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Co-designing a Community Housing Strategy: Insights from a Rural District

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Co-designing a Community Housing Strategy: Insights from a Rural District

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Abstract

Interpreting issues associated with the supply of suitable, affordable, socially inclusive housing in rural areas requires analysis through a different lens to that of urban housing. This paper reports a case study of the development of a community housing strategy in a rural district in Aotearoa New Zealand. A co-production of knowledge approach was used to support a community agency to define and address an array of local housing issues and develop a strategy to improve housing outcomes. We interpret the process undertaken to develop the housing strategy and conclude with a discussion of the relevance of a co-construction of knowledge approach. We also reflect on the importance of strong local leadership and commitment of resources to building local capacity and capability in rural regeneration planning.

Keywords: Rural regeneration, rural housing, community strategy, co-construction of knowledge, New Zealand

Co-conception d'une stratégie de logement communautaire : observations d'un district rural

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Résumé

L'interprétation des enjeux liés à l'offre de logements adaptés, abordables et socialement inclusifs en zones rurales nécessite une analyse différente de celle du logement urbain. Cet article présente une étude de cas sur l'élaboration d'une stratégie de logement communautaire dans un district rural d'Aotearoa, en Nouvelle-Zélande. Une approche de coproduction de connaissances a été utilisée pour aider un organisme communautaire à définir et à traiter un ensemble de problèmes locaux en matière de logement et à élaborer une stratégie visant à améliorer les résultats relatifs au logement. Nous interprétons le processus d'élaboration de la stratégie de logement et concluons par une discussion sur la pertinence d'une approche de co-construction de connaissances. Nous réfléchissons également à l'importance d'un leadership local fort et de l'engagement de ressources pour renforcer les capacités locales en matière de planification de la régénération rurale.

Mots-clés : régénération rurale, logement rural, stratégie communautaire, co-construction de connaissances, Nouvelle-Zélande

1.0 Introduction

The supply of suitable, affordable, socially inclusive housing in rural towns and districts is an important aspect of rural resilience and sustainability (Shucksmith, 2023). Despite this understanding, most housing research has an urban focus (Gallent et al., 2015; Kordel & Naumann, 2023; Van Zandt et al., 2008). Urban regeneration researchers are interested in large scale housing developments in cities and associated investment in infrastructure. Our research, in contrast, focuses on regeneration as policy and projects for renewal and redevelopment of settlements and associated rural areas, linking to a growing branch of rural regeneration research that focuses on planning for small town change (Powe & Hart, 2017). It elucidates complex rural processes associated with governance, local initiative, and the changing role of localities in a globalising world (Perkins & Thorns, 2017).

The focus of the New Zealand case study we report in this paper is a research collaboration between the researchers, Stronger Waitaki, and the Waitaki Housing Taskforce as they developed a community housing strategy in Waitaki District, Aotearoa New Zealand (see Figure 1). Our role as researchers in this process, was to adopt a co-construction of knowledge approach (Djenontin & Meadow, 2018) in support of the development of the housing strategy. We engaged with the local housing taskforce in various aspects of the strategic process, bringing our expertise in rural research, data interpretation, social assessment, and strategic planning to bear.

We begin the paper with a review of relevant research literature, followed by an explanation of our fieldwork. We then turn to a brief analysis of Ōamaru and Waitaki district governance organisations, the Waitaki District Council and Stronger Waitaki, and broader rural regeneration concerns. Using the case of the community-led Waitaki Housing Strategy, we then discuss how a group of mainly local stakeholders, supported by wider national institutional networks, set about co-producing knowledge on local housing issues and developing a strategy to deal with them as part of wider rural regeneration interests. The research identifies and discusses issues related to development of local research and policy capacity in rural settings, and points to an active role for academic researchers in supporting local regeneration processes.

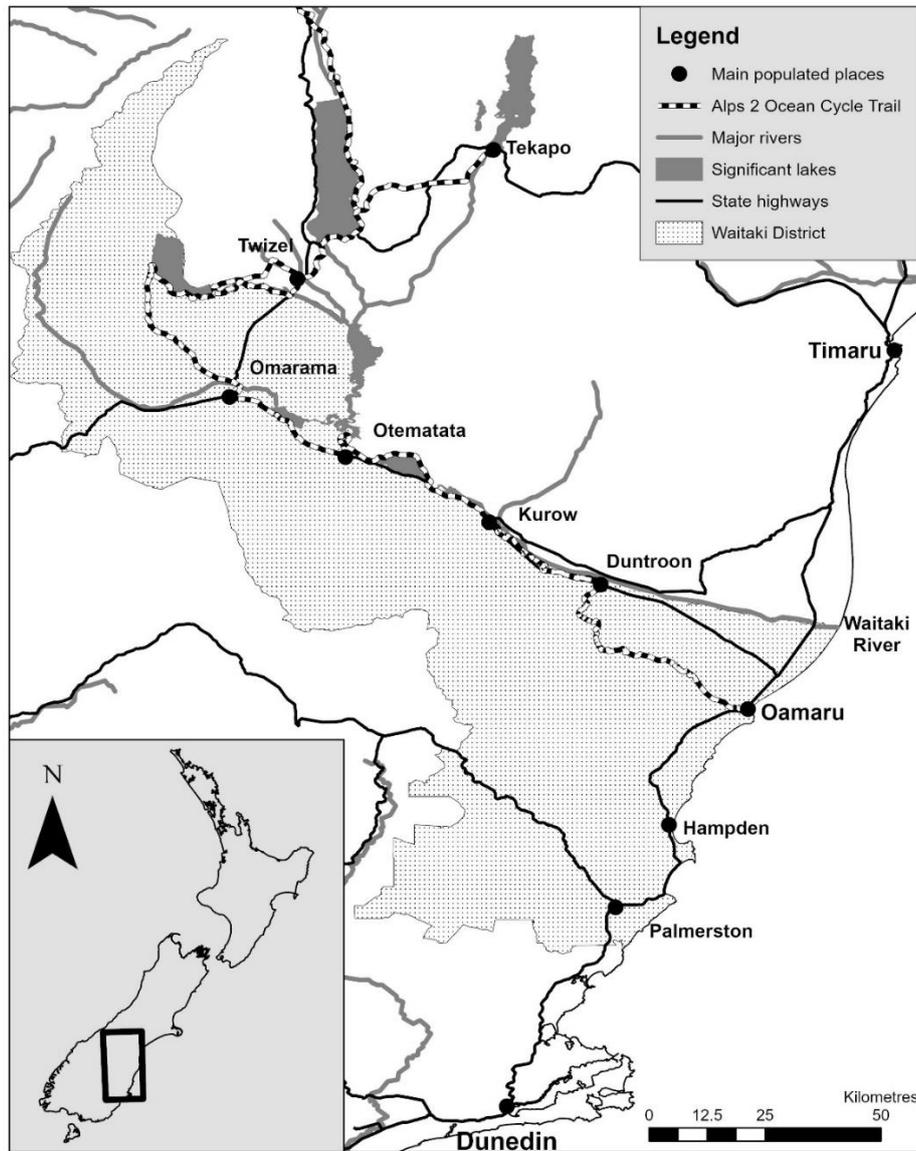
2.0 Housing in Processes of Rural Regeneration

Successful regeneration in rural towns—population 10,000 or fewer in Aotearoa New Zealand—and districts depends on effective long term, collaborative effort and capacity building with a mix of local and external support (Perkins et al., 2019). In rural places there is often a reliance on the inputs, strengths, and active participation of rural people and communities. These points draw attention to the importance of community-based initiatives that address local social-economic problems. Housing is often one of these. It is a key social issue and a determinant of health, social wellbeing, and rural resilience (Rolfe et al., 2020; Scott & Gkartzios, 2014).

Rural housing regeneration has its own challenges (Van Zandt et al., 2008). Variability in the characteristics of rural towns means that an array of analytical and policy approaches to housing is required. Some rural towns exist close to and within an urban field and are strongly influenced by urban relations, including employment catchments, peripheral housing development, and land prices. Although they are also globalising, other rural areas are more remote and their housing is dispersed across a large area, often centred on one medium sized town and several smaller settlements. The larger, regional towns usually provide

a range of social, professional, cultural, and commercial services to rural residents and hinterland communities (Powe & Gunn, 2008).

Figure 1. The Waitaki District main settlements, Ōamaru, and area towns.



Alps to Ocean trail map sourced from Google Maps. Coastline, populated places, State highways, major rivers and lakes sourced from Land Information NZ and licensed for use under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International license. Waitaki District boundaries sourced from Statistics NZ.

During periods of growth in rural areas, housing is fundamental to attracting and retaining sufficient skilled workers for new and expanding economic activities, such as farming, food processing, transport, and rural tourism. Government and other public services in rural regions often struggle to employ the people they need unless suitable housing can be arranged (Wilson et al., 2020). This is a particular issue for recruitment in the rural health sector as well as for local government. Where there is a dependence on international migrant workers, the challenge is finding ways to meet their long or short terms housing needs, and cultural preferences, which can lead to accommodation dissatisfaction and housing insecurity (Ziebarth, 2000). Affordable housing for newcomers and rural migrant workers is therefore an industry, local government, and community concern (Broadway, 2000).

High amenity rural towns and districts that attract capital and tourists, holiday homeowners, as well as wealthy permanent residents, tend to have housing concerns focused on growth, housing supply, and affordability for less wealthy owner occupiers and renters (Argent et al., 2007, Mackay et al., 2014; Perkins et al., 2015). Other rural areas, that may have a high reliance on natural resources and primary production, processing and allied logistics, face the challenge of attracting workers, often depending on the ability to accommodate workers in suitable, affordable housing close to their new place of work. Housing instability for those who rent and who have low incomes and savings, or who face precarious employment is also an issue in rural towns (Ziebarth, 2000), one that affects the capacity of workers to commit to a long-term tenancy agreement and pay rent. In addition, rural areas highlight the casualisation of work, seasonal and insecure work, contracting of work and multiple job holding across key sectors including farming, horticulture tourism and food processing (Robertson et al., 2008).

The demographic and cultural diversification represented by movement of people to rural areas is captured in discussions about the global countryside (Perkins et al., 2015; Woods, 2007) and increasingly multi-ethnic or cosmopolitan rural spaces (Alam & Nel, 2022; Alam et al., 2023; Conti & Sivini, 2023; Woods, 2018), which impart a particular dimension to discussions of rural housing. The vulnerability of migrant families, for example, is increased by their lack of knowledge of the host society and available support services, which include housing, health, and social services (Wilson et al., 2020).

Changes in demography—particularly with respect to ethnicity and an older population—further complicate the housing picture in rural places. In particular, structural aging is a key feature of many, agriculturally based, towns and districts, which raises issues of suitable housing and social support (Diamond & Jaye, 2020). In addition, there are links between housing and the physical environment, including rural topography and climate. Older housing may be too cold, hot, or damp, demanding higher than desirable energy costs for retirees living in rural areas. Some houses are also too big, inaccessible and isolated from key services, including health, aged-care, and transport. For young people in these small towns, who wish to transition from school to work and leave the family home, there are few adequate housing options.

Another important factor is the issue of access to quality rural housing for Indigenous people, Māori in the case of Aotearoa New Zealand. Their housing needs must be considered in an historical context of land losses and associated poor wellbeing outcomes, which shape their ability to access funding and support for housing, particularly for rural populations living on customary lands (Palmer, 2016).

These complex challenges point to the strategic thinking and planning required to address rural small town housing regeneration, drawing on collective action and empowerment of community leaders and the organisations they represent. Their role is to identify needs, develop objectives, and share responsibilities for the development and implementation of a housing strategy or plan. This approach requires enhancing community capacity and leadership to share information and resources, develop actions, and implement them (Caswell, 2001; Odeyemi & Skobba, 2021; Stocker & Pollard, 1994).

3.0 Case Study Location, Approach and Methods

The case study draws on fieldwork we undertook in two phases of research over a period of six years in the Waitaki District (population c. 23,400 in 2023) of the South Island of Aotearoa New Zealand. The area included the Waitaki Valley (see Figure 1), its small rural settlements and the district's 'central place', the rural town of Ōamaru (population c.14,000 in 2023). The area is administered by the Waitaki District Council and lies in the North Otago region and the sub-tribal jurisdictional area (in Māori, rohe) of Te Rūnanga o Moeraki. The Waitaki District's economy is based on agricultural production, hydroelectricity generation, manufacturing, logistics (such as rural transport), tourism, and services to the district's population.

Our first phase of fieldwork, which took place prior to our collaboration with the Waitaki Housing Taskforce, was in the mode of social impact assessment research (Mackay et al., 2023). The research focused broadly on interpreting a suite of local regeneration initiatives and associated hospitality and tourism developments in and around the Ōamaru waterfront and heritage sites, expanding later to an analysis of the Alps to Ocean (A2O) cycle trail through the rural district to the Ōamaru waterfront (Mackay et al., 2018; Mackay et al., 2019). This work focused on the social impacts of regeneration and evaluations of what worked well and why (Taylor, et al., 2021). During this initial period of fieldwork, the team developed relationships with key stakeholders and community leaders, who guided the next phase of work to housing as a key local policy issue requiring a strategic response. Through these relationships the nature of our fieldwork shifted to emphasising co-production of knowledge (Djenontin & Meadow 2018) in support of local capacity building. Utilising a spirit of collaboration (Powe et al., 2015), this meant addressing housing issues featuring knowledge generated collaboratively by the researchers and the Waitaki Housing Taskforce.

The approach to developing the housing strategy drew on two interrelated methods. The first method is soft systems analysis combined with social assessment—a participatory approach designed to address complex problems while identifying feasible change (Taylor, et al., 2004; Taylor & Mackay, 2023, 2024). The second method used a logical framework—a planning tool—to design, monitor, and evaluate an initiative, a strategy, or plan in a series of steps. Both approaches emphasise the need to build a 'rich picture' of the context of a strategy or plan before embarking on strategy design. Both approaches also look to ensure the content of a strategy is developed alongside, and tested for feasibility, with stakeholders and affected people throughout the process—outlined below.

The mixed method approach generated a mix of quantitative and qualitative data to interpret local housing issues and inform local actions. At the outset, a statistician on contract to the Waitaki Housing Taskforce delivered a presentation summarising secondary data on the population and housing of the district. Government agencies added data on the demand for emergency and social housing. We added to this initial picture and wrote an overview paper (Taylor et al., 2020) utilising reviews of previous reports and specific secondary data collection and analysis to build a picture of demography, housing demand, social housing, workforce trends, and social services. Where feasible, data were mapped through a spatial, GIS, framework. Sources included the New Zealand census of population and dwellings, government agency data and reporting on housing and social support, local government data on housing demand and construction, and tribal data on demand for home ownership. Taskforce meetings provided a means to discuss and evaluate available data and gaps in

the housing picture and apply findings to development of the housing strategy, as discussed in Section 4.

In addition to this baseline work, the research team worked with the Waitaki Housing Taskforce as they designed an open internet survey of the housing needs of district residents (Waitaki Housing Taskforce, 2022). The survey provided a detailed picture of housing issues for district households, adding to the quantitative profile of the population, housing, and social service needs. It was promoted to residents through Stronger Waitaki networks and had 559 self-selected respondents, with a bias towards female respondents (73%) indicating their particular interest in household needs and housing issues in Ōamaru and the rural hinterland. The survey provided valuable insights into issues such as the affordability of housing, crowding, and suitability of homes—size, warmth, and cultural needs.

Additionally, the Ōamaru Pacific Island Community Group undertook face-to-face visits to over 100 Pacific Island households and obtained data on their wellbeing status during the Covid 19 pandemic. These visits confirmed that across Pacific Island groups there was a low level of home ownership and that many households were struggling to pay for everyday costs, of housing, food, and health, which confirmed the results of the internet survey for low-income households in general.

These data were supplemented with knowledge brought to the table by Waitaki Housing Taskforce members in the form of anecdotal stories and their observations about lived housing experiences of their clients. Taskforce meetings regularly included these sources on important issues that are difficult to quantify, such as experiences with discrimination in the housing market, and examples of demand for emergency housing due to family violence. Comments by survey respondents added to the qualitative data. In addition, we conducted unstructured interviews with residents and other stakeholders and listened to accounts of local experiences from people grounded in housing and social issues adding to the information on discrimination and emergency housing, for example.

This mixed method approach was key to the co-production ethos, as it allowed for different participants to contribute a range of data types, and these were all seen as valuable during taskforce meetings. The data directly informed development of the community housing strategy throughout the iterative process that we outline next.

4.0 Stronger Waitaki and the Waitaki Housing Taskforce Process

Stronger Waitaki was initiated in March 2013 to identify and respond to the key community priorities for the Waitaki District (<https://www.saferwaitaki.co.nz/home>). This entity comprises a network of more than 160 groups and organisations representing central government departments (usually with a regional presence), local government, non-governmental organisations, emergency services, cultural groups, and health, wellbeing, education and workplace agencies, all ‘active partners in making Waitaki the Best Place to Be’ (<https://www.saferwaitaki.co.nz/home>). The entity is guided by an inter-sectoral stewardship group located in Waitaki District.

Stronger Waitaki provides a platform for collaborative effort allowing the Waitaki community to optimise available resources and expertise in pursuit of community goals. It has taken on the rural regeneration role with respect to housing in Waitaki District and formed a sub-group called the Waitaki Housing Taskforce—herein the Taskforce—to lead this work. This sub-group, facilitated by district council community-development employees, is charged with enabling

accessible, affordable and adequate housing for the people of the district. Its key members include representatives from:

- Stronger Waitaki
- Waitaki District Council
- Te Rūnanga o Moeraki
- Central Government Agencies: Kainga Ora: Homes and Communities (social housing), Ministry for Social Development, Department of Corrections
- Community Groups: Age Concern, Otago, Methodist Mission, Ōamaru Pacific Peoples Community Group incorporated.

Establishment of the Taskforce set in train development of the district's housing strategy. This initiative coincided with our social impact assessment research in Ōamaru, as noted above. In pursuing a range of local regeneration initiatives in Waitaki District with the community, it was clear to us that housing was a major issue locally, and something worthy of study in the context of rural regeneration. Based on our existing relationships with Stronger Waitaki, in 2019, we were invited to participate in the work of the Taskforce and help inform and guide its strategies and planning. The Taskforce set out to understand housing issues by gathering and sharing data as described and defining the housing problem.

In doing so, the Taskforce committed to an open and iterative process from the outset, remaining open to discussion of new information as the strategy was developed. The ability of the Taskforce to clarify and adapt objectives and actions of the emerging housing strategy was fundamental to its success, guided by the co-production of knowledge iteratively through engagements between community members, decision-makers and researchers. This iterative process is depicted in Figure 2 and described further below, showing how the co-production of knowledge integrates with the steps to develop the strategy.

4.1 Understanding Housing Issues: Information Gathering

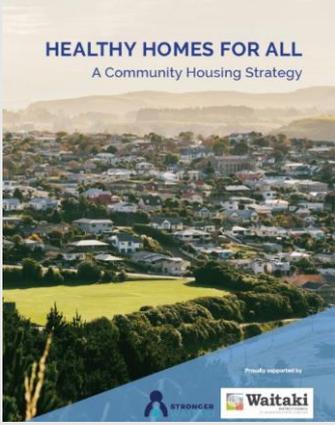
Between late 2019 and September 2020, the combination of data generated from research and the experiences of its members allowed the Taskforce to develop an evidence-based interpretation of local rural housing issues and options for feasible change. These data were presented to district councillors and to two Taskforce workshops facilitated by a research team member and attended by staff, councillors, other stakeholders and the research team in September 2020 and in February 2021.¹ The research team then helped to analyse the workshop outputs as outlined below.

As the Taskforce started to build a picture of local housing issues, an important contribution of the research team was to help relate these issues to trends in rural housing and allied regional change. There were two notable examples. First was the arrival in Ōamaru of additional migrants from within Aotearoa New Zealand and overseas, many from the Pacific Islands, working in farming, food processing and manufacturing, and rural tourism. The provision of housing for transient workers, such as seasonal employees on short term work contracts and restricted visas is a particular issue, including the need for larger homes for some, often multigenerational, households. Second, the use of family homes for

¹ Work on the strategy was interrupted by a wildfire incident in an isolated area of the district (destroying 53 houses) and by the Covid 19 pandemic. The latter meant that some Taskforce-related communications and meetings were delayed or had to be done via video conferencing.

visitor accommodation was recognised as an important new influence because of the penetration and concentration of the accommodation sharing platform Airbnb within the district. Data on Airbnb were obtained and mapped along with analysis of their effect on the rental housing market by reducing the number of houses available for longer-term renting by residents (Campbell et al., 2020, 2021).

Figure 2: Co-producing the Waitaki housing strategy: an iterative community process.

Co-production of knowledge and insights on community housing (research and information sharing)	Building blocks of the community housing strategy (key steps)	Putting it all together: healthy homes for all
<p>Community workshops</p> <p>Information sharing</p> <p>Research presentations</p> <p>Resident survey online</p> <p>Regular meetings with core group and guests</p>	<p>Creating the vision: what we want to achieve</p> <p>Research and community engagement to build a broad understanding of the district and how it is changing</p> <p>Identifying key housing challenges and needs and prioritising issues</p> <p>Identifying strategic opportunities and generating objectives</p> <p>Setting for each objective: actions, responsibilities, resource needs, timing, and indicators of success</p>	 <p>link to document</p>

4.2 Workshop 1 Outputs

The first workshop focused on defining and prioritising housing issues. These deliberations emphasised an array of housing issues in the Waitaki District as identified through the above research:

- A lack of adequate, affordable rental housing, including short-term housing for transient seasonal workers and for youth leaving home.
- Land use planning problems: availability of suitable urban land, including greenfield sites for new housing and rules around intensification, such as height restrictions and the subdivision of existing homes on larger sections. These planning issues were complicated by new central government policy on housing intensification alongside policy protecting highly productive soils.
- Too few smaller—single and two-bedroom—units to meet the needs of an increasing number of elderly residents living in larger homes.
- A limited supply of social—public housing as reflected in housing waiting lists administered by government agencies, the council and social service organisations.

- A shortage of suitably priced housing for those wishing to buy homes, especially newcomers and those entering the market for the first time.
- Housing stock, owner occupied and rental, that is unsuitable for current conditions, being of the wrong size and type, including a lot of older houses, with poor or expensive heating, damp and mouldy, or with poor insulation.
- Housing that is overcrowded with larger families, multiple generations, or extended family visiting longer term, and a limited stock of homes with several bedrooms.
- A lack of transitional and emergency housing for people released from prison, or experiencing family violence.
- Low levels of owner-occupation among Māori, and Pacific peoples, made worse by limited capital and, for the latter, by residency visa requirements.
- Discrimination by property managers or owners against vulnerable groups renting in the housing market, including based on race, age, lack of rental history, cultural practices, family size, or pets.

The Taskforce concluded that each of the housing issues identified here presented an opportunity to address ways of improving wellbeing in the District.

4.3 Workshop 2 Outputs

The second workshop focused on identifying feasible changes in response to these issues. Participants examined the practicability of dealing with the housing issues. They first agreed on a vision and objectives related to the issues outlined above. This resulted in a realisation, on the part of the Taskforce, that any housing strategy it developed had primarily to coordinate effort across the district toward the achievement of a common goal based on new partnerships, and stronger advocacy for a diverse supply of affordable and appropriate houses. The common goal endorsed by the Taskforce and workshop participants was ‘healthy, affordable, appropriate homes for all, with access to services in vibrant, resilient communities’ This was reflected in the short title of the strategy, ‘Healthy Homes for All.’

An action plan was then developed, as were responsibilities and a timeline for achieving them. There was also a discussion about the resources that would be needed to complete the actions. Indicators for success were spelled out, and a risk assessment was conducted.

Actions were associated with a wide array of desired outcomes mainly centred on housing affordability and housing access, both in the rental market and with owner occupation. The Taskforce wished to incentivise and enable development of smaller, more affordable and sustainable housing, and greater residential density. This included investigating models for funding for housing alternatives capable of meeting the needs of diverse communities: Māori, Pacific peoples, the elderly, and other vulnerable groups. All of these found expression in a document entitled “Healthy Homes for All: A Community Housing Strategy” prepared by the Waitaki Housing Taskforce in March 2022 (see Figure 2).

5.0 Implementation: Meeting the Need for Monitoring and Evaluation

Once the strategy was published, the Taskforce focus shifted to strategy implementation and development of a monitoring and evaluation framework. Monitoring and evaluation are an integral part of an iterative adaptive process of designing and implementing a change process, whether it be a project, strategy, policy or plan (Taylor & Mackay, 2024). The research team developed a monitoring and evaluation framework (matrix) in collaboration with the Taskforce. This framework helped to guide participants in preparing for regular meetings and discussions about progress. This framework was also important for consistency when new people joined the Taskforce or agency personnel changed.

Co-production of knowledge extended into implementation as the participating organisations provide information that helps to track activities and outcomes. In the housing strategy, important information came from the research team and participating organisations such as the Ministry of Social Development's regular data gathering on social housing needs, the Ministry of Housing and Urban Development's quarterly reports, and the Waitaki District Council's planning and consenting team. Here a mix of quantitative and qualitative data continued to be useful and appropriate alongside measures or indicators of change or success, so that internal data sources and local knowledge are combined with external sources and official statistics.

6.0 Discussion and Conclusion

This paper presents a case study of one rural community's response to housing challenges as part of a broader regeneration strategy. The Waitaki housing strategy adopted principles of collective action and empowerment of community governance, leadership, organisations, and key stakeholders. As researchers allied to this process, we sought to understand the processes in train and, in the spirit of the co-construction knowledge, applied analytical skills and facilitation to the development of the strategy. We thus filled a skills gap that enabled the housing strategy to proceed effectively.

Over the course of the research, we learned several crucial things. The housing strategy showed that co-production of knowledge can be a very useful element in efforts to build local rural community capacity, especially for data collection and analysis. The common approach is for local government and local non-governmental agencies to rely on external sources of research, data, and consultancies to resolve local problems. Building local capacity in social analysis with the community and key stakeholders is fundamental to co-construction of knowledge at a local level. The housing strategy showed that a mix of operators: sector organisations; tribal organisations; agencies of local, regional, and central governments; researchers; and community groups can co-produce knowledge. A key success factor was strong leadership from Stronger Waitaki, which involved a range of stakeholders as well as local and external researchers to co-produce knowledge and work on content of the strategy, supported enthusiastically by the Waitaki District Council.

The co-construction of knowledge also requires jointly developing frameworks for assessment, evaluation and theories of change that challenge current rural regeneration thinking, creating knowledge that will be of use in other district regeneration activity. Here, we emphasise the importance of social impact assessment research to document experiences over time and apply that in future activity (Mackay et al., 2023; Taylor & Mackay, 2023). These feedback loops help to understand emerging issues, longer-term changes and innovative ways

of solving complex local issues, such as those associated with rural housing. Evaluation of what has happened with initiatives in particular localities is an important input to future activity, based on what works well, why and for whom (Taylor et al., 2021). This reflective practice involves a commitment to systematic and longitudinal research.

We note that monitoring and evaluation are also important to establish organizational accountability and social value in rural regeneration practice, as part of regular reporting on an initiative as well as efforts to look back on what was achieved. Monitoring and evaluation therefore become part of the information gathered to justify extended or new funding arrangements for regeneration.

This paper contributes to understanding of housing issues and provision in small rural towns and districts, places that are quite different from urban settings serviced by a large housing studies literature. The work we report links to the growing field of rural and small-town regeneration in many countries and elucidates the links between complex rural settings and the need to account for matters associated with governance, leadership, local initiative, and the changing role of localities in a globalising world. The paper also emphatically advocates for co-construction of knowledge and the very useful part researchers out of the academy can play by working closely with local stakeholders in a mutually beneficial way.

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