to a community needs assessment could include the following:

- Setting the objectives of the assessment - what information is required from whom for what reason.
- Collecting new and existing data such as:
 - demographic data about the population of interest to (i) understand their current status, for instance in terms of age distribution, incomes, numbers of children, household composition; and (ii) identify important trends, for instance whether sizes of families are changing, whether the population is ageing;
 - information about people's relevant behaviours and activities, for instance relating to their leisure and recreation activities, their spending patters, their travel patters;
 - information about people's future plans and aspirations, especially as they relate to current behaviours and activities and factors influencing any expected changes;
 - descriptive information and quantitative data about the place, programmes, services and/or amenities of interest. For instance, if the needs assessment relates to park use, what are the current amenities (tracks, huts, etc) and their condition, who uses them and how often, what is expected future use and so on.



Techniques for data collection, especially relating to community aspirations, attitudes and current activities, include interviews, focus groups, and other participative research methods as well as surveys.

- Analysis of data, including content analysis of the qualitative data from participative research activities, and evaluation of the findings (including economic evaluation) for prioritising actions. Economic analysis can be used in the evaluation process as it provides a basis for prioritising actions by matching them with the resources available. Such analysis could look at how resources are currently used and, once the options are identified, calculate the costs and benefits of each. More information about how to carry out the economic aspects is in [cost benefit analysis](#) .

Examples of tourism related community needs assessment in New Zealand include: DoC's 2002 Recreational Opportunities Review; Christchurch City Council's Westmorland Recreational Needs Analysis; Palmerston North City Council's Vautier/Skoglund Parks Needs Analysis; Auckland City Council's needs assessments for Grey Lynn Park and Maungawhau Visitor Centre; Landcare Research's NVS User Survey and Needs Assessment; and Wellington Regional Council's Wellington Harbour case study - needs analysis.

Our evaluation

The range of needs assessment carried out in New Zealand is too diverse to make any definitive statement about their usefulness. However, our judgement is that they are used too infrequently in resource management situations. Given the costs of carrying them out, it is rare for communities to conduct their own needs assessments.