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Whakatāne District Council

Independent assessment report | October 2017*

An independent assessment report issued by the Independent Assessment Board for the CouncilMARK™ local government excellence programme. For more information visit www.councilmark.co.nz



*Period of Assessment March 2017



A measure
for better
community value.

Assessment Summary

AT A GLANCE



The Whakatāne district is steeped in history and culture. The region is rich in forestry resources and tourism is an important growth industry.



LARGE METRO

SMALL METRO AND LARGE PROVINCIAL

SMALL PROVINCIAL AND RURAL



REGIONAL

The current situation

Whakatāne District Council services a diverse range of communities, with Whakatāne, Edgecumbe and Ōhope showing growth that is not being experienced in smaller centres such as Murupara, and Matatā. The Council has a challenge in meeting the needs across its wide socio-economic range and its diverse urban/rural/township mix.

With 43 per cent of its population being Māori, the Council is actively involved with seven Iwi and has strong relationships through the Mayor and the Chief Executive. However, engagement with Ngāti Awa requires more work.

Dairying, fruit growing and processing, forestry, water bottling and small industries such as boat building are the main industries, although tourism is growing. Despite the district's closeness to Tauranga and Auckland, the spill-over economic benefit is only beginning to be realised.

The Council had a rapid increase in its debt levels in the early 2000s, and for the past five years has held commitments, concentrating on improving its finances and adopting a generally risk-adverse approach to projects. There is a strong emphasis on

affordability of rates and charges. With major and costly infrastructure projects required, the Council will need to carefully plan and manage community consultation and expectations so that it can deliver affordable services that enable development across the district.

Period of assessment

The assessment took place on 13 and 14 March 2017. Subsequent to this assessment, there has been major flooding in the district. The Council performed well through these events, although these events are not considered in this report.



\$1,700m
GROSS DOMESTIC
PRODUCT¹

SERVES

32,691

PEOPLE², A MIX OF
66.3% EUROPEAN/PAKEHA
43.5% MĀORI



POPULATION TREND
DECREASE

MAKES UP

1.657%

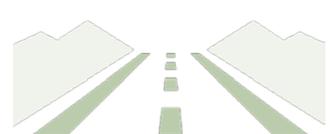
OF NEW ZEALAND'S TOTAL LAND AREA³
REPRESENTING WHAKATĀNE DISTRICT,
FROM OTAMARAKAU IN THE NORTH TO
THE CENTRAL VOLCANIC PLATEAU IN
THE SOUTH, AN AREA OF:

4,442 km²

RESPONSIBLE FOR

904km

ROADS⁴



Key learnings

The Council is actively working to meet service needs for a sparse population spread over several small and one larger population centre. Infrastructure, such as wastewater, that service several areas can be expensive for a council with self-imposed financial limits. Managing such a spread of population is challenging, even with the assistance of external funding. Decisions to proceed with large commitments has to be made with care and full transparency given the implication of large costs for individual ratepayers. As an example, this assessment found that councillors, senior staff and stakeholders held mixed views on the desirability of the Council committing to a large wastewater system for the district.

The Council has good examples of where community involvement and cost savings have been achieved to the benefit of the community. The partnership with Iwi Ngāti Manawa to provide animal control in Murupara, and using ambassadors from community boards to inform “freedom” campers of local policies, are regarded as successful approaches to regulating activities that many other councils struggle with. Bringing services in-house,

such as mowing, has resulted in more effective management and cost savings.

Whakatāne district has considerable potential for further tourist development. Ensuring that stakeholders, including Māori/Iwi, and the Council are united on the best form of tourism for the district will greatly assist its development and promotion.

¹ MBIE 2016

² Stats NZ Census 2013

³ DIA 2013

⁴ Ministry of Transport 2013/14

Assessment Summary

continued...

OVERVIEW

The Council is largely responsive to community needs and is performing competently in most assessment areas. There are major service needs for the district, and the Council has a low appetite for risk. With councillor commitment, a sound financial setting, requisite operating expertise, a continuous improvement ethos and community input, the Council is well placed to further increase its effectiveness.

RATING



Findings



COUNCIL HAS MADE RECENT IMPROVEMENTS ACROSS MOST PERFORMANCE AREAS. FURTHER AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT ARE LARGELY WITHIN THE COUNCIL'S GOVERNANCE, FINANCIAL, SERVICE AND ENGAGEMENT CAPABILITIES.

Councillors are generally competent, and executive and staff are committed to responding to community needs and delivering effective and some innovative services.



THE COUNCIL MAINTAINS LOW DEBT, AND LARGELY HAS CONSTRUCTIVE STAKEHOLDER AND COMMUNITY RELATIONSHIPS.



TO FULLY ACCOUNT FOR AND MAXIMISE THE EFFECTIVENESS OF SERVICES, IMPROVEMENTS ARE REQUIRED IN COUNCILLOR EVALUATION AND TO ENSURING THE COUNCIL'S RESOURCES ARE ADEQUATELY MANAGED.

Making these improvements will better equip the Council to better manage high-cost large projects such as the proposed district sewerage system and renewal of aging infrastructure.

Commonly used terms

Term	Definition
Asset Management Plan	A tactical plan for managing a council's infrastructure and other assets to deliver an agreed standard of service.
Infrastructure	Local and regional roads, pathways and cycleways, drinking water, wastewater and stormwater assets, sports and recreation facilities (parks, sportsgrounds, green spaces etc), community and tourism facilities (playgrounds, public toilets, libraries, museums, galleries and public art etc), town centres, and other facilities.
Local Government Act 2002	The legislative act that provides a framework and powers for councils to decide which activities they undertake and the manner in which they will undertake them.
Long Term Plan	The document required under the Local Government Act that sets out a council's priorities in the medium to long-term.



Governance, leadership and strategy	Financial decision-making and transparency	Service delivery and asset management	Communicating and engaging with the public and business
Variable	Competent	Competent	Better than competent

STRENGTHS

The Council has a committed Mayor and councillors, and an effective Chief Executive, all of whom are community-driven.

The Council is managing debt well.

Service delivery is largely effective, with some innovations and .cost-savings achieved.

The Council has an open and effective channel of communications through to its community.

AREAS OF IMPROVEMENT

The Council needs to make sure its community clearly understands and supports the benefits of investing in large service projects.

For full accountability, the Council's internal and external performance measures should be aligned.

The Council could benefit from restructuring the Audit and Risk Committee so that it becomes a representative committee of the Council and is chaired by an independent member.

More attention should be paid to delivering the capital works programme on time.

The earthquake status of the Council's offices needs to be fully understood.

The Council's departments need to work together with supporting systems.

There should be a formal annual evaluation of councillors, to identify areas for further training and needs.

Stakeholders consider the Council should have a stronger role in economic development for the district.

The relationship with Māori/Iwi needs further advancement including in economic development. From the Council's perspective, the relationship should be extended further than the Mayor and Chief Executive, so all councillors participate.

The Council should develop an overarching communications strategy that is linked to customer service.

Leading locally

Governance, leadership and strategy

Councillors are functioning well in some areas. A formal evaluation of their performance would assist in identifying areas for improvement which, once acted on, should lead to a higher-performing council.

Priority grading

Variable

< The Council has a strong and capable Mayor and Chief Executive, who work well together. However, the full potential of this Council is somewhat limited by the mixed capability of councillors. >

It is also limited by the capacity of third-tier managers, who expressed concerns over their lack of resources for executing plans effectively.

Setting the direction for the community

The Council's vision is for the Whakatāne district to be known as: "the place of choice for people to live, work and play" and is founded on four principles: responsibility, sustainability, enablement and affordability. Councillors feel they are the guardians of the vision, and they expect no change to the vision for the new Long Term Plan.

Six community outcomes are stated: effective leadership; economic development; community needs; quality services; valuing our environment and reliable and affordable infrastructure. Appropriate linkages between activities, projects and community outcomes are apparent. The annual plans and the Long Term Plan are adequately related.

Creating confident councillors

Most councillors were re-elected in 2016, with only two new councillors added to Council. The new councillors went through an induction programme.

There is little use of governance training through a recognised provider and only one councillor has attended an in-depth governance course. Most councillor training in the last two years has been "operational" or "technical" rather than specific governance training.

Councillor understanding of "good governance" appeared relatively weak, despite most serving several terms on the Council. There is budget available for supplementary training, but few councillors had or planned to undertake further governance development.

Councillors are committed to serving their communities well, however, there is no systematic self-assessment and councillors themselves showed little enthusiasm for self-assessment. As an alternative, the Council could consider moving to annual assessments and even formal external evaluation of councillors so their performance can be reviewed and they can learn from experiences and feedback.

Some councillors appear to struggle with the financial information presented to them, claiming it is "very hard to understand budgets and what is actually going on." The same applies to their understanding of the Resource Management Act.

Some Māori/Iwi felt that they needed a stronger relationship with all councillors, not just the Mayor and Chief Executive, and that there should be more collaboration and potentially a Māori committee.

Effective working relationships

The Mayor and the Chief Executive have a strong working relationship. The same is true of councillors and the Chief Executive who operates with an "open door" approach. The Chief Executive reports directly to the community.

Councillors enjoy good access to staff, subject to trust and rules of engagement that separate governance from operational activities.

Councillors were confident that succession planning for the Chief Executive was in hand.

Health and safety

The Council has a strong commitment to providing a safe working environment for staff and contractors. This is supported by a health and safety policy and manual, formal health and safety reviews, and public reporting of minutes.

The health and safety framework and its associated documentation are formally reviewed once every two years against the requirements for workplace safety-management practices. The Council's health and safety policy complies with all tertiary-level requirements.

The Council's management regularly reports to the full Council on health and safety, including reporting on health and safety in the risk register. The Council is committed to seismic strengthening of the Civic Centre to further reduce the earthquake risk that was not widely known by staff or councillors at the time of assessment.

Informing council decisions

Councillors were satisfied with the quality and level of information supplied by council officers. The Chief Executive is highly regarded by councillors, by direct-report executives, and by third-tier managers. One direct-report executive said the Chief Executive was their reason for continuing to work at the Council. The senior leadership team is open to innovation and new ideas.

The Council's departments generally work well together, although there should be better co-ordination between planning, finance and services to determine future demand.

Staff are recognised for good engagement through awards. Third-tier managers claimed to receive good support from senior management, although some views of "them versus us" were apparent. Some third-tier managers reported that there were too many projects in progress, and resources and communications across the organisation could be improved to break down barriers between departments.

Strengthening risk management

The Council has an Audit and Risk Committee with formal Terms of Reference. The Committee is chaired by the Mayor and all councillors are members of the committee. There is one independent member.

Neither the Mayor nor the councillors were concerned the Mayor was Chair of the committee, even after it was noted that it might be better practice for someone other than the Mayor to chair in order to potentially increase objectivity.

Strengths

The Chief Executive is capable and well-respected.

The Mayor and the Chief Executive work well together, with strong support and encouragement from both the community and the executive team.

The Council provides good recognition to staff for their work.

Areas for improvement

The Council would benefit from an improved understanding and application of good governance to upskill Councillors and to improve formal procedures at the Council.

A formal annual evaluation process for councillors, possibly through an external provider, could help give councillors a professional and objective perspective of their performance, lead to suitable professional development opportunities and further improvements in teamwork.

The Council should consider restructuring the Audit and Risk Committee so it becomes a committee of the Council, structured along the lines of best practice and chaired by an independent member.

The Council would benefit from clarification of resource allocations and performance expectations for third-tier managers to resolve concerns over their work load.

Investing money well

Financial decision-making and transparency

The Council has returned to a fiscally conservative position with prudent management of debt and risk that better reflects core funding from a reasonably static revenue base. However, if large projects are approved, even with possible funding from central government, they will increase Council debt levels.

Priority grading

Competent

< The Council has taken the past five years to recover from a series of considerable rises in rates. Its financial management is now generally prudent, resulting in lower rate increases and adequate delivery of core services. >

The Council's intention to embark on a major capital investment programme will introduce considerable financial cost and risk that will require close and ongoing attention, in terms of both the initial decision-making and the later monitoring of the effects of those decisions.

Assessing the financial data

The Chief Financial Officer expressed a desire to move to 30-year and eventually 50-year financial strategies in order to fund inter-generational needs.

The Council states its financial strategy and reporting comply with the requirements of the Local Government Act.

Recently, finance team members visited the Council's infrastructure assets including the water treatment plant. These visits have led to increased knowledge and awareness, resulting in greater understanding of strategy.

To ensure that rigorous analyses of all potentially viable strategic options are completed before preferred options are selected, the

finance team needs to have an integrated role in the Council's business case development.

Financial reporting follows generally accepted practices, including the production of monthly reports. As such, both internal and external financial reporting is adequate. However, reporting to councillors could be clearer as councillors have found it difficult to interpret the reports. A candid discussion between councillors and the Council's management would be helpful for understanding how reports could be made clearer.

Being clear and transparent

There are some concentrations of power in the Council's Audit and Risk Committee that should be addressed. The Mayor is also the Chair of the Committee, and the Mayor and the Deputy Mayor hold the delegated power to recommend the name of a person to be appointed as the independent member.

Addressing financial risk

A comprehensive set of financial documentation and policies is in place to support the Council's risk and control functions. Its risk policy is based on the ISO 31000 standard, and further refinements are planned.

The Council reports on individual risks. However, Council staff informed the assessors that a holistic perspective is sometimes lacking. To ensure overall risk is assessed and outlined, the Council must have the best understanding of its strategic options, or strategic impact for large projects in particular. Projects such as the proposed Matatā wastewater scheme represent a considerable risk to the Council, as its final total financial outlay is uncertain and its viability depends on shared funding with central government agencies.

In 2016, the Council introduced an innovative project to manage a known risk more effectively. The "dog control" project in Murupara is a partnership project with the local Māori/Iwi.

An independent review of the risk management framework, and of the operating and strategic risks reported to management and the Council, could provide additional confidence that all relevant risks are being reported and appropriately mitigated.

Balancing the budget

The Council has a zero-based approach to budgeting. Overall, budget managers deliver appropriate information in a timely manner, although third-tier managers have reported resourcing difficulties.

The Council has not always been able to complete capital projects within a given financial year, resulting in significant under-expenditure and the carrying forward of the unspent amount into future years. The Council intends to present unbalanced budgets in the future.

Meeting financial targets

The Council does not have a credit rating as the scale of its borrowings does not require one. However, the Council may need to apply for a credit rating if it embarks on a major infrastructural update and new strategic projects such as the Matatā wastewater project.

In the last two years, the Council has addressed audit matters in a timely manner and there have been no adverse opinions in the audit reports.

The Council meets financial-prudence benchmarks on rates affordability, debt ratios and multiple income streams. However, with changes forecast for the district's population and therefore its rating base from property, further improvements in the Council's financial management and risk management may be needed. Improvements will also be necessary if the Council takes on significant debt to fund major infrastructure projects.

Rates debt is being managed through internal processes. While this in hand, the Council should continue to monitor its rates debt closely, especially if it increases as a percentage of rates revenue, as this will create pressure elsewhere.

Financial reporting to the community through the Long Term Plan, Annual Plan and Annual Report is generally easy to read and interpret.

Strengths

The Council has emerged from a period of high rate increases, and has turned high expenditure into a more stable financial management and lower rate increases.

The Council has a clear and balanced financial strategy. It has clearly stated its intention to adopt an unbalanced budget in the future.

The Council meets its financial prudence targets.

Areas for improvement

The Council should ensure its financial risks, including increased debt and rating impacts, are fully assessed for all capital projects.

The Council should fully inform its residents and customers in statutory documents of capital project non-completions and allocated funding carried over into the next financial year.

The Councillors would benefit from improved clarity in presentation of the financial reports.

The Council would benefit from a more integrated and strategic assessment of risks and risk reporting.

Delivering what's important

Service delivery and asset management

The Council has improved its service delivery through mostly in-house planning and oversight. This approach has been extended to the management of large capital projects. As well, innovation in the delivery of non-infrastructure services has led to novel solutions and cost savings.

Priority grading

Competent

< Whakatāne District Council has undertaken significant changes to improve its service management, delivery and monitoring. Many contracted and dislocated services have been moved in-house, allowing improved Council oversight. >

These improvements are expected to assist the Council in several areas, including: upgrading an aging infrastructure responding to demands that will result from a gradual increase in the district's growth; responding to the requirements of National Policy Statements and meeting ever-growing consenting requirements.

Though the Council agrees it needs greater strategic alignment in planning services, knowledge of its assets is generally good. For example, the Council has asset management plans for strategic infrastructure activities and areas such Whakatāne Airport (a council controlled organisation) and other council infrastructure assets. Council is aware of the need to resource infrastructure, planning and enforcement at a level that will meet demands.

For non-core assets, there is good use of advanced business plans and s.17A reviews under the Local Government Act to increase service efficiencies. For example, mowing services have been brought back in-house, and this move is projected to save \$1.35 million over 10 years. Innovation in animal control and freedom camping enforcement is also increasing efficiencies.

Planning and evaluating service goals

The past approach to infrastructure has been opportunistic in nature, resulting in a lack of strategic coherence between infrastructure activities and the Council's strategic direction. The Council is now using asset management plans to achieve a more strategic approach, and these plans are being developed in-house, with more input from areas within the Council. Consequently, there is a greater sense of ownership of asset planning and management across the Council. The Council has also established a Water Management Board to bring governance closer to operations.

Asset management plans are the main drivers for the Long Term Plan's infrastructure component, and for the 30-year Infrastructure Plan. They have been developed for the main infrastructure areas. Council staff agreed there was more work to be done on strategic direction, and that there is a need to further integrate infrastructure planning with the Long Term Plan. For example, stronger linkage between spatial and infrastructure planning is required. A strategic direction is being developed for drinking water, stormwater and wastewater. For transport planning, staff acknowledge the need to reframe provision of all major services through a business case approach.

The District Plan which began in 2010 is now coming out of review and is being updated regularly.

The influence of government issued National Policy Statements on the levels and quality of service, asset management plans and the District Plan is unclear to Council, and clarity is being sought from central government.

Assessing capability and capacity

Levels of service are largely assessed through community satisfaction surveys (which attempt to evaluate the quality of services) and through feedback from elected community and Council boards. Satisfaction levels are generally in the upper quartiles, although water quality and stormwater show higher levels of dissatisfaction compared to other services. The Council is beginning to use external strategic studies to identify levels of service requirements, for example, using the Bay of Plenty

Regional Council's modelling of stormwater across the district to inform its Three Waters Roadmap. In addition, staff see the benefit of greater use of spatial plans to help identify likely future areas of demand for services.

A management plan for council reserves is currently being workshopped, before public consultation. Public volunteers are also used to "mystery shop" council facilities and answer survey questions on quality of service provided.

A similarly innovative approach is underway with freedom camping enforcement. To help ensure compliance with its rules on freedom camping, the Council has appointed ambassadors from community boards to inform and work with freedom campers at designated sites. This is in preference to infringement fines. However, where needed, breaches are dealt with by security officers.

Generally, the district has ageing infrastructure. The Council's asset knowledge varies from "good" on roading and wastewater to "average" on drinking water loss. Drinking water quality meets statutory requirements.

At the time of the assessment, assessors were informed that the earthquake ratings of the Council's offices – which are variously reported at between 19 and 28 per cent of the standard – were not known by the Mayor, councillors and most of the staff.

The Whakatāne harbour bar has experienced silting and build-up, which prevents deeper-hulled vessels from crossing it. The tourist vessel operating from Whakatāne to White Island is now using a twin-hulled vessel to cross the bar, and suction methods are being considered to deepen the harbour. However, there are cultural issues for Māori/Iwi in dredging and interfering with sacred rocks. Resolution will require the Council to balance cultural and commercial interests for the harbour.

The Council has recently reviewed its asset management and service provision, and some services have been moved in-house.

There has been restructuring in three waters management, with managers being appointed for capital projects, operations and planning, and consent management (which now takes around 30 per cent of consenting time/cost). However, third-tier managers said that the introduction of a number of new systems, plus new projects, has put pressure on their capacity to maintain business as usual.

Other examples where significant savings on service delivery have been identified and implemented include a new tender/contract for a kerbside recycling collection shared with the town of Kawerau. A s.17A comparison of in-house to external provision of services for the Whakatāne Aquatic and Fitness Centre has resulted in greater understanding of the cost of service by Council compared with external providers.

Evaluating asset effectiveness

For Whakatāne and Ōhope, there are eight to 10 hours of drinking water available in an emergency. Staff agree that 48-hour storage is desirable, although contingency plans exist to pump other supplies into Whakatāne and Ōhope, if required. A new bore water supply is also being considered.

The quality of drinking water is a public issue, with salt water contamination occurring during high tide at the river intake in Whakatāne. While salinity reaches the water treatment plant during periods when river flows are extremely low, the Council has an emergency raw water intake upstream to mitigate the risk and ensure water meets national standards. The Council has identified the possibility of algal bloom in the water supply as a major risk for drinking water. Murupara water is non-chlorinated and unmetred, and the Council says neither it nor the community requires disinfection at source, however the Council is considering chlorinating the scheme. Testing of artisan water sources shows that Murupara water meets standards, but testing is not undertaken daily.

This assessment was undertaken prior to the floods in April and May 2017. In 2013, low-lying areas of Whakatāne experienced serious flooding because pumping stations did not cope with river overflows. Improved stop banks and pumping stations have been installed since. Further work is underway especially in light of the flood that occurred subsequent to this assessment.

A major issue is the review of the Matatā wastewater scheme. The original scheme was not approved by the Environment Court, so a proposal for an integrated system is being developed. This would link wastewater from Matatā, Edgecumbe and Whakatāne, which has a consented outlet to the sea from an upgraded treatment station. Project funding depends on contributions from the Bay of Plenty Regional Council and central government as well as from the Council itself. At the time of the assessment, staff questioned whether all the options were on the table and if the trade-offs between financial and engineering merits of the integrated proposal versus the treatment of wastewater locally at Matatā have been considered adequately.

The Council has good knowledge of local roads and a constructive relationship with the NZ Transport Agency (NZTA) exists. The Council is responsive to local needs, and is revising its policy of not sealing some roads. In general, transport needs are moving to being assessed on a business case basis – for example, NZTA's business case criteria are being used for SH38 to Lake Waikaremoana, which is being co-ordinated between the Council, the local Māori/Iwi, the Wairoa District Council and NZTA.

The recent flooding in the district, were generally well-handled by the Council (and not covered by this assessment and not caused by the stormwater system), further demonstrates the need for services that meet community needs and expectations.

Addressing regulation

In 2015/16 there were around 600 new building consents issued for the district, and a higher number are expected for 2016/17. The Council is part of the “Lakes Cluster” of building inspection services which are shared with other districts in the Bay of Plenty region. The Council will join the ALPHA system of online consenting when it is introduced.

Animal control is an area of innovation. The success of a negotiated approach with Māori/Iwi to reduce the number of horses roaming on roads in the Lake Waikaremoana area has led to a project with Ngāti Manawa in Murupara in which locals are trained to operate as dog control officers. Overall, the estimated number of serious dog incidents each year in the district, including dog bites, is around 170. There is zero tolerance of unsafe dogs.

Planning for future development

The Council has adopted a spatial plan for the Eastern Bay of Plenty, and its implementation is now being considered. It is also acknowledged that the plan needs to be shared widely across the Council, so that future demands for services can be better understood. Spatial planning can also influence the district plan and its rules. The Bay of Plenty Regional Council has developed modelling on hazards and there is scope for the District Plan to use this information.

Generally, future residential development is constrained by the lack of available suitable flat land in growth areas such as Whakatāne and Ōhope. There has been development of the Council-owned Piripai block for residential growth, as well as residential developments at Shaw Road/Huna Road and of industrial land at Mill Road. These new developments incur additional infrastructure costs, but low development contributions are payable by developers, although development infrastructure is on a cost-recovery basis.

Strengths

Governance oversight has been brought closer to delivery.

The Council has become more effective in service strategy, management, measurement and delivery.

The use of business cases and s.17A reviews has improved efficiencies and saved money.

Innovative approaches to animal control and freedom camping enforcement have increased compliance.

Areas for improvement

The Council would benefit from assessing the status of ageing infrastructure and the associated significant replacement costs against a largely fixed income and low cost rating base.

Council would benefit from ensuring that planning, financial and infrastructure needs are carefully considered and integrated into options for future capital projects.

The Council would benefit from linking strategy, planning and measurement to the Long Term Plan.

The Council should link spatial planning to more strategic asset management plans.

Completion of significant infrastructure and residential projects will further demonstrate council value to the district.

The Council should ensure all Councillors and staff are fully informed on the earthquake rating and status of all of its buildings.

The Council should ensure sufficient resources to meet service needs and changes to systems.

Listening and responding

Communicating and engaging with the public and businesses

The Council performs well in this area, and could perform even better by having a stronger strategic focus that includes customer services.

Priority grading

Better than competent

< The Council is advanced in its practice of communications and engagement, especially at the tactical level. Strategic communications and engagement are important to the Council's relationships, particularly with business and Māori/Iwi. >

A more strategic focus (which would include measuring communications and engagement to understand their effectiveness) should lead to improved alignment between customer services and communications.

It would also help all areas of the Council to be consistent in its messaging.

Planning effective engagement

The Council has a tactical approach to communications and uses a range of successful tools, including its award-winning website. It also has good media relationships. However, there is an acknowledged need for an overarching communications, engagement and digital strategy to lift its communications by explaining the "why" of communications.

Council messaging would benefit from greater linkage between strategy and tactical operations. Currently, there is little strategic alignment between communications and customer services messages.

Key performance indicators for communication are largely based on the external satisfaction survey (including media and social media coverage). Reputational issues such as trust and credibility are not measured.

It is also acknowledged that a well-constructed communications strategy, currently under development, will identify the right messages and channels to further promote tourism in the district.

Building relationships with Māori/Iwi

Relationships between the Council and local Māori/Iwi are generally positive for six of the seven Māori/Iwi in the district.

The relationship between Ngāi Tūhoe and the Mayor and Chief Executive is "easy, relaxed." Councillors have met at the main Tūhoe building Te Kura Whare, and there is room to develop the relationship further at councillor level. The relationship between Ngāti Awa and the Chief Executive appears to be amicable. However, tensions between Ngāti Awa and other parts of the council are apparent, especially when it seeks to advance developments with cultural and/or environmental implications.

Other stakeholders share the Council's frustration that projects such as the wharf redevelopment and adjacent precinct require action. It is clear that a gap exists between expectations of Ngāti Awa (in particular) and the Council. However, all parties agree there could be benefit in a strategic discussion about how the relationship between the Council and Ngāti Awa could be developed in a positive and beneficial direction.

This relationship gap is distinguished from regular forums between the Council and Iwi at Mayor and Chief Executive as well as management level, and a dedicated Council engagement officer. There is engagement and partnership between Iwi and the Council on animal control (with Ngāti Manawa) SH38 project (with Tūhoe) and the Matatā wastewater project (with Ngāti Rangitahi).

Building relationships with business

The Council tries hard to engage and encourage business as economic development is a top priority and tourism has major potential for the district. Businesses want the Council to be more "business centric" and to provide easy paths for business

development in the district (eg increasing promotion of tourism starting with a more strategic approach to messaging). There is a general feeling by business stakeholders that the Council is “soft” on Māori/Iwi and that this is sometimes a constraint on commercial development.

Business stakeholders have suggested the Council build up a development fund to grow a more vibrant community which can attract the “right kind of sticky business”, such as high-end tailored tourism that emphasises local experiences.

The gap between business, community and council interests appears narrow. A detailed analysis of stakeholder issues, for example through an independent audit of stakeholders, could help clarify common aims and be the first step in a closer working relationship between stakeholders and the Council.

Strengths

The Council’s communications are well developed. It has an award-winning website and its documents are clearly presented with good use of graphics.

The Mayor and Chief Executive have generally good stakeholder relationships.

The Council has positive media relationships.

Areas for improvement

The overarching strategy for communications and engagement currently under development will assist in focusing the Council’s everyday communications and messaging, and assist in defining broader promotion messages, for example in promoting Whakatāne as a tourism destination.

The Council would benefit from taking a strategic approach to relationship building, particularly with business and some Māori/Iwi.

The Council should look at ways of improving how it measures its communications. For example, through an independent stakeholder audit and through addressing issues of trust and reputation in its community satisfaction survey.

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