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Porirua City Council

Independent assessment report | July 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



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for better
community value.

* Period of assessment: October 2016

Assessment Summary

AT A GLANCE



Porirua City Council faces some distinctive challenges and is responding well to these challenges, with some areas of particular strength.



LARGE METRO

SMALL METRO
AND LARGE
PROVINCIAL



SMALL PROVINCIAL AND RURAL

REGIONAL

The current situation

Porirua City Council is facing a period of rapid change and numerous challenges, including:

- > The diversion of SH1 from the city through Transmission Gully;
- > A stagnant Central Business District retail sector;
- > A demand for significant infrastructure improvement; and
- > A relatively static ratepayer base.

The Council is responding to these challenges with fresh thinking and an open mind. The Council is moving to put in place more rigorous performance reporting, better developed business cases for investment, stronger project management and more robust asset management and infrastructure plans.

Period of assessment

The assessment was undertaken immediately prior to the October 2016 elections when a new mayor and six new councillors were elected. In addition, the Chief Executive and her senior management team have only been in place for a little over 12 months and are undergoing a change process.



\$1.4b
GROSS DOMESTIC
PRODUCT¹

SERVES

51,717

PEOPLE², A MIX OF
36.9% EUROPEAN/PAKEHA
26.2% PASIFIKA
20.8% MĀORI
6.4% ASIAN



POPULATION TREND
STABLE

MAKES UP

0.065 %

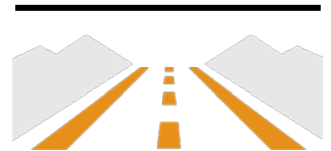
OF NEW ZEALAND'S TOTAL LAND AREA³
REPRESENTING PORIRUA CITY, FROM
KENEPURU THROUGH TO PUKERUA
BAY, AN AREA OF

175 km²

RESPONSIBLE FOR

247km

ROADS⁴



Key learnings

The Council recognises that improving its performance will require openness to new ideas and a willingness to adopt improved practices. Adopting these two approaches will enable the Council to grow both its residential and commercial ratepayer base and fund significant new infrastructure investment it needs. The Council has already commenced some new initiatives, but has a lot of work ahead of it. Key amongst the lessons learned from the assessment are:

- > *Strategy and planning:* In order to deliver an effective Long Term Plan, the Council needs to maintain its strategy over a sustained period, and ensure that there is evidence to support the problems being addressed and use business cases to justify the capital investments being made.
- > *Accountability:* Good public accountability requires the community vision and goals to be clearly and directly linked to a well-balanced performance framework. With this linkage the community will be better able to assess the progress being made towards those goals, and the value for money they receive from rates and other charges they pay.
- > *Capability:* The skills required to manage diverse operations and complex assets, and to deliver large-scale projects within local government, are ever increasing. The Council needs to strike a balance between engaging external expertise and continually developing its internal capability.

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

Porirua City Council faces some distinct challenges and is responding well to these challenges, with some areas of particular strength. Significant changes at the 2016 local body elections, and a relatively new management team, pose some risk to ensuring initial improvements are well-embedded by the Council.

RATING



Findings



In the short-term, the single biggest challenge facing Porirua are the tradeoffs which need to be made between service delivery, rates affordability and infrastructure investment. More significant reductions to either discretionary activities (ie not those defined as “core services” in s.11A of the Local Government Act), or the level of service provided for those activities, may need to be considered if sufficient investment is to be maintained in critical infrastructure while minimising rates

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.



Longer-term, the Council needs to ensure it has an effective strategy to grow both its commercial and residential ratepayer base, particularly in light of the re-routing of SH1 through Transmission Gully.



Numerous internal processes and structure need to be either put in place or strengthened, coupled with greater investment in the development of its staff and elected members, if the Council is to have sufficient internal capability to meet Porirua’s short and long-term challenges.



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

STRENGTHS

It is a council which has a strong vision and real ambition for its community.

Its finances are responsibly managed, and address the hard issues facing the city.

There is genuine and regular engagement with all sectors of the community.

The staff has a strong service ethic.

AREAS OF IMPROVEMENT

Clearer strategies and programmes for developing capability are needed, whether internal or external.

Elected members should better understand the business case for infrastructure investments and test management assumptions. An improved framework to better measure and report trends in Council performance, with reference to value for money considerations, is needed.

The Council should adopt an appropriate business case methodology, particularly where required to obtain central government funding for large infrastructure and other capital projects.

Leading locally

Governance, leadership and strategy

The Council vision is specific, ambitious, and articulated in a way that strikes a chord with their community.

There is cohesive political and executive leadership, which recognises the need for ongoing improvement in the Council planning and reporting documents.

Priority grading

Competent

< The vision and strategic priorities set by the Council demonstrate a strong understanding of their diverse community, their needs and expectations, and the challenges of meeting them. The Council also recognises that Porirua has unique features, but not unique issues.>

At the core, strong financial management and effective planning of their land and infrastructure needs will be the key activities that influence successful outcomes for the city. However, Porirua has the lowest number of rateable units relative to resident population in New Zealand and the highest dependence on rates as income. Accordingly, in order for its vision to be realised, stronger and more tangible links are needed between that vision and the day-to-day activities which ratepayers fund.

Vision, goals and strategy

The Council has developed four strategic priorities that are unique and recognise key features of their environment. They are extensively and regularly communicated to the community, and appear to be well-received. The vision has also undergone both subtle and material changes in language between the last two Long Term Plans. For the vision and strategy to be truly embedded within the community mind set, the details need to be consistently retained across electoral cycles.

Central to the Council strategy is the idea that the elected members and staff are advocates, influencers and enablers of the community, particularly in areas that Council cannot directly control (eg improvements to the education, employment and health of their children). They acknowledge that they need to “sharpen the evidence” as to how they in fact influence some of these outcomes.

Professional development for elected members

There has been no formal governance training, and it was acknowledged that the departure of more experienced elected members presents a risk to ensuring councillors continue to operate at an appropriate governance level. The past effectiveness of the working relationship appears to have been the result of good leadership and constructive relationships.

It is important that the new Council more formally and comprehensively addresses the induction process for elected members beyond an introduction to the Local Government Act. This includes establishing an annual self-review process, and managing the allocation of the training and development budget by either the Mayor or a committee of elected members.

Performance of elected members

It is apparent that there has been a constructive working relationship amongst the elected members in the past triennium. In addition to a code of conduct, elected members have established an informal understanding amongst themselves regarding expected standards of behaviour. They have engaged an independent facilitator in the past to assist with their planning, but have not conducted an annual self-review of their performance.

Relationship between elected members and the Chief Executive

With a substantially new council, this relationship is as yet untested. In the past, incorporation of the Council’s strategic priorities into the Chief Executive’s 2015/16 performance agreement (with actions and measures) has helped provide focus to this relationship.

Management

There has been significant management change through 2015/16 which has included changes to roles and structure. It is premature to say whether these changes have improved operational delivery, but it is apparent that the executive leadership is a tightly focused group. The elected members viewed these changes positively, but also considered that work remains to ensure that tier three and tier four management teams are meeting expectations of community and political responsiveness.

Finance, Audit and Risk Committee

The Council has an independent member on the Finance, Audit and Risk Committee, and the external auditor also attends meetings. Council acknowledges that there may be merit in an additional independent member, and for one of those two to chair the Committee. (Subsequent to this assessment, a new, highly capable chair has been appointed.)

Strengths

There is a clear and distinctive vision being presented to the community.

Progress towards the strategic priorities is gauged by a diverse range of measures.

Elected members have established an effective working relationship amongst themselves and with staff.

There is honest communication to the community of the challenges facing the city, leaving no doubt as to some hard decisions and areas for improvement required.

Areas for improvement

The Council needs to retain the same strategic priorities for a longer period so that the community can better monitor the Council's progress.

The community outcomes and indicators of success used by the Council should be ones for which they are responsible and held accountable for.

The accountability documents should be simpler and better highlight the progress to their vision and strategic priorities.

The accountability documents could be modified or supplemented with a simpler summary of future plans and past performance. Particular attention should be paid to present a medium-term perspective of Council performance (ie their "trajectory") as opposed to a snapshot in time.

A good induction process would benefit members to effectively carry out their duties.

Elected members should have, and manage, a separate training and development budget.

Investing money well

Financial decision-making and transparency

The Council is cost-conscious, and has a solid understanding of its financial issues. There is, however, room for improvement in the transparency of the financial reporting and how it goes about assessing the trade-offs between value and cost.

Priority grading

Better than competent

< Porirua has some distinctive financial challenges, and in general, the Council is doing a good job of both managing them and communicating what it is doing and why to its community.>

It does not, however, meet all of the required standards for councils, with the benchmarks for rates income affordability, rates increase affordability, and capital expenditure on essential services were missed in recent years. Operationally, the Council has a sound financial team who manages and reports their finances well.

There is an underlying tension between the Council's vision and the issue of rates affordability which needs to be better tested. The inherent limitations of Porirua's rating base are self-evident, but it does not follow that there are not more ambitious, albeit contentious, financial strategies for managing costs.

Finance strategy

The Council has clearly articulated to the community the financial challenges it faces – particularly the low number of rateable units relative to resident population, the low number of commercial ratepayers and the significant infrastructure improvements required. The annual reports demonstrate some of the trade-offs between service improvement and cost cutting that need to be considered, with options clearly presented as to what could be spent or saved on a number of matters.

One of the most significant transitional issues facing the Council is moving to a balanced budget. The need to rate for depreciation creates a significant affordability issue that is politically difficult to communicate to the residents. The Council has taken a responsible approach of not cutting rates to an extent that would put existing infrastructure at risk from under investment, and also compound economic challenges were the Council not to make new investments in key infrastructure, such as roading links to the new SH1 network through Transmission Gully.

Financial data

The quality of monthly financial reporting is good. The use of a "waterfall" to present overspends and underspends provides a succinct summary of key financial variances. There is also a concise summary of the reason behind any material budget variances. There is a pattern of high spends on both capital and operating expenditure towards the end of financial years. This suggests either inadequate management of capital and operational activities, or an inclination to "spend up" the remaining budget towards the end of a financial year. It is important for public confidence that these annual spikes are clearly explained.

The quality of financial reporting in the annual documents, while being compliant with statutory requirements, is not as satisfactory. As with the non-financial performance reporting, there is a lack of graphs and other visual aids to interpret performance, a lack of perspective on financial performance (future or past) over a meaningful period of time, and a lack of a succinct summary highlighting areas of poor and strong financial performance (eg whether the capital programme was accurately expended relative to budget, or clear explanations around significant financial variances.)

Transparency

The allocation of costs between public and private benefits is thoroughly outlined in the Council's Long Term Plan. However, the actual apportionment of these costs appears to be highly subjective with little empirical evidence to justify the ratios arrived at. The level of public benefit allocation to several areas, particularly those under community/recreational facilities, is lower than one would expect. It is unclear whether this represents political expediency or the general view of the community, but if it is the latter, it should be more transparently tested with ratepayers.

Risk and control function

The Council has an extensive risk assessment framework, and it includes the expected elements such as risk definition, risk identification, risk scoring and mitigation steps. However, the Council's Strategic Risks Register states that all risks are at the level targeted, and that only ongoing monitoring is required. Given the range of issues facing Porirua, there would be merit in a peer review to give assurance of the rigour of that assessment.

The code of conduct has been recently revised. While it improves on the 2004 edition, it could still more comprehensively and explicitly deal with probity issues, including conflicts of interests. Discussions with elected members did not demonstrate a strong appreciation of how to record and manage issues of probity/conflict, with the general feeling being that it was adequate either to not participate in discussions where conflicts existed, or withdraw from the meeting. Greater training, advice and reference to the relevant Office of the Auditor General (OAG) guideline publications are needed.

Budgeting

The budgeting process shows some rigour in terms of opportunities to make savings. It is apparent that affordability is at the forefront of the Council's thinking. However, budgeting would also benefit from being framed in a clearer strategic context.

In evaluating cost savings options, the Council should be clearly identifying whether a particular activity or level of service is particularly important in contributing to their long term vision and strategic priorities. Without this being a clear criterion in their financial decision-making, there is a risk that they may spend on matters that are relatively unimportant compared to the strategic priorities, or conversely, make cuts on activities that are important.

Strengths

The Council finance team has a strong understanding of the key issues and cost drivers.

There is a thorough monthly analysis and reporting of financial performance.

The Council has taken a responsible, long-term view of its financial planning, particularly with regard to balancing its budget and investing adequately in critical infrastructure.

The Council's communication to the public on financial issues is both clear and plausible.

Areas for improvement

An additional independent member and chair on the Finance, Audit and Risk Committee should be considered.

The Council should elevate the importance of risk planning in all council discussions.

The code of conduct should be revised, to better address potential conflict of interest issues.

The strategic priorities should be better integrated into the annual budget decision-making process.

The Council should assess whether its funding policy has evidence to support the current allocation of public and private benefit costs.

The Council should develop better cost-efficiency and value for money measures in Council expenditure.

Residents should be presented with more information about discretionary expenditure options so that they can make more informed submissions on rates levels.

Delivering what's important

Service delivery and asset management

The new executive has refreshed the Council's service ethic, but faces numerous challenges. In particular, they need to establish robust business cases and project management disciplines for capital expenditure, and demonstrate value for money of current services through objective performance measures.

Priority grading

Variable

< The Council is embarking on a significant programme of improvement and change. There is obvious improvement in service culture over the past one-two years. It has created a level of energy and commitment to the Council which appears to have been lacking in the past.>

However, value for money is questioned – at least by the community. Stronger business case discipline needs to be established and projects need to be rigorously managed across the organisation. The establishment of a Project Management Office is an effective step forward in this regard.

There is considerable work to be done in asset planning and management. While NZ Transport Agency and Wellington Water provide the Council with complementary capability in three waters and roading, management of the Council property portfolio presents a significant risk.

The Council primarily focuses on core services, but it also spends \$4.8 million on economic development, community development and youth development. This is a significant (approximately nine per cent) portion of the overall Council budget for activities that could be considered more discretionary than investment in critical

infrastructure. If such expenditure is to be justified, then it requires considerably more rigorous measures for the quality of that expenditure and its impact on the Council's community outcomes.

Service delivery models

The significant change across the Council management structure has meant that they have not made significant progress to review the most cost effective options for service delivery in the manner required by s.17A of the Local Government Act. Draft review documentation is, however, in place which clearly outlines a review methodology.

Service delivery capability and capacity

It is difficult to assess the quality of capability development as there is little information on which to base an informed opinion. Anecdotally, staff spoke of "struggling" to get access to a training budget and a tendency for too many decisions to be elevated to the executive leadership team. There is no formal third tier management group who could relieve the general managers of more day-to-day operational matters.

There is no formal leadership development programme or management succession plan. The remuneration and reward strategy appears to simply comprise paying mid-market and offering staff as broad a range of opportunities as possible within their role. Overall, the impression gained was that the human resources strategy lacked sophistication and is not well aligned with the Council's strategic goals.

Past engagement surveys highlighted the lack of strong leadership, poor communication and lack of training and development as some of the most central issues to producing a lack of engagement. An engagement survey was taken subsequent to the assessment and has not shown any improvement in staff engagement. However, discussions with staff suggested a positive culture change within the organisation, and the most recent survey indicates increased confidence in the executive management team.

Service delivery quality

The Council acknowledges that they have not met the expectations of the community for access to online services and that “we haven’t joined up the business with ICT.” There is negligible online functionality on the Council website, and the lack of capability in this area is significantly out of step with modern expectations of a public service.

Notwithstanding ratepayer concerns over rates levels and the quality of some services, there is a fairly positive view of the Council’s service ethic. In most areas of customer service (eg helpfulness, responsiveness, accessibility), approximately two-thirds of residents generally rated staff between 7-10/10 (satisfied or very satisfied). Discussions with stakeholders reinforced this view, with consistent comments regarding the commitment of staff to working well with the community.

Service delivery quality – breakdown of individual services and infrastructure

3 Waters: The establishment of Wellington Water has provided the Council with access to a wider range of expertise and experience. However, the discussions suggested that the investment strategy largely remains a bottom-up engineering view of the world, rather than a top-down strategic investment view. It was acknowledged that greater engagement from elected members and executive management on the infrastructure strategy is needed.

The absence of meaningful performance measures for infrastructure is a particular concern. Community satisfaction ratings for the performance of complex infrastructure assets or recording the level of water consumption are wholly inadequate measures of how well the Council is investing in, and managing the performance of, the network. Quantitative and qualitative measures need to be developed for asset knowledge and performance, as well as a comparative benchmark for the level of capital expenditure relative to the scale and performance of the network.

Property: The Council manages a \$200 million property portfolio, including \$15 million of investment properties and \$60 million of Council buildings. The uncertainty as to the condition of many of these assets is concerning, but the Council has acknowledged a need to “totally revisit” its property asset management plan and strategy, including adopting a policy and establishing principles for acquiring and disposing of property.

A clearer financial strategy is also needed to determine whether to liquidate non-strategic property assets, more cost-effectively fund maintenance of heavily used Council buildings, or to close other, under-utilised, Council buildings. The range of issues pertaining to property gives cause to question whether the Council has sufficient internal capability to manage technically and commercially complex assets.

Compliance with regulatory requirements

The Council lacks an enforcement strategy and effective performance measures. There is some anecdotal evidence that the Council is increasingly recognising the importance of ensuring consistency and reasonableness in all regulatory activities as an important contributor to encouraging greater business growth in the city. They have also belatedly recognised that input from developers through a forum will help improve both the development and application of planning policy.

The Council currently monitors every consent condition, liquor and food licence. This is not a cost effective, risk based approach to enforcement. More emphasis should be placed on education in all regulatory areas (particularly building consents), as well as on collecting better statistical information to identify where compliance problems are arising and what enforcement actions could best remedy them.

Accountability reporting

Although having an extensive performance reporting framework, the Council has fallen into a number of practices: (1) defaulting to residents’ satisfaction surveys as a proxy for service quality; (2) using task completion as an indicator of good performance; (3) meeting standards that are simply a statutory requirement; and (4) regularly changing measures so that it is difficult to track the quality of performance over the medium to long-term.

Significantly, value for money is tested in the annual residents’ survey, and the report states: “Value for money is a reasonably strong driver of overall perceptions of Council and, as the evaluation on this measure is low, Council should focus on demonstrating the value that it provides since this represents the best opportunity to further improve overall perceptions.”

The performance framework is in need of significant overhaul. Fewer, but more relevant measures are needed which truly demonstrate not only “stretch” performance, but also demonstrate progress towards community outcomes. A better balance of quality and timeliness measures is needed. Financial cost-efficiency and value for money measures are also required.

There is also a need for graphical reporting of performance trends, which by necessary implication means retaining measures for three-five year periods, so that the measures do not present a moment in time, but rather the performance trajectory in which the Council’s activities are headed.

The new management team and elected members were receptive to questions regarding the adequacy of the current performance framework, and acknowledge the need for change. Pātaka Art + Museum and the library service were particularly creditable examples of where the Council are exploring a range of imaginative performance initiatives.

Capital investment decisions and delivery

During the on-site visit, elected members expressed some concern regarding the rigour of business cases, the need for independent advice on major investment decisions and projects, and the use of a separate project reporting structure. Staff acknowledge that their business case methodology is “relatively immature.” Although the Council does not intend to adopt the Better Business Case methodology used in central government for all projects, there is a need to ensure they use a scalable and robust methodology for all capital investment decisions over an appropriate threshold.

The assessment looked at the drafts of the initial s.17A reviews as well as the business case for “Customer Experience and Brand Development.” Although it did not strictly follow any formal business case methodology, it had many of the elements one would expect to see. Relative to the expenditure proposed (approximately \$30,000), it represented an adequate level of analysis.

Public confidence might be assisted by the Council adopting a formal business case methodology for expenditure over a stated threshold

Council staff also acknowledged that they have not been effectively delivering on their capital programme and did not fully appreciate the inter-dependencies which existed across the programme of work. Their establishment of a Project Management Office is a positive development, but the team will need more extensive training and experience on large projects to make the office a success. The Council should also consider more transparent reporting on these projects within the Annual Report to track scope, budget, and timelines between the forecasted and actual outcomes.

Consideration should also be given to a project management policy which sets criteria for taking independent advice on matters such as project assurance, cost management and project governance.

Strengths

Staff has a strong service ethic.

The executive management team is leading an increasingly positive organisational culture.

The Council is making initial progress to improving internal processes and structures.

Areas for improvement

The Council should consider establishing better measures for all operational activities, particularly value for money measures.

The Council should consider improving the understanding of service costs.

Implementation of an ICT strategy for transforming the delivery of online services should be reviewed.

The Council should consider establishing an enforcement strategy which better manages risk and prioritises regulatory activities.

Asset management plans should be reviewed to better test the validity of current forecasts and assumptions.

There should be adequate expertise to manage council-owned property.

The Council should address findings arising from the staff engagement survey.

The Council should adopt an appropriate business case methodology.

Public reporting all major projects, including details on timeliness, cost and scope would improve public confidence in Council performance.

In line with the Office of the Auditor General’s recommendations, the Council should have strong governance, management reporting, and quality-assurance processes for major capital expenditure projects.

The Council should be developing strategies for staff and councillor training, development, and succession planning.

Listening and responding

Communicating and engaging with the public and businesses

Elected members and staff have set high standards for communication and community engagement. The recently elected Mayor and councillors will need to reaffirm these discussions with the community in order to set the future direction of the city.

Priority grading

Performing well

< Porirua City is a demographically and ethnically diverse community, which necessarily demands a wide-ranging strategy for both the manner of engagement and the content of messages communicated.>

With affordability issues being uppermost in the minds of many of the residents of Porirua, the Council faces a particular communication challenge in reconciling the messages that they need to deliver, and those that the community is receptive to. The Council can successfully point to numerous channels with which they endeavour to keep their community informed, but cannot point to a high level of engagement with those messages.

Engagement with the general public

The Council has put considerable effort into community engagement. The current Annual Plan is a case in point where Council went to considerable efforts to engage with all sectors of the community, both geographically (to all the local “villages”) and demographically (including youth, Māori/Iwi and Pasifika). Numerous communications channels were used, and the Council attended numerous community events.

Digital engagement

The Council has tried a variety of communication channels. The “videoscribe” which was prepared to explain the setting of rates is a particularly good example of how something other than statutory documents can be used to explain a complex, and largely unpopular, issue in an informative yet simple manner. However, success with digital engagement has been limited, with the majority (56 per cent) still primarily receiving information via a newsletter inserted to the local newspaper. Those receiving information via the electronic means is significantly lower (website (15 per cent); Facebook (nine per cent); and Twitter (one per cent)).

Engagement with diverse groups

Direct engagement with the community on general Council business matters is not only extensive, but also well regarded. The Council has assigned a councillor to every residents association, and the increase in associations formed (13) is, in the view on one association, a reflection that the Council listens to their communities, and the community can get results from working with them.

The relationship between the residents associations and Council appears to be a mature one, where the former recognise that they should not exist to manage service complaints on behalf of ratepayers, and the latter accept that the community should set the direction on local issues. While many of these initiatives were relatively minor (eg allowing local children to specify what they wanted in a new playground and having the community prioritise village regeneration activities), they are symbolically important ways in which the Council furthers its commitment to the community.

Media

The Council has an extensive communications strategy, and they have gone to considerable lengths to communicate the challenges facing the city. This includes explanations on the website and regular updates in community newspapers and on social media. The draft Annual Plan is presented in a manner which highlights the trade-offs which are being made to reduce costs (and therefore rates) on the one hand, but where they need to invest in critical infrastructure on the other.

However, the content and tone of stories reported in the media suggests that their media strategy isn't working especially well. Rates stories dominate the local newspapers, generally with a negative perspective. The Council may be well advised to consider some different approaches. It may be that a harder conversation needs to be had with the community about more radical cost savings on discretionary activities, or a more sophisticated educative process on the costs of infrastructure and other financial issues. The status quo will only serve to diminish the strategic messages that the Council wish to communicate, and continue to mire constructive debate on their priorities in the single issue of rate levels.

Strengths

The Council is active in genuinely engaging with its community at a grass-roots level.

Both elected members and staff are accessible to their community, with community groups having a real opportunity to influence local issues.

The Council is open to trying new forms of communication and engagement and their communication, outside of the statutory documents, is framed in easy to understand, everyday language.

Areas for improvement

The Council needs to identify additional channels to improve community engagement.

The communication roles amongst the Mayor, elected members and staff need to be re-established following changes from the recent election.

The Council needs to determine with greater certainty whether their current strategy on managing expenditure has been well communicated, and whether there is alignment between community wishes and this strategy.

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