

New Zealand Policy on Ageing An Age Integration and Mainstreaming Perspective

New Zealand's approach to integrating and mainstreaming policy on ageing has been to develop and implement a comprehensive strategy focussed specifically on identifying and monitoring policies and programmes of specific relevance to older people. This presentation will outline the purpose of the strategy, the process that was used to develop the strategy, the implementation programme that has been undertaken, and the lessons we have learned in the two and half years since the strategy was first introduced.

Why have a Positive Ageing Strategy?

The New Zealand Positive Ageing Strategy was published in April 2001 and launched at that time by the then Minister for Senior Citizens, Hon Lianne Dalziel. The need for a comprehensive and strategic approach to ageing issues in the New Zealand context was however highlighted several years earlier – during the 1999 International Year of Older Persons. That year provided an impetus to highlight the status of older people in New Zealand, raise awareness of older people's issues on the policy agenda, and to consider the challenges and opportunities New Zealand's ageing population will generate.

In the first few months of the year 2000, officials at the Ministry of Social Development prepared a comprehensive project plan for work on the establishment of a Positive Ageing Strategy. In planning documents the purpose of the Strategy was described as follows:

To improve opportunities for older people to participate in the community;

To build on previous work and actions, particularly the research undertaken and networks developed during the International Year of Older Persons; and

To combine actions being taken across different policy portfolios, into a comprehensive strategy framework.

When the New Zealand Positive Ageing Strategy was produced, its purpose had been encapsulated in the phrase "Towards a Society for all Ages". This reflects the strategic direction set out in the strategy's principles and goals. The end goal, or long term outcome is a society where older peoples' contributions are valued, where older people can participate in their communities in the ways that they choose, and where both young and old view older age as positive and empowering.

The Process

The success and visibility of the Positive Ageing Strategy is very much attributable to the inclusive and consultative process through which it was developed. The Working Party involved the Ministerial Advisory Council for Senior Citizens, specific consultation with older Maori and Pacific peoples, non-government organisations, local government, academics, the health sector, and the general public through community consultation with older people and specific consultations with young people.

During the International Year of Older Persons, a Volunteer Community Co-ordinators programme was developed. The VCC programme involves individual older people nominated by a local organisation, working closely with the Office for Senior Citizens on specific projects related to promoting the rights and interests of older people. The 37 Volunteer Community Co-ordinators were actively engaged in the Positive Ageing Strategy consultation process.

A key risk of active and thorough consultation is that those consulted will have unrealistic expectations of what their contribution will create, or what will be delivered as a result of the consultation. As the Positive Ageing Strategy was to become a strategy *for* older people, it was very important that they were not disillusioned or disappointed. To avoid this risk, the consultation was focussed specifically on identifying *priorities* for future action. The feedback from the consultation, combined with the information available through research and statistics, directly informed the establishment of the strategy's goals and principles.

The Principles and Goals

The Strategy is built around 10 Goals and 10 Principles. It is conceptually simple and provides an effective framework within which actions across the government sector can be placed. The Goals, each of which has a small set of high level actions, are as follows;

Income: Secure and adequate income for older people

Health: Equitable, timely, affordable and accessible health services for older people

Housing: Affordable and appropriate housing options for older people

Transport: Affordable and accessible transport options for older people

Ageing in Place: Older people feel “safe and secure” and can “age in place”

Cultural Diversity: A range of culturally appropriate services allows choices for older people

Rural: Older people living in rural communities are not disadvantaged when accessing services

Attitudes: People of all ages have positive attitudes to ageing and older people

Employment: Elimination of ageism and the promotion of flexible work options

Opportunities: Increasing opportunities for personal growth and community participation.

How the Positive Ageing Strategy is kept alive

An appropriate response to important policy issues, particularly when they have cross-portfolio relevance, is to develop a strategy. The New Zealand Positive Ageing Strategy sits in a policy context in which there are a multitude of other strategies, such as the Health of Older People Strategy, the Transport Strategy, the Disability Strategy, and the Injury Prevention Strategy. Each of these is important, but the sheer volume of strategies produced at the government level can undermine enthusiasm within the general public. There has also been criticism when there is no formalised monitoring for progress being made on strategies and that overtime very detailed strategies can become redundant and static as policy responses change or evolve.

The New Zealand Positive Ageing Strategy is dynamic. This is achieved through a range of mechanisms including: a new Action Plan being produced each year, each year's Action Plan being reported on in the following year, and a commitment to produce reports on the status of older people, at approximately three yearly intervals.

The Office for Senior Citizens, which is part of the Ministry of Social Development, has responsibility for producing Positive Ageing Strategy Action Plans and Annual reports. We have just completed the Action Plan for 1 July 2003 – 30 June 2004. This involved liaising with 34 other government departments, and asking them to identify actions that directly link to one or more of the Goals in the Positive Ageing Strategy. Having compiled a list of the actions of each government department, individual actions are then linked to the relevant Goal of the Positive Ageing Strategy. A measure of achievement and key milestones or timeframes is identified.

Measures of achievement and key milestones are important because at the completion of each year's Action Plan, every action is reported on according to whether its measure of achievement and milestones. In short, was it done on time, and did the responsible department achieve what it set out to do.

Both the Action Plan and the Annual Report are published and widely disseminated. Public interest in Positive Ageing Strategy Action Plans and Annual Reports is very high. On average we disseminate approximately 10,000 printed copies of each, and make each document available online. Our distribution strategy includes sending copies to every public library in New Zealand, and every Member of Parliament.

Promoting the New Zealand Positive Ageing Strategy is an integral part of the Office for Senior Citizens advocacy function. The Office convenes quarterly Interdepartmental Network meetings which include officials from most other government departments. These meetings provide an opportunity to exchange information about policies, programmes and services being undertaken across the government sector. The meetings are also important to checking progress on actions each agency has committed to within the current year's Action Plan, and discussing future actions for inclusion in subsequent Action Plans. In commenting on possible policies, programmes and services or on proposals for new policies programmes or services, the Office for Senior Citizens always uses the goals and principles of the Positive Ageing Strategy as our framework. For instance, we would consider a proposal to make changes to the state housing stock according to whether the proposal would contribute to or impede achievement of the housing goal in the Strategy. This approach ensures that the strategy has a constant profile in day to day work at an official's level.

Having an agency with specific responsibility for promoting and monitoring the Positive Ageing Strategy has proven to be essential to maintaining its profile within the government sector and among the public. However, the fact that the Office for Senior Citizens has that role does not mean that other agencies can avoid engagement with the strategy. The annual Action Plan and Annual Report ensure the ongoing involvement of almost every government agency.

Lessons learned and how we have responded to challenges

Accounting for resource requirements

Maintaining work on the Positive Ageing Strategy and its associated Action Plans and Annual Reports, is resource intensive. Apart from the analyst hours required to prepare, process, edit, and arrange publication and distribution of Action Plans and Annual Reports, the cost of publication and distribution needs to be budgeted.

Early and ongoing engagement with contributors

The public sector in New Zealand includes almost 40 government departments and thousands of officials. For an agency that is required to co-ordinate a set of contributions from as many agencies as possible, this can create challenges. Our strategy for early engagement has been to make contact early each year with the Chief Executive of each government department, and to establish a specific contact person with whom we can liaise. For departments that are represented at the quarterly Interdepartmental Network meetings, a letter to the Chief Executive is more a formality than a necessity. However, a number of departments are not actively involved in the Interdepartmental Network and it is important not to overlook or exclude the contributions of those agencies.

The Office also runs a series of seminars early each year to familiarise representatives from all government agencies with the Positive Ageing Strategy cycle of Action plans and Annual reports. Identifying appropriate Actions and putting those actions into the Action Plan framework involves discussion, consideration and analysis.

Keeping the actions ‘real’

While there are few policies that have no direct or indirect relevance to older people, or to any particular population group, the Positive Ageing Strategy Action Plans have had to confine listed actions to those that relate to policies and programmes with a *direct* and/or *specific* relevance to older people. Although the overall strategic direction of some agencies is consistent with the Positive Ageing Strategy goals, it has been difficult at times to identify actions that have relevance for older people per se, rather than for older people as part of the larger population benefiting from a particular policy.

An example is the Ministry of Education’s tertiary education strategy, which includes policies aimed at assisting people from all population groups to take up tertiary education opportunities. These policies assist older people, but they also assist ethnic minorities, school leavers, and mature adults. The dilemma becomes whether to include such policies in the Positive Ageing Strategy Action Plan.

We have increasingly taken the position that only policies, programmes and activities that are specifically targeted to older people, or that have a criteria or measure of achievement that links specifically to the older population, will be included in Action Plans.

Ensuring achievements are ‘measurable’

The Positive Ageing Strategy is based on a cycle of identifying actions to be undertaken within a specified timeframe and reporting on the achievement of those actions. In terms of reporting achievements it is important that these are tangible and measurable. Vague objectives or unspecified achievements risk undermining public confidence in the authenticity of actions and make the reporting part of the cycle very difficult. Positive and categorical measures of achievement maintain the outcomes focus of the Strategy, and require the contributing department to publicly commit to setting realistic and purposeful actions.

Writing for the audience

The Positive Ageing Strategy and the associated Action Plans and Annual Reports are documents designed to be accessible and meaningful to all sectors of society. This is critical to effectively promoting the strategy and the actions that contribute to the achievement of its goals. While Strategy documents are widely sought, there is particular interest in the strategy among individual older people and older people’s organisations. We are very conscious of this audience and actively avoid neologisms, acronyms, and bureaucratic jargon. This has contributed to the success of the Strategy and to the ongoing interest in Strategy related documents.