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Central Hawke's Bay District Council

Independent assessment report | November 2021*

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



**CENTRAL
HAWKE'S BAY**
DISTRICT COUNCIL



A measure
for better
community value.

* Period of assessment: October 2021

Downer

Assessment Summary

AT A GLANCE



Central Hawke's Bay is a largely rural area with strong ties to the land, tight communities and an increasing confidence in its future.



LARGE METRO

SMALL METRO AND LARGE PROVINCIAL

SMALL PROVINCIAL AND RURAL



REGIONAL

The current situation

Central Hawke's Bay District Council is a progressive council with a deep commitment to serve and support the residents of Waipawa, Waipukurau and surrounding rural communities.

- > Under the leadership of a new mayor, elected member group and chief executive, the Council embarked on a journey in 2017 to undertake an ambitious programme of improvement.
- > A new vision for the community was developed and all aspects of the Council's governance and operational functions were reviewed.
- > There are many encouraging signs for Council, which has substantially advanced its approach since the last CouncilMark™ review. Council's reputation is growing, both locally and regionally. Support for the Council amongst stakeholders is now strong.
- > A new Long-Term Plan for the period 2021–2031, which was developed in consultation with the community, sets out a significant investment programme to rebuild critical infrastructure and deliver services to meet community expectations.
- > Council is working closely with regional and national agencies to deliver a wider range of community services. Feedback from the community indicates support for the Council is strong and widespread.

Period of assessment

The assessment was undertaken over a two-day period at the Council offices, on 30 September and 1 October 2021.



\$39,889

GROSS DOMESTIC
PRODUCT PER CAPITA

SERVES

14,142

PEOPLE, A MIX OF
83.1% EUROPEAN/PAKEHA
23.7% MĀORI
2.9% PASIFIKA
2.5% ASIAN³



POPULATION TREND
GROWTH

MAKES UP
1.2%

OF NEW ZEALAND'S TOTAL LAND AREA
REPRESENTING **CENTRAL HAWKE'S BAY
DISTRICT**, THE AREA FROM PUKEHOU IN
THE NORTH TO TAKAPAU IN THE SOUTH,
AND FROM THE WESTERN RUAHINE
RANGE TO THE PACIFIC COAST IN THE
EAST. AN AREA OF:

3,332 km²

RESPONSIBLE FOR

1,265km

ROADS



Key learnings

The Central Hawke's Bay District Council has undergone a transformation over the past three to four years. Today, Council's engagement with the community and understanding of community needs is comprehensive. Council has the political will and management drive to respond and deliver to identified needs. Its actions are highly aligned with the purpose of local government.

- > Council's vision, *Central Hawke's Bay: Together We Thrive!* *E Ora Nga Tahi Ana!* provides the foundation for all decision-making. "Thrive" is visible and is well recognised and understood in the community. "You would have to have been hiding under a rock if you didn't know what it means."
- > Council is well attuned to community feedback with extensive participation evident – engagement and feedback mechanisms enable continuous checking and reworking of plans as needed.
- > The Executive Leadership Team's drive is overt; they have high expectations (self and staff) and place a high value on working "at pace". Staff are highly supportive of their leadership and the workplace operates on a "high trust" model.
- > Council actively seeks to work across all areas of community wellbeing and is committed to meeting community needs. It makes the "local" in "local government" real.

1 <http://www.mbie.govt.nz/info-services/sectors-industries/regions-cities/research/modelled-territorial-authority-gross-domestic-product>

2 <http://www.stats.govt.nz/Census/2013-census/data-tables/population-dwelling-tables.aspx>

3 http://www.localcouncils.govt.nz/lcip.nsf/wpg_URL/Profiles-Councils-by-Name-Index?OpenDocument

4 <http://www.transport.govt.nz/ourwork/tmif/infrastructureandinvestment/ii002/>

Assessment Summary

continued...

OVERVIEW

Council's strong dedication to lifting its performance is paying off. Stakeholders said Council is "punching above its weight". The effectiveness of its strategy, processes and leadership matches that of larger councils with considerably more resources.



Findings

1.

Elected members are visible and respected in the community: they listen and work alongside residents.

Elected members actively elicit feedback from residents, via town hall meetings, in-home meetings and one-on-one discussions, to learn about problems and needs.

2.

Management and staff are committed to smart thinking and delivering "at pace".

Management's intent to deliver on ambitious goals with limited resources is both strategic and direct. A "high trust" culture is apparent amongst staff. Management and staff alignment and commitment is impressive.

3.

Council fronts the issues.

Council recognises that mistakes do happen from time to time. When they do, problems are acknowledged and remedial action is taken. Communication is open and honest to ensure the community understands what is happening. The community is appreciative of this approach.

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 (LGA 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 LGA 2002 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
Stand out	Performing well	Performing well	Stand out

STRENGTHS

Council is recognised within the community for its leadership and positive contribution.

Through exemplary communication, the community is aware of Council’s plans and direction, and infrastructure and service delivery challenges.

Elected members and executive leaders work well together and respect each other. Council staff are well-engaged and highly motivated to meet and exceed service delivery expectations.

The 2021-2031 Long Term Plan (LTP) addresses some big issues and represents the continuing arc of development as the organisation strives to meet service delivery expectations.

Community support to invest in critical infrastructure is high.

Together We Thrive! E Ora Nga Tahi Ana! is well-recognised, both amongst staff and in the community, as the unifying factor that underpins all Council activity.

Ratepayers’ understanding that rate increases are needed to fund critical infrastructure developments is high.

AREAS OF IMPROVEMENT

Collaboration between Council and tangata whenua requires further development, especially at the marae level.

Council’s approach to health and safety is not adequately encompassing or holistic, requiring an enhanced focus on strategy and “officer” obligations.

Council will need to keep its same “clear sightedness” with impending Three Waters and other local government reform.

The review and development of its regulatory compliance functions needs to be seen through.

Council needs to maintain focus on developing the quality and use of asset information.

Leading locally

Governance, leadership and strategy

Central Hawke's Bay District Council is well led by a capable mayor and chief executive. Council leaders have an excellent understanding of issues across the community and good progress is being made to meet service delivery needs and expectations.

Priority grading

Stand out

< Council is operating well under the leadership of an experienced mayor. Elected members are working well as a team, and they display high levels of motivation to make a positive difference across the district. >

Setting the direction for the community

Central Hawke's Bay Council has a strong and coherent vision in place. "Thrive" was developed in 2016-2017, following the election of the current mayor and after thorough consultation with the community. Widespread recognition of "Thrive", and what it means, is apparent amongst the leadership, staff and across the community.

Governance documents such as the overall vision, long-term plan, policies, annual plan and asset management plans are comprehensive and well linked. Together, they communicate the Council's aspirations for the community, operational priorities and how outcomes will be achieved.

"Pace" has emerged as a lived value. This is significant given the extent of change required to lift Council performance. However, some stakeholders, including tangata whenua, said caution is required to ensure Council takes everyone on the journey with them.

Elected members recognise that current low levels of debt will come under pressure as a significant capital works programme gets underway. However, community support to repair, replace and extend the capacity of core infrastructure is high. The new wastewater treatment plant and associated infrastructure is an example of high-quality engagement.

Conducting Council business

The "Thrive" vision provides a foundation for Council business – whether in its approach to delivery of services through its network assets or the delivery of community-based projects. The ELT meet twice per month – once with an operational focus and once with a strategic focus. Adaptive delegations are used to ensure decisions can be made at the appropriate level.

Working relationships with the elected member group and with the ELT are excellent. The Mayor and Chief Executive both have strategic mindsets, and they tackle issues head-on. High levels of watching for blind spots are apparent. Active enquiry, challenge of past practices and the use of external experts enable Council leaders to minimise bias when considering problems.

Stakeholders report that changes within the Council over the past few years (leadership, strategy and operational delivery) "have been transformational".

Building capability and teamwork

Commitment to ongoing professional development amongst the elected members and ELT is high. A comprehensive induction programme is in place to support incoming elected members. Professional development activities cover both technical and governance topics, and there is a strong emphasis on people, culture and behaviour.

Elected members recognise the importance of succession for political leaders, to the extent possible in a democratic tradition.

To date, self-assessment techniques have been used to evaluate elected member performance. As a group, elected members are open to a formal and comprehensive external review, and planning to conduct such a review is underway.

Elected members appear to work well as a team, with a commitment to the tenet of collective responsibility. They debate issues openly but support the decision of the group once the decision is made.

A strong sense of 'team' is also apparent amongst staff, and there is an obvious appreciation of diversity and inclusiveness.

Focusing on health and safety

Central Hawke's Bay District Council has a comprehensive health and safety framework in place. Staff understand the importance of good health and safety practices, and they maintain high levels of awareness through their working day.

While health and safety reports are presented to the Risk and Assurance Committee, the health and safety culture so visible within the organisation does not appear to extend to governance. The focus is somewhat tactical. The extent to which the elected members were familiar with their responsibilities under legislation was unclear to the assessors.

The chief executive acknowledged that there is a disconnect in delivery of the health and safety improvement program, with the programme being led from the "bottom up" and little emphasis at this point on 'officers' meeting their obligations and setting the overall tone. It is clear health and safety is important to the Council, but refinements are needed to ensure a more encompassing and holistic approach to health and safety.

Responding to risk

The Council's Risk and Assurance Committee (RAC) is chaired by an independent member who was appointed to the Committee in 2019. Terms of Reference are in place, and good progress is being made to ensure the RAC functions well and high quality advice is provided to elected members. Management of the RAC is thorough and the RAC is active and seeking to do the right work.

Elected members on the RAC ask good questions, although some display a tendency to focus on operational detail rather than their governance role, which is the high-level oversight of risk and response. While maturing, the RAC's maturity and effectiveness will be tested as Council begins to implement the 2021–2031 LTP.

Consistent with our findings above, an area that would benefit from further attention by the RAC is health and safety. The Council's approach was described as "bottom up", which left the impression that health and safety may be receiving less governance attention than what might be envisaged by current legislation.

Collaborating with tangata whenua

The Council is working diligently to engage effectively and to secure Māori involvement in decision-making. It formally meets at least four times a year with the board of Te Taiwhenua o Tamatea and also meets with other Tamatea tangata whenua leadership. Māori leaders acknowledged Council efforts and that some progress has been made, but note high quality engagement is yet to be achieved.

For tangata whenua, decisions are made at marae-level, and not all marae are ready or adequately organised to engage well. While Council has a desire to move quickly, Māori leaders place higher value on taking the time needed for considered discussions to make steady progress.

As a result, Māori involvement in decision-making is currently, less than it could be, despite both Council and tangata whenua desiring a strong collaborative approach to decision-making.

Managing the organisation

The Council is ably led by a capable chief executive. Informal comments from elected members, senior staff and external stakeholders indicate the chief executive is held in high esteem, even to the point of being a model of how a sector leader should lead. The chief executive has built good depth across the ELT to minimise any single points of exposure and to provide succession options when the chief executive role becomes vacant in the future.

A formal performance and individual development plan approach supports day-to-day management.

Informing Council decisions

Elected members and ELT members operate with high levels of transparency. Every Council meeting is held in public, except when 'public-excluded' is necessary due to confidentiality.

The ELT works hard to understand what elected members expect (within the bounds of statutory and regulatory requirements) and reports accordingly. However, some elected members said reports are too long at times.

Strengths

Council is led by a capable mayor and chief executive, both of whom are highly regarded by their teams, community leaders and stakeholders.

Council's governance and planning documents are both comprehensive and fit-for-purpose.

Council staff appear to be well-engaged and highly motivated to meet and exceed service delivery expectations.

Elected members work well as a collegial group, with a strong commitment to both understanding community needs and professional development.

Areas for improvement

Collaboration between Council and tangata whenua requires further development if the desired partnership in decision-making is to be realised.

While functional, Council's approach to health and safety is not adequately encompassing or holistic, requiring further focus on strategy and "officer" obligations.

Further maturing of the Risk and Assurance Committee's governance function is needed to enhance strategic decision-making.

Investing money well

Financial decision-making and transparency

Council's core premise is to meet expressed community need and to resolve issues inherent in historical operating and funding models. Commitment to secure adequate funding is high, but careful management will be required to ensure budgets are balanced in the future.

Priority grading

Performing well

< Council understands its financial position and service delivery challenges, and it has considered the financial implications of resolving these. Through clear communication with its communities, Council has developed a sound financial strategy. >

Planning and evaluating financial goals

Council has recently adopted its 2021–2031 LTP. The new LTP seeks to address a complex array of issues including historical austerity, underinvestment in critical infrastructure (both renewals and new plant) and artificially low rating. Signs of population growth in the Hawke's Bay also needed to be considered.

In its reformed approach to governance and management Council has discussed identified issues openly with the community. The exemplary consultation process provided the basis to discuss and gain support for an expansive but credible approach to prioritise and resolve critical issues. The resultant work programme will deliver a substantial correction on past financial and infrastructure policies, which were not sustainable.

Rates are expected to double over the next decade because of the commitments in the LTP. Expected debt is likely to increase beyond current prudential debt limits, which means Council will need to adopt a much higher debt to revenue limit and obtain a suitable credit rating. It also means that ratepayers will face substantial rate increases to fund critical projects and ensure future budgets are balanced.

Council's financial strategy, which it has determined to be prudent, seeks to maintain headroom for any unexpected events.

Active oversight and management of the financial strategy will be required to ensure the priorities and direction established by Council is delivered over the long term. That includes careful planning for the effects of the proposed Three Waters Reform and other initiatives that may impact local government services and delivery. Council's performance over the past year demonstrates it is positioned to respond well.

Being clear and transparent

The financial performance information that is provided to elected members, the ELT and activity managers is comprehensive and clear. Direct linkages are apparent between performance information and crucial service delivery plans, especially the capital works programme. All relevant information reported publicly is in a readily understood format.

Improvements to report quality have been made over the past two years to enable effective budget management and informed decision-making by activity managers and budget holders. Reports sighted were of a high standard.

Addressing financial risk

Council demonstrated high levels of awareness of the financial risks it faces as it seeks to both remedy poor historical financial practice — notably systemic underinvestment in asset networks and artificially low rating — and to prepare for population growth. The LTP clearly outlines the financial performance

parameters and associated risks including provision for funding headroom to cater for the unexpected.

There is an active, independently chaired Risk and Assurance Committee. The Committee receives comprehensive reporting and it monitors and oversees financial risk competently.

Meeting financial targets

Council has deliberately linked its financial objectives with strategic outcomes. These are clearly expressed in relevant documentation, and they are well understood throughout the organisation.

Stand out communication and consultation processes enables Council to discuss candidly and respond well to identified community expectations and infrastructure challenges, and to demonstrate how financial targets would be met.

Council has been very successful in raising non-ratepayer funding for its various initiatives. Strong central government relationships have enabled Council to secure substantial funding from several sources for significant projects. The additional funding has enabled important core infrastructure projects and community development initiatives to proceed much more quickly than would otherwise have been possible.

Council intends to continue to seek funding from external sources to expedite important community projects.

Council is aware of the affordability challenges it faces with its financial settings. While it is asking for increased ratepayer funding, it is also actively pursuing external funding to assist overall development of the community.

Strengths

Council's long-term planning process is thorough and financial plans and targets are aligned with service delivery objectives.

Council is actively planning for adequate and equitable ratepayer contribution to maintain overall financial sustainability.

A comprehensive suite of governance and management reporting and associated mechanisms are in place to monitor financial performance.

Staff are integrated into financial management activity.

Areas for improvement

The Risk and Assurance Committee needs to maintain a focus on meeting Council's financial targets.

Council will need to keep its same "clear-sightedness" with the impending Three Waters and other local government reforms.

Delivering what's important

Service delivery and asset management

Council's approach to service delivery has been transformed in recent years. It is now operating with a high degree of professionalism. Systems and processes have been improved to ensure services are delivered at expected levels.

Priority grading

Performing well

< Council's commitment to service delivery has been critical to its transformation. Best practices are now embedded along with the flexibility for innovation to further improve service delivery effectiveness.>

High quality service delivery is fundamental to Council's aspirations as it strives to meet the service delivery expectations of residents and businesses across the district.

Planning and evaluating service goals

Council is serious about service goals. A comprehensive information database has been established to enable effective performance monitoring and benchmarking.

In 2018-2019, Council started a key consultation with communities: the *#thebigwater story* initiative. The results of that consultation led to a fundamental change in Council's planning and development of service performance goals. These are now consistent with the community's aspirations for both service levels and environmental outcomes.

Council has an effective system in place for monitoring performance. A dashboard system is used to provide quick and

insightful analysis of performance with the opportunity to investigate areas of interest or concern more closely, if desired.

Council is making good use of spatial information to analyse data, monitor service performance and inform decision-making processes. Spatial data is also used to identify emerging trends such as those parts of the district experiencing growth (or decline) — a critical insight that should enable Council to respond well as demand for services changes over time.

Council has planned a significant capital investment programme over the next decade. Process and systems improvements are being established, and new management tools are being deployed, to ensure reporting is adequate to support the effective management and delivery of the work programme.

Assessing capability and capacity

Council has made a significant investment in its people capacity and capability. The new style of leadership adopted promotes a positive workplace culture and helps ensure staff effort is aligned with service delivery targets and outcomes.

Results to date are positive. Assessors noted that staff awareness of, and support for, Council's vision and direction of travel is high. Staff mentioned "Thrive" on many occasions.

Importantly, leaders and staff recognise and accept Central Hawke's Bay District Council is a small rural council. Staff turnover is expected as individuals pursue career aspirations. Leaders will need to continue to be diligent to ensure appropriate staffing is available to complete proposed work programmes.

Council leaders have made good use of the principles of partnership and collaboration as they have sought to build capacity and capability. The tripartite joint venture with Veolia and Recreation Services Limited, and the professional services contract with Stantec, illustrate what is possible. Under these arrangements, the integration of contractors and staff is seamless. Staff are co-located at Council offices and a strong sense of "team" and a single service culture are apparent.

Council's innovative approach to building capacity and capability has added resilience to the management of core network asset and service delivery functions. Through these arrangements, Council has access to national capability while retaining local management of delivery. The community simply see one integrated service.

Assessing service quality

Council has a strategic approach to service and service quality. This includes the core network asset services, community services as well as community development. Council is active in seeking better outcomes for its community across the range of well-beings.

Council's strong consultative culture, both with local communities and regional and national bodies, has contributed to the development of services that meet community needs and are aligned with regional and national priorities. Council's performance in this area has been well-received. External stakeholders said Council's collaborative approach has enabled it to "punch above their weight."

Examples of effective collaborations include those with NZTA Waka Kotahi (transportation), the Mayor's Task Force for Jobs, Local Government New Zealand, the Ministry of Social Development (sustainable employment) and the Hawke's Bay Regional Council (alignment with regional strategies). Council's success in securing external funding from agencies, such as the Provincial Growth Fund, reflects broad thinking about what is required to service and to meet community well-being.

Sound asset management is in place. Integrating the financial system with asset management is being adopted to further empower activity managers. Further improvements are expected as the new Spatial Plan for 2020 through 2050 is implemented.

Survey tools are used to monitor customer service provision and quality. A range of feedback loops are being implemented to check the service received by the community meets expectations, and for analysis and corrective action if service is inadequate.

Infrastructure

Council's approach to transportation recognises the importance of the rural roading network. The current focus is on safety and efficiency. However, monitoring is underway to inform future plans to respond to emerging issues, such as population growth, public transport and multi-modal mobility preferences.

"Three Waters" dominates Council's current overall asset management strategy. The *#thebigwaterstory* reflects Council's approach to dealing with the major historical issues, including

providing for adequate management and investment in wastewater infrastructure. The process of developing a solution has been thorough and is a large feature in Council's 2021–2031 LTP. Notwithstanding this, Council carries approximately \$10 million of costs from prior failed systems.

Solid waste services are provided by Council through kerbside, transfer and landfill services. The service has been subjected to a full Section 17a review, and an upgraded approach is being funded through the 2021–2031 LTP. The "Waste Free CHB" initiative is the centrepiece of Council's way of thinking about solid waste.

Community services

Council faces some challenges with its building infrastructure, most notably the closed earthquake-prone library in Waipukurau. This has had a material impact on the delivery of community services. Council is using strategic and tactical levers to respond to identified problems, some of which are addressed in the 2021–2031 LTP.

Council is reviewing the nature and extent of the community services it provides. This includes the role of a library in a community, and the scope of services needed to support rural communities.

Council has lofty ambitions for community development. Several initiatives have been trialled to assess their suitability, and most have been well-received. Further work is underway to determine the viability of retaining each initiative. To date, most of these trials have been supported by external funding obtained through excellent external relationships.

Addressing regulation

Council's consenting performance is managed well through its dashboard reporting. However, Council's approach to consenting and inspections is subject to continuous review and refinement to ensure it continues to respond well as needs change. By way of example, local demand to create subdivisions is high, with the number of lots already substantially exceeding what was anticipated in the 2021–2031 LTP, creating a need to focus on meeting demand.

Compliance monitoring is an area under review, with the intention of adopting a new compliance strategy. Other areas under review include bylaws. Some of the issues are complex, most notably freedom camping. However, staff are seeking to manage the overhaul of current arrangements and development of new bylaws within the ethos of the Council, which includes community centricity and effective consultation.

Council's District Plan is undergoing a comprehensive review which is expected to be concluded in 2022. The work has been informed by advanced spatial planning, a clear understanding of service delivery expectations and a coherent community development strategy. The scope of work includes ensuring close alignment between expected growth sources of funding, in particular the approach to development contributions.

Considerable effort has been made to ensure the upcoming District Plan incorporates a specific te ao Māori perspective.

Establishing a business case for investments

Council has a strong sense of its investment direction, as set out in its Infrastructure Strategy. The approach is well integrated into overall service delivery and Council planning.

Council officers and elected members think clearly and analytically when considering major investment decisions. Assumptions are tested thoroughly. External stakeholders commended Council on its ability to develop and promote effective business cases and, importantly, to report project delivery well against the approved business case.

Strengths

Council's approach to service delivery, asset management and planning is integrated and community centric.

Council's collaborative approach to service delivery has enhanced capability and capacity and added delivery resilience.

Council has placed a high emphasis on wider well-beings and community development.

Communication with stakeholders, joint venture partners and the wider community is exemplary.

Council displays a high preparedness to acknowledge and respond to service delivery challenges.

Areas for improvement

Council's continual drive for improvement is strong. It is undertaking various steps in the development of its regulatory compliance functions which it needs to see through.

Community stakeholders appreciate Council's intent. They are eager that Council remains close to them to ensure all initiatives – often delivered at pace – do deliver sustainable outcomes.

Listening and responding

Communicating and engaging with the public and businesses

Council's engagement with the community and external stakeholders is exemplary. Staff commitment to communicate effectively with external stakeholders is high, and there is an acknowledgement that effective engagement with Māori groups needs more attention.

Priority grading

Stand out

< Council has an excellent understanding of community needs and expectations, and its efforts to engage effectively have been well-received. >

Planning for effective engagement

Council has a comprehensive Communications and Engagement Strategy for the period 2019–2021. An updated version, for the period to 2024, is currently being drafted.

The purpose of the strategy is to provide a framework for effective communication and engagement with stakeholders who interact with the Council. The strategy emphasises agility – flexibility to communicate through one or more traditional and digital channels, depending on the group or audience Council is addressing. Generally, Council channels are used for outbound communications and local community groups are used to disseminate information at the local level. Strong feedback loops are in place.

Community leaders and other external stakeholders report that the effectiveness of Council's communication and engagement is high, and this is supported by positive survey results.

Community engagement

The mayor and chief executive are both well-connected within the community, and they are respected as adroit communicators.

Council's proactive efforts to communicate with residents and business stakeholders are appreciated. However, some stakeholders indicated that, in its efforts to be transparent and open, Council sometimes erred on 'selling the story' at times.

A strong solution focus is apparent. Council staff understand that issues and problems do arise from time to time. When they do, staff seem willing to tackle tough issues head-on, and to speak plainly. If the problem is of Council's making, it will quickly acknowledge and accept responsibility, and present remedial options and plans to achieve a satisfactory resolution.

Council's engagement with the business community rates highly among stakeholders the assessors spoke with.

Business stakeholders were very supportive of the transformation work completed over the last few years. However, they also said the rate of change is high, and suggested Council staff should now consolidate and bed-in changes to ensure they are sustainable. They also indicated that the high pace approach seems to have led to some questionable decisions. For example, well-intended employment initiatives have missed the mark because they were not targeted appropriately.

Engagement with central government

Council is highly active in its attempts to engage well with central government. The Prime Minister and several ministers have taken up invitations to see first-hand the projects underway in the district to enhance well-being and deliver better infrastructure.

Several central government stakeholders spoken to by the assessors said Council documents are excellent, and that the quality and timeliness of both proposals and reporting is high.

The mayor and chief executive are also active on regional and national committees and initiatives. Though they fulfil different roles, the mayor and the chief executive work well together and are recognised by peers and others as being formidable and effective leaders.

Engagement with Māori

Māori leaders and Council leaders both display a strong desire to engage well to support the aspirations of all in the district, but especially Māori.

Conversion of intention to action is the next priority for the parties. Council has outlined how it would like to engage with tangata whenua. Currently, tangata whenua is still to form a view on how it wishes to engage with Council. Once this is completed, and alignment is achieved, more meaningful engagement should follow.

Māori leaders indicated they expect Council to engage at the marae level, not just via the board of Te Taiwhenua o Tamatea, because that is where substantive decisions are made. The mayor and chief executive acknowledge this expectation and note that this will be demanding on available resources.

A critical element will be alignment of expectations, especially around “pace”. Māori leaders are of the opinion that Council is trying to move forward too quickly. For tangata whenua, this particularly played out through a recent marae development programme sponsored through Council. They say they need time to think about options and the implications of options. Council needs to accept this and recalibrate its anticipated schedule accordingly if the good faith that is building is to remain and further progress is to be made.

Monitoring engagement performance

Council provides several different channels for stakeholder, community and resident engagement, including in-person, print media and digital (social media, webinars, online surveys, and the Council website, for example). Over the past four years, Council has grown its communications team significantly. Today, communications are an integral part of all Council activities and programmes.

A suite of digital tools has been commissioned to enable Council to monitor the effectiveness of communications and engagement activities. It is evident that Council places importance on these tools to ensure it has effective “feedback loops” with the community on its work – to either confirm or enable changes in its approach.

Resident opinion surveys are conducted annually, and the results are reported throughout Council up to and including the elected members.

Local media is encouraged to attend Council meetings, and media releases are provided for publication. Questions from media, such as during and following Council meetings, are recorded, as is the Council response.

Strengths

The mayor and chief executive are considered exemplary communicators and responsive to feedback.

Council leaders are highly regarded by central government officials.

Stakeholders appreciate Council’s positive mindset of quickly acknowledging and correcting mistakes.

Council makes excellent use of communications and engagement monitoring tools.

Areas for improvement

Council’s emphasis on transparency and openness produced an impression of ‘selling’ at times. Stakeholders appreciate stories but prefer facts to remain prominent.

Council needs to take stock to ensure changes are bedded-in and are sustainable.

Engagement with Māori is underdeveloped, especially at the marae level.

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