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Whanganui District Council

Independent assessment report | April 2020*

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**WHANGANUI
DISTRICT COUNCIL**
Te Kaunihera a Rohe o Whanganui



A measure
for better
community value.

Assessment Summary

AT A GLANCE



**WHANGANUI
DISTRICT COUNCIL**
Te Kaunihera a Rohe o Whanganui

Whanganui is an expansive region with a rich cultural and economic heritage, a stable population, strong ties to the land and an eye on the future.



The current situation

Whanganui District Council serves the residents of Whanganui city, many small settlements and a large rural community. The Whanganui River is the metaphorical backbone of the district. Economic development and the social well-being of residents are key focus areas for the Council, as it strives to revitalise the district. Relationships with residents, business, Māori and other stakeholders are stable.

The Mayor and Chief Executive are both well-established in their roles. A clear sense of aspiration for the future prosperity of the district is apparent, following a long period of slow decline.

Council's vision for the future is documented as *Leading Edge*, and five priority development areas have been identified. Several major initiatives have either been commissioned or are planned. These include a new waste water treatment plant, several social support programmes and the revitalisation of the port area as a commercial and transport hub.

Progress to date is laudable. However, further work is needed to ensure future projects are appropriately prioritised and funded, and effort is aligned, if the commitments outlined in *Leading Edge* are to be achieved.

Approximately 25 per cent of the district's population identify as Māori. Te Āti Haunui-a-Pāpārangī is the dominant iwi. Council and Māori display a genuine intent to engage for the betterment of all.

Period of assessment

The assessment took place on 19 and 20 June 2019.



\$1.53b
GROSS DOMESTIC
PRODUCT¹

SERVES

42,150

PEOPLE², A MIX OF
85.6% EUROPEAN/PĀKEHĀ
24.5% MĀORI
3.1% PASIFIKA
3.2% ASIAN



POPULATION TREND
DECLINE/STABLE

MAKES UP
0.89%

OF NEW ZEALAND'S TOTAL LAND AREA³
REPRESENTING WHANGANUI DISTRICT,
ON THE WEST COAST OF THE NORTH
ISLAND OF NEW ZEALAND:
AN AREA OF

2,373 km²

RESPONSIBLE FOR
844km
ROADS⁴



Key learnings

Whanganui District Council is largely responsive to community needs. Engagement is effective and the Council is delivering core services well. Council and Māori/iwi both express a strong desire to engage well. Other key learnings were:

- > Whanganui District Council leaders have a sense of vision for the district, and a growing confidence that allows them to lead well, for the benefit of all. The challenge now is to ensure that vision and strategy for the district is appropriately integrated, and made more visible.
- > The Council is staffed by an experienced and committed Executive Leadership Team (ELT). However, working relations between elected members and the ELT, though operative, would benefit from further development.
- > The Council is actively partnering with government agencies and local community groups to fund innovative economic development initiatives and to address identified social needs.
- > The Council's work programme is ambitious; it may be too ambitious. While some projects have been delivered as planned, the implementation of project prioritisation and business case frameworks should enhance decision-making, and a standardised approach to project management should help alleviate current project capital carryovers.

¹ [Whanganui Economic Dashboard](#)

² [Stats NZ 2013 Census](#)

³ [DIA 2013](#)

⁴ [Ministry of Transport 2016/17](#)

Assessment Summary

continued...

OVERVIEW

Whanganui District Council is performing competently in core service delivery areas. With a streamlined strategy, sound organisational management and an ongoing commitment to continuous improvement and improving community engagement, the Council is well-placed to increase its effectiveness.

RATING



Findings



COUNCIL IS LED BY AN EXPERIENCED MAYOR AND CHIEF EXECUTIVE.

The Mayor has drawn a relatively inexperienced and diverse group of elected members into a cohesive unit over the current triennium. Additional training and development is suggested to further enhance their effectiveness as a decision-making team.



COUNCIL'S FINANCES ARE WELL-MANAGED, AND THE INFRASTRUCTURE TEAMS ARE COMPETENT.

Service delivery has been this Council's strength. Careful assessment and prioritisation of future projects is now needed, to ensure teams continue to meet service delivery expectations.



THE COUNCIL IS AN ACTIVE PROMOTER OF ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AND SOCIAL WELL-BEING INITIATIVES.

Council is working hard to communicate effectively with the community, and to provide economic development and social well-being initiatives to enhance prosperity across the district.

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	Better than competent	Competent

STRENGTHS

Council’s vision for the future of the district, *Leading Edge*, provides a comprehensive and credible basis for decision-making.

The Council’s finances are well-managed. The finance team does the basics well, and it provides credible advice to both elected members and the ELT.

Council’s commitment to effective working relations with Māori/iwi, and collective decision-making, is strong.

Council has a competent infrastructure team, and core services are being delivered well, especially roading services.

AREAS OF IMPROVEMENT

Council has a plethora of ‘strategies’ and strategy-related documentation, which has led to some confusion about what is important and where resources should be applied.

Accountability documents, though complete, are presented in a form that is difficult to read and interpret.

Council would benefit from a meaningful framework to prioritise projects, to assess the risks, implications and consequences of competing projects and options more effectively.

More explicit linkages between operational activity and strategic goals would make realisation of benefits easier to assess.

Leading locally

Governance, leadership and strategy

Whanganui District Council is working hard to provide strong and effective leadership, for the betterment of all. Relationships within the Council and with the community are, largely, stable.

Priority grading

Variable

< The Council has established a strong vision for the district. A high level of commitment to serve the community and its interests is apparent. The challenge now is to realise the potential expressed in the vision. >

Setting the direction for the community

The Council's unifying vision for the district, namely "an energised, united and thriving district offering abundant opportunities for everyone", is encapsulated in *Leading Edge*. This strategy was first developed in 2014 following extensive community consultation, and it was reviewed and updated in 2018. The five key focus areas to deliver its vision are community, connectivity, creativity, environment and economy.

Leading Edge provides an overarching and integrated framework for all Council activity and decision-making. It is coherent and well-presented, and it contains specific actions and measures to guide both the development of annual plans and measurement of progress.

However, *Leading Edge* is seen as an aspirational document by many elected members and Council staff, rather than as a specific initiative to which the Council could, or should, be held accountable for. Also, many other strategy documents and brand statements sit alongside *Leading Edge*. These are not adequately integrated at present. As a result, the effectiveness of *Leading Edge* as a unifying strategy (to deliver the stated vision) is compromised.

Leadership capability

The elected member group is comprised of a healthy mix of both highly- and less-experienced Councillors. During the current triennium, elected members have begun to work together as a group, in the best interests of the whole district.

Elected members received a comprehensive technical induction at the beginning of the current triennium, covering the machinery of local government and operational aspects of Council. While some coverage of the governance role was provided, the collective understanding of governance, especially the role and purpose of Council committees, remains relatively weak.

No formal evaluation of elected member performance has yet been commissioned to confirm actual capability and competency and to inform of future developmental needs.

Effective working relationships

The Mayor and Chief Executive have a strong and effective working relationship with each other. The elected members confidence in the Chief Executive as a leader is universally high—to the extent that the Chief Executive's contract was extended two years ahead of schedule.

The Chief Executive and ELT members provide effective leadership over operational activities, and relationships amongst staff are, in general, satisfactory.

One set of working relationships that could benefit from further attention is that between elected members and the ELT. Some interactions are guarded and reserved; a consequence of historical tensions and mistrust that do not appear to have been fully resolved.

Health and safety

A strong commitment to health and safety is apparent throughout the Council. Compliance obligations are being managed well, and reporting is sound. Both lead and lag indicators are being used for effective monitoring and to inform decision-making.

A Health and Safety committee is functioning and an online tool, PeopleSafe, is used for incident reporting and management.

The health, safety and well-being manual is currently being reviewed. This review is being undertaken despite the Council's health and safety systems being externally assessed (most

recently in 2018) and found to be of high quality. This further proves the Council's commitment to continuous improvement.

Managing the organisation

The Chief Executive is managing the organisation well, as evidenced by improving staff engagement survey results, and the completion of key projects, including the new waste water treatment plant. The Chief Executive's performance agreement is comprehensive, and a good performance evaluation process is in place.

The organisation's values, namely 'positive and encouraging', 'collaborative brilliance' and 'make it happen', seem to be embedded throughout the organisation.

Staff engagement is assessed annually (since 2016, using a survey tool developed in-house). The results are analysed and discussed with staff, and they are used by the ELT to inform its priority setting, especially in relation to continuous improvement. Staff appear to be engaged, and a culture of continuous improvement is apparent. However, Council may wish to consider using an externally developed survey, to provide a more robust assessment of engagement.

Strengthening risk management

The Council's Audit and Risk Committee (ARC), a subset of the full Council, meets quarterly. Two external members sit on the ARC.

A risk register is in place, with strategic, operational and emerging risk categorisations. The register is reviewed regularly, and it is updated as necessary.

Risk reports are provided to the elected members. However, the elected members are currently reliant on the ARC for their understanding of risk and risk implications.

Information flows

Councillors meet regularly in accordance with a published schedule. Reporting to elected members from management is comprehensive, and information is presented in a straightforward manner, using established document templates. The Chief Executive and the ELT utilise a 'no surprises' policy, which is appreciated by elected members.

Workshops are commonly used by Council to ensure elected members are adequately briefed on all matters pertaining to pending decisions. Elected members scrutinise information carefully, and they ask probing questions of managers, both prior to, and in meetings. Sometimes these questions are perceived by managers as being unnecessarily detailed or intrusive, possibly crossing from governance oversight to management operations.

Strengths

Whanganui District Council's overarching strategy, *Leading Edge*, is both comprehensive and persuasive.

The Mayor and elected members have begun to work together well as a group during this triennium, and a sense of collective responsibility is starting to emerge.

The relationship between the Mayor and Chief Executive is demonstrably strong.

The audit and risk function is operating well.

Council's reporting framework is comprehensive.

Areas for improvement

Elected members would benefit from further professional development, to refine their understanding of effective governance practice.

Council has a plethora of strategies in place in addition to *Leading Edge*, resulting in some confusion amongst staff, and some operational inefficiencies.

External validation of staff engagement (such as a third-party survey tool) would provide a more robust evidential basis of staff engagement.

Some evidence of historic mistrust and a lack of teamwork between elected members and management is evident, leading to unnecessary tensions at times.

The purpose and function of Council committees lacks clarity. Adjustments are needed to ensure the effective operation of committees and to streamline Council decision-making.

No formal evaluation system is in place to evaluate the individual and collective capability and effectiveness of elected members.

Investing money well

Financial decision-making and transparency

The Council has a long history of careful financial management. However, some bold decisions may be required in the future, to ensure projects are prioritised well and the service delivery expectations of the community are met. The increasing preference for co-funding has enabled otherwise unaffordable projects to proceed.

Priority grading

Competent

< Council management of its finances is sound. In particular, the financial strategy is credible and the Council's approach to risk is appropriate. >

Financial strategy

The Council's financial strategy appears to be both sound and compliant with legislative obligations. Linkages between the financial and infrastructure strategies have improved over the last five years, as a result of an iterative approach to development and more effective engagement between the finance and infrastructure teams.

A high level of sensitivity to rates affordability is evident throughout the organisation.

The underlying assumptions upon which the financial strategy is founded are tested by the Chief Executive and the ELT. However, more rigorous testing by independent experts is recommended, to ensure baseline assumptions (especially longer-term population growth and demographic projections) are realistic.

Financial data

Financial reporting to the ELT is provided monthly. Reports are comprehensive, and the level of understanding within the ELT is appropriate. Reporting to elected members occurs six-weekly, via

the Strategy and Finance Committee. Elected members place a high level of reliance on the Strategy and Finance Committee to scrutinise financial performance on their behalf.

Annual reports are produced by the finance team, with the support of the policy team. The quality and sufficiency of Council's annual reports is evident in the unqualified opinions received from AuditNZ.

Risk and control function

Council's general approach to risk is appropriate for a council of this size and type. The risk policy and associated framework is current—it was last reviewed in 2018. Good procedures and tools are in place, including an enterprise risk management system, CAMMSRISK. Risk management training has been provided to relevant managers.

The risk register is comprehensive. The ARC takes an active interest in 'strategic' risks, which are reviewed six-monthly. A mindset of continuous improvement is apparent throughout the organisation.

General Managers all receive regular reporting, and the level of understanding at this management level is satisfactory.

Budgeting

Council's approach to budgeting is based largely on incremental improvement, rather than zero-based practices. This is most apparent in the infrastructure group. Council's budgets are balanced over the longer term, and its budgets and processes to develop them are compliant with legislative requirements.

The approach to budgeting by the ELT seems to be prudent. However, expenditure may be understated, as projects and renewals that are yet to be costed are not included.

Several major capital programmes are planned, with the revitalisation of the port being most notable. While comprehensive business cases have been developed, an independent and rigorous analysis of the assumptions upon which

they are founded is suggested, to ensure they are credible, and that the expected benefits are realisable within specified timeframes.

Currently, the Council lacks a formal framework to assess and prioritise budget options. A framework such as the *Better Business Case* framework would enable Council to assess options, justify proposals and make more informed funding decisions in an environment characterised by limited resources.

Financial position of council

The Council's finances are overseen by a capable team who maintain an appropriate focus on income, expenses, risk and debt. Appropriate financial controls and systems are in place to ensure Council operations and decisions are consistent with its liability management policy.

All audit and external review opinions are satisfactory. Council has a credit rating of AA, indicating that the management of financial affairs and debt is sound.

Council has experienced some difficulty with rates arrears at times. Most of this difficulty is concentrated in lower socio-economic areas and collectively owned, low productivity Māori lands. This is being actively monitored and managed.

Council intends to review its asset portfolio, with a view to disposing of non-critical items. While this is commendable, a well-managed communications plan will be required to ensure the basis for any disposals is clearly explained and justified to residents.

Transparency

Council has a robust foundation for effective transparency. All required documentation is provided publicly, both in hardcopy format and online. A new website is being developed to enhance online accessibility.

The rating basis is well-described in publicly available documentation. Rating levels and explanations are consistent with Council's strong emphasis on affordability.

Some documents, however, are dense and contain large amounts of highly detailed information, presented in a tabular format. This makes it difficult for non-financial readers to understand well. The Annual Report and Long Term Plan are two examples of this.

Community consultation on financial matters is genuine, although participation is low in relative terms.

Strengths

Council has a highly capable finance team.

Council's high credit rating is an indication that external agencies have confidence in its debt management policies and practices.

Financial reporting is comprehensive and well-presented.

The presentation of options and supporting financial data for major projects is conducive to high quality decision making.

Areas for improvement

Some public reporting documents are dense and, therefore, difficult to read and understand for non-technical readers.

Council has an unusually high percentage of project carryovers, indicating that project ambition and delivery are inadequately aligned. Council may need to reduce the number of concurrent projects or improve its project management capability.

Further development of elected member understanding of risk is desirable, particularly the consequential implications of strategic risks.

Council staff should ensure assumptions in business cases are rigorously tested so the rationale for projects is transparent and can be subsequently monitored.

Formal project prioritisation and business case frameworks are needed to enhance decision-making practices.

Delivering what's important

Service delivery and asset management

The Council's infrastructure team has worked hard over the years to ensure core systems are operating well. A risk-based approach to asset management, including targeted monitoring and predictive modelling, is deeply embedded.

Priority grading

Better than competent

< Whanganui District Council has invested wisely to ensure core infrastructure meets the current and emerging needs of its community. >

Aligning services with strategy

The Council's infrastructure strategy is fit for purpose. The recent investment in a waste water treatment plant is an example of a bold investment to ensure core infrastructure meets present and emerging needs.

Monitoring and assessing service levels

Council uses a stakeholder survey to monitor and assess service levels. The most recent survey, conducted in June 2018, revealed high levels of satisfaction. The Council has received national awards for its community work. However, stakeholder satisfaction with the Rural Community Board is lower than desired. This is being investigated.

Service complaints are recorded and reviewed regularly.

Service delivery and quality

Council's asset management plans are, in general, adequate. Some are excellent, with clearly stated service quality information, but others are less easy to interpret. These are subject to ongoing review.

A risk-based approach to service delivery is used across the Council. Assets are monitored for both function and condition according to a risk profile. Predictive risk modelling enables Council to assess and, potentially, anticipate the likelihood of asset failure.

Planned capital spending appears to be relatively low, and actual expenditure is lower than depreciation. Further analysis is suggested to determine whether this is a result of prudence and careful planning, or that maintenance and renewal programmes are not being delivered as needed.

Drinking water is chlorinated throughout the district. The Council has invested in systems, processes and information to ensure a safe water supply, and it is commissioning a new bore to secure drinking water supply in the medium and longer term.

Council is using up-to-date flood modelling to improve the management of stormwater and to ensure future investment is targeted in high priority areas.

A new waste water treatment plant has been commissioned, following a period of intense debate ahead of the final decision to proceed. The plant has been designed with sufficient capacity to meet both expected residential and trade waste demands.

The Council was an early adopter of the alliance approach to roading. Roading management today is excellent. The roading network (including bridges) is well-documented and predictive modelling is used to assist with road maintenance decisions.

Capability and capacity

The Council has undertaken an organisational review and restructure to ensure it is adequately resourced for current and emerging needs. Despite high levels of turnover, staff satisfaction indicators are on the rise.

The staff orientation programme is to be reviewed and updated; the intention being to implement a 'passport', which will serve as both a roadmap and a record to ensure new staff are equipped with the knowledge to perform their duties well. An online learning and development programme has been implemented, and staff can book themselves into courses. Succession and workforce planning is underway.

The Infrastructure team has good project management expertise. However, Council should consider using a standardised approach to project management across the organisation, for greater efficiencies and to enhance project success elsewhere.

Compliance with regulatory requirements

Council's regulatory obligations are met and guided by its Compliance Strategy. The stated priority is to provide a safe and healthy environment, and to lead the community towards positive compliance behaviours; in effect, compliance without prosecution. A tiered response system is in place, proportionate with the severity of a given offence.

Dog management has been a notable success. Council's approach in a city with a high concentration of dog owners has resulted in very low numbers of incidents and, commendably, no dog bites or destruction orders in the last twelve months.

Building consent and resource consent applications are processed within prescribed statutory timeframes, and Council has met the essential services benchmark for the last three years. However, there are some concerns within the community about how inspections are being handled.

Community services

Council has taken a cautious approach to the delivery and management of community services and associated assets. However, the approach taken to the provision of library services is innovative. One collaboration between the Council (providing books and RFID technology) and local communities (buildings and volunteers) has resulted in increased patronage.

Council is an active supporter of heritage buildings. The nationally significant Sarjeant Gallery is one such example where significant funding has been committed to an earthquake strengthening project. Council supports other heritage buildings through a Heritage Grants programme, for the preservation of significant buildings.

Economic development

Council has taken a bold position in relation to economic development, by committing \$1.945 million per annum to support Whanganui and Partners, its economic development unit. A pilot training school has also been purchased (through Whanganui District Council Holdings Limited), and several other projects are planned, most notably the revitalisation of the port and the establishment of an inland port. While business cases have been prepared, a critical review by independent experts is suggested, to ensure the 'fit' with Council's overall purpose and strategy is strong, and to confirm that expected benefits to ratepayers from non-core investments are both realistic and achievable. Close post-project monitoring and reporting will enable Council to assess whether expected benefits are actually being realised.

Strengths

The risk-based approach to asset management is delivering good efficiencies without compromising service quality.

Innovative approaches to delivery of community services is increasing levels of access and participation, especially amongst high deprivation populations.

The development of self-management for Council staff is providing more effective management of essential and beneficial learning.

The Council's alliance approach to roading development and management of roading assets is excellent.

Areas for improvement

Higher levels of collaboration and integration with the Regional Council are needed for more effective management of major rain events.

An organisation-wide approach to project management would be beneficial.

The function and effectiveness of the Rural Community Board should be reviewed.

More rigorous analysis is needed to ensure the 'strategic fit' of economic development proposals, and that expected benefits are realistic.

Succession planning in some key knowledge areas is inadequate.

Listening and responding

Communicating and engaging with the public and businesses

Council staff have a strong commitment to good communication and engagement. However, Council will need to be careful to ensure the large number of communications projects currently underway are delivered as expected.

Priority grading

Competent

< The Council is investing heavily in communications, to ensure its engagement with a socio-economically and demographically diverse community is effective. >

Communications strategy

Council's Significance and Engagement Policy is comprehensive, and a corporate communications strategy has been developed to put effect to this policy.

Considerable communications activity is apparent. Council's commitment to effective engagement is visible through its investment in people and technology. For example, the recent deployment of self-service kiosks in the foyer of the main Council building is expected to enhance access.

Council recently consolidated its corporate brand. The *Leading Edge* strategy provides a framework for effective engagement and decision-making. However, a profusion of other strategies and brand associations remain, resulting in some confusion, both within Council and, significantly, amongst community groups.

Media and digital engagement

Council describes its media policy as serviceable. Work is underway to improve the content and consistency of messaging across the Council. Council spokespeople are clearly designated, and media training is provided. Media releases are issued frequently, and a clear, factual style is used.

Council is in the process of revising its digital strategy, having been an early advocate of a district-wide fibre based network. The stated intent is to build on the foundations already in place, such as the recently installed self-service kiosks, in order to increase access and provide a greater range of services online.

A new website is planned, with increased functionality including a greater range of maps for utilities and overflow paths, the ability to make payments and general information about services.

Council utilises social media to communicate with the community and elicit feedback. Some useful learnings are emerging, including that relatively little is known about the role of the Council.

The live streaming of Council meetings is an innovative development, aimed at opening up access to the machinery of Council. Currently, few people watch the Council meeting stream live. However, recordings are made available for delayed viewing by interested parties.

Reputation

Council commissions an annual ratepayer survey and some activity-based stakeholder satisfaction surveys to assess how it is perceived in the community. Nearly three-quarters of those surveyed in 2018 rated their interaction with Council as good or very good, an improvement over the previous survey. Council also commissions a national survey every two years to assess its reputation in comparison with other districts in New Zealand.

Council has a stated intention of commissioning other surveys, such as one focussed on engagement with Māori, but these are yet to be completed.

Engagement with Māori

Council has worked hard to achieve a good level of understanding of Māori/iwi interests and issues throughout the district. Formal consultation mechanisms and supporting documents have been established to provide a foundation for more effective engagement. A strong desire is apparent amongst staff to more actively embrace tikanga Māori in the delivery of Council services as well.

Māori/iwi recognise that the relationship with Council is continually evolving. However, they expect genuine consultation on all significant decisions. Both parties are committed to such engagement, and conversations are beginning to flow. However, outcomes cannot be predicted. The Council may need to review its core values, to build trust and expedite a more meaningful level of engagement and collective decision-making in the future.

Engagement with the general public and business

Council has a strong commitment to effective engagement with business, community groups and the public generally.

Whanganui is one of 22 'safe cities' in New Zealand, an accredited programme to provide a safe environment for residents to live. The strategy for this programme was co-developed by the Council and several government agencies. Other community engagement and support initiatives include an active Youth Committee and a Welcoming Communities Plan. Whanganui is also a refugee resettlement destination.

The primary pathway for Council's engagement with the business community is through Whanganui and Partners, the local economic development agency. Direct funding support is provided by the Council. The proximity of this relationship has benefits in relation to enhancing the effectiveness of Council communications with, and the Council's reputation amongst, the business community.

However, messages from the business community to the Council are not always communicated directly, especially in relation to the performance of building control and inspection activities. The extent to which this is a significant problem in real terms is difficult to assess.

Strengths

Reconfiguration of Council's front office to include self-service kiosks and private spaces is innovative and interesting.

A strong commitment to a safe environment through 'safe cities' is apparent.

Use of live-streaming of Council meetings enhances accountability.

Areas for improvement

Relationships with Māori/iwi need to be taken to the next level, especially as iwi are a significant group in the district, in both social and economic terms.

Council's branding and positioning lacks clarity.

A more proactive style of engagement and consultation is needed to ensure Council's interaction with ratepayers is effective.

Messaging within core accountability documents is unclear.

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