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Rangitīkei District Council

Independent assessment report | April 2022*

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RANGITĪKEI
DISTRICT COUNCIL



A measure
for better
community value.

* Period of assessment: November / December 2021

Assessment Summary

AT A GLANCE



RANGITIKEI
DISTRICT COUNCIL

Rangitikei District Council is a geographically large district with a strong local economy based on agricultural production and support services.



LARGE METRO

SMALL METRO AND LARGE PROVINCIAL

SMALL
PROVINCIAL
AND RURAL



REGIONAL

The current situation

Rangitikei District Council serves the residents of Bulls, Marton, Taihape and Hunterville, as well as several smaller villages and large rural and Māori communities. After many years of steady population decline and austerity, Council now anticipates moderate population growth over the next decade and plans are being developed to accommodate this.

Council is led by a Mayor who was first elected in 2013. Operational leadership is provided by the Chief Executive who was appointed in 2019.

A positive workplace culture is apparent at all levels and external stakeholders say that Council has become easier to engage with over the past few years.

Council and Māori in the district display trust and empathy. They are mutually respectful and display a genuine desire to engage and work together effectively. Māori are active participants in governance and decision-making processes.

Period of assessment

The assessment took place on 30 November and 1 December 2021.



\$729m

GROSS DOMESTIC PRODUCT¹

SERVES

16,050

PEOPLE², A MIX OF
79.2% EUROPEAN-PAKEHA/
26.2% MĀORI / 5.6% PASIFIKA
2.1% ASIAN / 0.3% MELAA / 1.5% OTHER



POPULATION TREND
INCREASING (SINCE 2014)

MAKES UP

1.671%

OF NEW ZEALAND'S TOTAL LAND AREA³
REPRESENTING RANGITĪKEI DISTRICT,
WHICH INCLUDES BULLS, HUNTERVILLE,
MARTON, TAIHAPE AND TURAKINA,
HAS A LAND AREA OF

4,479 KM²

RESPONSIBLE FOR

801.05km

SEALED ROADS⁴

424.84km

UNSEALED ROADS⁴



Key learnings

Rangitīkei District Council has embarked on an ambitious programme of work to both re-establish and deliver upon a compelling vision for the district. Supporting goals, strategies and outcomes are aligned with the vision, and a values-led culture is apparent throughout the organisation. The Executive Leadership Team is well-regarded by staff and stakeholders alike. Debt is low, which provides headroom to fund infrastructure renewals and capital projects.

- > The Chief Executive is providing strong and effective leadership. He has championed the development of a values-led culture and his commitment to health and safety is relentless.
- > The Mayor is highly-regarded amongst stakeholders because he is visible and accessible. However, in pursuit of action the boundary between governance and operations has blurred on occasion.
- > Council has recognised that the population of the district is growing and planning is underway to ensure critical infrastructure to deliver desired service levels is provided.
- > Relationships with Māori are both mature and effective.

¹ https://www.localcouncils.govt.nz/lqip.nsf/wpg_URL/Profiles-Councils-Rangitikei-District-Council-Main?OpenDocument

² [Rangitīkei District community explorer \(infometrics.co.nz\)](https://www.localcouncils.govt.nz/lqip.nsf/wpg_URL/Profiles-Councils-Rangitikei-District-Council-Main?OpenDocument)

³ https://www.localcouncils.govt.nz/lqip.nsf/wpg_URL/Profiles-Councils-Rangitikei-District-Council-Main?OpenDocument

⁴ Rangitīkei District Council Long Term Plan 2021-2031, p.12

Assessment Summary

continued...

OVERVIEW

Rangitīkei District Council has a strong vision for the community, with supporting strategies in place to meet community service delivery expectations. While a strong, values-led culture is emerging under the leadership of the Chief Executive, further investment in governance practices, and in community engagement systems and practices, would be beneficial.

RATING



Findings



A CLEAR VISION WITH ALIGNED STRATEGIES AND OPERATIONAL PLANS PROVIDES A SOLID FOUNDATION TO MEET SERVICE DELIVERY GOALS.

Council's overall framework is compelling. However, ambiguities in governance practice need attention if staff motivation is to remain high and desired outcomes are to be achieved.



RISK MANAGEMENT WEAKNESSES.

Council's approach to risk management is underdeveloped. Further investment in an integrated risk management framework is needed to improve resilience and to enhance decision-making quality and resource allocation. This has been recognised, and work is underway to develop a suitable framework.



RELENTLESS COMMITMENT TO CREATING A VALUES-LED CULTURE, AND A HEALTHY AND SAFE WORKPLACE.

The enthusiasm and commitment of the Chief Executive and the Executive Leadership Team (ELT) to lead from the front is personified through improving staff morale, engagement and pride in the workplace.

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
Competent	Better than competent	Better than competent	Competent

STRENGTHS

A coherent vision and overall strategy is in place, with strong linkages to policies and plans.

Council's unrelenting approach to health, safety and well-being is well understood and embedded across service teams.

Council's commitment to sound processes through its Project Management Office is producing considerable benefits.

Council's relationship with iwi and hapū is mature and effective.

AREAS OF IMPROVEMENT

There is some confusion and ambiguity over governance and management boundaries at times which creates the risk of undermining staff.

Council's risk management framework is underdeveloped, and more complete reporting is needed to inform strategic decision-making.

Council's knowledge of asset condition is not comprehensive, although it is being updated.

Council's reputation is not currently assessed within the community or amongst key stakeholders.

Leading locally

Governance, leadership and strategy

Council is led by an experienced Mayor and a capable Chief Executive who is well-regarded by staff and stakeholders alike. An overall vision and supporting strategies are used as a reference point to ensure services are delivered to community expectations. The working relationship with Māori is both mature and effective.

Priority grading

Competent

< The Council has embarked on a programme to improve organisational performance and service delivery outcomes through ownership, capability and accountability. >

Rangitikei District Council is led by a Mayor who is serving his sixth term on the Council (third as Mayor) and a highly regarded Chief Executive who was appointed in 2019.

Setting the direction for the community

Council has developed a clear overall vision for the district, “Making this place home”. Community outcomes are explicitly stated in the Long Term Plan and elsewhere — these being healthy and resilient communities, healthy and improving environment, partnership with iwi and, prosperous economy. Most elected members and the Executive Leadership Team (ELT) appear to understand the vision, but some had difficulty articulating it.

Clear alignment between overall vision, the four well-beings, strategic priorities, community outcomes and supporting activities is apparent through Council documentation. These have been melded into a powerful visual image to help staff, residents and other stakeholders understand how the elements fit together.

Council leaders acknowledged that refinements were needed to the Statement of Service Performance — Council’s “social contract with ratepayers” — to provide a clearer description of the service levels Council commits to delivering. These refinements were completed as part of the 2021-31 LTP process.

Creating confident councillors

Currently, Council does not have a formal process to review the performance of elected members. However, Council has a strong commitment to the professional development of elected members to help them become more effective as a decision-making group. Three elected members, including the Mayor, have attended the week-long Company Directors Course run by the Institute of Directors. Council intends to send two more elected members during 2022. Despite this, a lack of understanding in relation to governance was apparent amongst the elected members at the time of the assessment.

The Mayor has a very “hands-on” style of leadership. His contribution is appreciated by stakeholders — because he is seen as accessible and able to get things done. However, the distinction between governance and management has been blurred at times, potentially undermining the efforts of the staff. Adopting a more strategic oversight-based approach to governance would create a clearer boundary and avoid situations such as those in which staff are briefed directly by the Mayor.

Effective working relationships

Elected members seem to be united as a group and they were respectful of each other during the assessment. While individual views on specific points differ, the commitment to unity and achieving consensus takes precedence. A strong working relationship within the group and with the Chief Executive has been forged, and trust seems to be high.

The ELT prides itself on providing candid advice without fear or favour, and this seems to be appreciated by elected members. ELT members are also ‘up front’ when mistakes occur, or problems

arise — they take ownership of both the problem and corrective actions regardless of the source or cause.

Māori involvement in decision-making

Council's iwi advisory committee, Te Roopuu Ahi Kaa (TRAK), provides an important bridge between Council and Māori who live in the district. TRAK leaders attend Council meetings and have both speaking and voting rights. The Mayor has also appointed TRAK members to standing committees. The parties agree that the relationship is excellent, and engagement is meaningful.

A Māori Responsiveness Framework (TRAK's work programme) is currently being rewritten to shift the emphasis from activity to outcome. This reflects the maturing of the relationship and a desire to move the relationship from one of advising to one of partnership with the Council.

Managing the organisation

Council is managed by a Chief Executive who was appointed in 2019. The Chief Executive's performance agreement is comprehensive, and stated objectives and key performance indicators are aligned with overall Council objectives.

Health and Safety and the provision of effective leadership are the Chief Executive's top priorities. He is relentless in his pursuit of both, and there is considerable evidence to suggest he has made a significant impact and is 'on track' in both areas.

Organisational performance has also received considerable attention since the arrival of the Chief Executive. A values-led culture and a strong commitment to diversity, equity and inclusion is now apparent throughout Council staff. The results of engagement surveys indicate that staff morale, culture and relationship quality have all improved significantly since the Chief Executive's appointment—to the extent that mid-tier staff say they are now proud to work at the Council.

Health, safety and well-being

Council's approach to health and safety is described as 'unrelenting'. Goals are clearly stated, visibility is high and training is comprehensive—from the Chief Executive down.

Ownership of health and safety is encouraged at all levels. ELT and staff both spoke in terms of health, safety and well-being as an integrated package. Policies are set by senior leaders, but responsibility is delegated as far down the organisation as possible. Staff are encouraged to be open and speak out if they see or experience anything that makes them feel unsafe. Identified problems are resolved within teams wherever possible, and reporting frameworks are used to capture learnings.

Reporting and decision-making

Elected members meet formally once per month. Council performance is reported to elected members and other stakeholders via formal reporting mechanisms. Most meetings are preceded by workshops, to both secure the support of the Mayor and to assist elected members in understanding the content of papers and the merits of various options under consideration.

Reports are published to elected members four days before formal meetings. Most elected members indicated this leaves sufficient time for reading and enquiry, but some said they would like more time to read and consider papers. Elected members confirmed they have not discussed and agreed reporting expectations as a group.

Strengths

A coherent vision and overall strategy is in place, with strong linkages to policies and plans.

Council's relationship with iwi is mature and effective, Māori are included in all governance decision-making processes.

Council's Health and Safety culture and underlying practices are exemplary.

Both the elected members and the executive leadership team appear to function well as a group.

Areas for improvement

There is some confusion and ambiguity over governance and management boundaries at times, which creates the risk of undermining staff

Reporting expectations of elected members have not been clearly communicated to the ELT.

Performance reviews and governance education for elected members would likely improve governance capability and ensure resilience.

Investing money well

Financial decision-making and transparency

Council's financial strategy has been developed in line with its Long Term Plan and overall strategy and vision, and there is a strong emphasis on affordability and long-term financial sustainability.

Priority grading

Better than competent

< Council's overall management of its financial resources is sound. However, its approach to risk management is relatively weak. >

Planning and evaluating financial goals

Council has developed a financial strategy that is based on delivering agreed service levels, infrastructure renewals and critical capital projects, and other objectives specified in the 2021-31 Long Term Plan (LTP).

The financial strategy and associated budgets and plans are founded on an assumption of moderate population growth in the district. These assumptions have been tested and found to be credible. In funding operations goals, Council expects to live within its means and produce a small cash surplus each year.

The financial strategy was developed in conjunction with the infrastructure strategy. The two are inextricably linked and the close interaction throughout the development process ensured the two parts form one integrated 'whole'. A solid commitment to understanding and incorporating total lifetime costs into strategy, planning and budgetary documents is apparent throughout Council's financial documentation.

However, historically low debt levels are expected to increase as Council tackles long-term underinvestment in critical infrastructure and responds to increasing demand associated with expected population growth. Debt will be funded through rates increases over the LTP period. Rating levels have been set following consultation with the community and confirmation of desired service levels.

Risk management and oversight

Risk oversight is provided by an independently chaired Audit and Risk Committee (ARC), that meet quarterly. Formal terms of reference are in place. A formal work programme ensures clear lines of accountability for officers and that reporting expectations are aligned with sound audit and risk management practice.

Council's approach to risk management is underdeveloped. The risk policy is sound, but the overall risk management framework is relatively weak, and elements are not integrated. While a strategic risk register is considered by the ARC at each meeting, operational risks are managed within departments and project risks are documented within Project Management Office (PMO) reports. There is no explicit linkage between these elements. This has been acknowledged and work is underway to implement a more complete framework that is fit for purpose.

Significant investment decisions are based on business cases that include whole-of-life costs. External experts are often used to peer-review technical analyses completed by business case authors.

Business case development was outsourced to specialist consultants in 2021 due to the lack of internal capability. Council's intention is to create business cases in-house again, once sufficient expertise and capacity is available. Two PMO staff have received training, and these individuals will work alongside specialist consultants to prepare cases to the level required to meet best practice standards.

Balancing the budget

Council updates its ten-year budgets every three years, as part of the long-term planning. The revenue policy, infrastructure strategy and financial strategy are used to inform the budgeting process.

Recent improvements in Council's financial management system have enabled the finance team to produce more comprehensive performance reports, including real-time access to budget information, to activity owners. This means accountability for budgeted expenditure can be delegated and managed more effectively at the point of expenditure.

Monthly budget reports are presented to elected members, with clear narratives explaining the reason for any significant variances.

Council's rates remission policy is being reviewed. A minor change, to exclude part of the district from the policy, is anticipated. While the impact on rating and income in future periods is expected to be minor, the change has been allowed for in planning and budgeting processes.

Financial position and targets

Rangitikei District Council currently has minimal levels of debt. However, this is forecast to change over the next few years because of the funding requirements of the capital programme described in the LTP. Debt levels will remain within the thresholds specified within Council's Treasury Management Policy.

The Council's ELT has a comprehensive understanding of the financial instruments available to fund projects and operations.

Debtor levels are in hand. The collection of any long-standing arrears is handled by an external debt collection agency.

Being clear and transparent

Council's rates-setting process is discussed widely with the public every three years as part of the development of the Long Term Plan (LTP). The process by which rates are developed and set is transparent, and it is well-documented publicly using straightforward language.

During the 2021-31 LTP consultation, Council signalled an option to introduce differentials to the rating framework. A decision will be made in the future after consultation with the community is completed and feedback assessed.

All Council financial reports are publicly available. Officers have refined the structure and content of financial reports over the past two years, the goal being to simplify and normalise the presentation of information to aid reading and comprehension.

Strengths

Council is well-served by a capable finance team.

Debt levels are currently low, leaving considerable headroom to fund critical infrastructure projects.

Council displays a preparedness to utilise debt wisely.

The alignment between financial and infrastructure strategies is explicit.

Areas for improvement

Further standardisation of report formats would aid in reading and comprehension.

Council's risk management framework is underdeveloped.

Delivering what's important

Service delivery and asset management

Council's service delivery and asset management is defined by both its focus on continuous improvement and its historical shared services agreements with neighbouring councils, most notably Manawatū District Council.

Priority grading

Better than competent

< Council has initiated several changes to improve both service delivery performance and delivery of its capital programme to meet community expectations more consistently. >

Asset condition and management

Council has comprehensive asset management plans (AMPs) in place. However, its current confidence level in asset condition knowledge is low. While the inherent risk of such confidence levels is understood by the ELT and plans are in place to address this issue, asset condition is not included on Council's strategic risk register.

Work is underway to secure an accurate set of asset data for water infrastructure. This is due to be completed by 2024. A new asset management strategy will be developed, leading to a 30-year prioritised programme for renewals and performance upgrades for the three waters assets, and for network growth.

Council's lack of confidence in asset condition knowledge extends to Council-owned buildings, including offices and its social housing portfolio. To rectify this, a comprehensive building condition survey has been budgeted and work is underway.

Evaluating service delivery and quality

Council develops, and consults on, levels of service through the LTP process. Performance measures and targets to support service levels are specified in the LTP. Council monitors and

reports actual service performance through its Statement of Service Performance (SSP). In the recent past this report has not been available publicly, raising accountability and transparency issues. However, the yet to be published 2020-2021 Annual Report clearly states the achievement status in each category.

Council's stated objective is to maintain critical infrastructure to meet existing levels of service. Historically, core service delivery strategies have not always linked consistently to Council's vision, overall strategy and community outcomes, so credible assessments have been difficult to determine. Furthermore, not all service levels include a measure of quality, timeliness and value for money. These shortfalls have been recognised and, following the development of a new strategic framework in 2020, changes have been made to ensure strong alignments are apparent across Council documentation and work programmes.

Currently, roading, three waters and environmental health services are delivered by the Manawatū District Council under a shared services agreement. As no services are provided by Rangitikei District Council to Manawatū, and this is not expected to change, the agreement is, in practice, an outsourced service delivery agreement and should be regarded as such.

Staff indicated the shared services agreement will be reviewed once the future ownership of three waters infrastructure is resolved. The purpose of the review is to assess service delivery requirements needed to achieve community expectations and to assess value for money.

Water assets and services

Despite considerable uncertainty in relation to three waters infrastructure reforms, Council is continuing to actively manage its water infrastructure, invest in improving asset condition data, consolidate resource consenting and utilise technology to assist in the identification of problems and faults in the network. Council indicates it has an accurate understanding of the actual cost to deliver water services.

Compliance with water and wastewater national regulatory standards and resource consents are measured and reported against. A programme of work is underway to move to land-based disposal of treated effluent, and experts have been retained to assist with both this and a programme to address expired or expiring treatment plant consents. In addition to greater clarity,

the expert assistance engaged by Council should expedite a consistent, proactive approach to consenting.

Roading assets and services

Council's roading network is well documented and understood in accordance with Waka Kotahi NZ Transport Agency requirements. The regional procurement initiative the Council belongs to has delivered significant operational savings.

Council has no in-house roading staff as the entire function is outsourced to Manawātū District Council as part of the shared services agreement. This includes everything from the preparation of strategic roading documents and budgets through to the roading maintenance programme.

Performance measures for roading include those prescribed by the Department of Internal Affairs, with additional measures relating to the provision of metal to unsealed roads and the timeliness of resolution of service requests. The draft 2020-21 Annual Report indicates that three of the seven performance measures for roading and footpaths were achieved. Council advised that changes to the way responses to service request data are collected should deliver performance improvements in the next reporting period.

Community services

Council does not have an explicit community services strategy. However, a strategy is implied in other documents. The strategic vision documents contain four well-being strategies and an action plan for each well-being. Action topics include community-related elements such as education and training opportunities, town regeneration and development and connected communities. In addition, a housing strategy has been developed and was included as supplementary information to the 2021-31 LTP consultation.

The cost of providing community services is generally calculated using previous year expenditure with increases for inflation. Patronage data is not collected, so it is difficult to assess value-for-money with any confidence.

Staffing capability and capacity

Council completed a strategic assessment of staffing levels and capabilities as part of the recent LTP process, to ensure resourcing matched service level requirements. Resourcing in the regulatory services area was stretched, and this has been exacerbated by nationwide skills shortages in key technical areas. Elected members were advised of the findings, and a decision was taken to fund several new positions.

In November 2020, Council introduced a new performance development planning process to support staff development. This was enhanced in July 2021 through the development of Ara Poutama, a performance and development framework which includes longer term career development opportunities.

Staff engagement is monitored quarterly. Survey findings are shared in detail at group and team levels, and summary results are shared with all staff and elected members.

Solid waste

Rangitīkei has historically low recycling rates for household waste. Opportunities exist for Council to give greater attention to its rubbish and recycling functions, giving residents access to kerbside rubbish and recycling collection, updating its Waste Management and Minimisation Plan, and reviewing service contracts across all waste functions.

Regulatory services

Council's Enforcement Strategy and Prosecution Policy covers responsibilities for the environment, building safety, food safety, alcohol consumption in public places and the control of dogs and other animals.

Decisions in relation to compliance action are based on two main criteria: the seriousness of the breach and the likely impact on health, safety or the environment. Each breach and the related enforcement option are assessed on further criteria which is also used to determine informal enforcement, such as education or a written warning. All formal enforcement action is reported bi-monthly to the Policy/ Planning Committee.

Planning for future demand

The population trend in the Rangitīkei district is changing from decline to growth. The Council has recognised this and adjusted its long-term plans based on a 0.8% per annum population increase. Consideration has been given to even higher growth rates as the expansion of Ōhakea Airforce Base takes effect, and anticipated growth in the industrial sector, for example, the Marton Rail Hub.

A spatial strategy and plan, "Pae Tawhiti Rangitīkei Beyond", is being developed to create an integrated growth framework for the district. Planning staff confirmed the same population projections are being used by the infrastructure team to ensure alignment between land allocation and infrastructure planning.

Adoption of the spatial plan is scheduled to occur in mid-2022. Once approved, key elements of the spatial plan will be incorporated into the District Plan Review scheduled to commence in 2022/23 and underpin infrastructure planning. The proactive approach being taken by Council should deliver an integrated, district-wide growth framework to avoid piecemeal development and to realise infrastructure efficiencies.

Capital investments

Council invested in the establishment of a project management office (PMO) in 2020, following a critical review of previous poorly executed capital projects.

Council's procurement policy is outdated. That has been recognised and a new draft was being prepared at the time of the assessment. Approval is anticipated by 30 June 2022.

The PMO provides an internal hub for procurement, management and reporting on capital projects to maximise oversight and coordination. The PMO has developed procedures, reporting frameworks and templates to support the timely delivery of projects within budget.

Council has also established two project advisory boards over large projects currently underway (Marton Rail Hub and centralisation of wastewater for Marton and Bulls). Membership of these boards includes the Chief Executive, Chief Operating Officer and several elected members and external subject matter experts. The advisory boards provide critical oversight but have no decision-making ability.

Despite the relatively recent introduction of the PMO, it appears to be well-embedded and respected both internally and externally. PMO staff are motivated to ensure continual process improvement in Council's delivery of capital projects.

Accountability reporting

Council has not had a strong track record in external accountability performance. For example, the current LTP and immediately previous Annual Plan and Annual Report do not explicitly state Council's progress against levels of service and performance measures. However, this has now been rectified in the draft Annual Report 2020, which goes a long way to improving accountability reporting to the public.

In terms of internal accountability reporting, Statement of Service Provision metrics are reported quarterly through the Policy/Planning committee. Additionally, major capital projects are reported to elected members every month. The Finance/Performance Committee receives a detailed breakdown of financial performance bi-monthly, including capital expenditure and the reasons associated with any significant variances.

Strengths

Service delivery and asset management staff are highly knowledgeable of their subject areas and display a strong commitment to continuous improvement.

Council's unrelenting approach to health, safety and well-being is well understood and embedded across service teams.

Council's spatial planning exercise should deliver an effective and integrated approach to land use and infrastructure planning.

Council's commitment to project management through the PMO is producing considerable benefits.

Areas for improvement

A more thorough approach to strategic risk identification is needed.

Confidence in asset condition knowledge is low.

Council's procurement policy is outdated and in need of refreshing.

Opportunities exist for Council to give greater attention to its rubbish and recycling functions.

Listening and responding

Communicating and engaging with the public and businesses

Council demonstrates a high level of awareness of its community. The effectiveness of its communication and engagement processes is improving.

Priority grading

Competent

< Council is investing in communications to ensure its engagement across a broad spectrum of community and stakeholder groups is effective. >

Council has recently adopted a Communications and Marketing Strategy, the purpose of which is to guide communication and engagement activities and to improve public participation in democratic processes. Internal communications activities have been incorporated to support external communications and marketing activities. The strategy sets out Council's approach to communications in relation to its vision, well-being pillars and community outcomes. However, it does not assess several matters that could lead to continuous improvement in communication and engagement practice.

Reputation

Although 'reputational risk' is listed in Council's strategic risks document, Council does not formally assess its reputation within the community or with key stakeholders. That means it cannot reliably know if its reputation within the community is improving or declining.

Council indicated that it plans to dispense with annual residents' surveys in the future and to replace these with different tools. These new tools would include a 'happy or not' system at service centres and a QR code system at parks and facilities to obtain electronic feedback. These tools provide a 'point of service' approach to gauging feedback from users of its services. However, they are incapable of providing reliable information on specific services, issues or Council reputation. Segmenting feedback by ward, age, gender, ethnicity or other categories of interest may also not be possible.

Communicating through the media

Council does not have a Media Strategy or Policy. This is not inherently a problem, because only three people are authorised to speak to media, namely the Mayor, the Chief Executive and the General Manager of Democracy and Planning. All three have received media training.

Council has a very open relationship with the media. It normally requires the media to provide questions in writing and written responses are then provided. Despite this, some reporters contact the Mayor directly for comment on various topical matters and the Mayor often provides a direct reply.

Council has recently adopted a Social Media Policy, but policy elements are quite general, leaving room for misinterpretation — especially in relation to lines of responsibility and accountability.

Apart from monitoring website traffic, Council does not appear to undertake any meaningful monitoring or evaluation of communications effectiveness.

Engagement with central government

Council works closely with several central government agencies, and the Mayor indicated that he has a direct line to some Ministers. On questioning, Council advised that the Chief Executive was the preferred first point of contact.

Council regularly makes formal submissions on central government consultations. Recent examples include climate change, freedom camping and the building code.

While the Council does not have a formal strategy to engage proactively with central government agencies in areas of infrastructure and legislative/regulatory reform, it appears engaged and responsive.

Engagement with Māori

Rangitikei District Council has a relatively mature relationship with local iwi/hapū. While this includes formal memoranda with Tangata Whenua o Rangitikei and Te Rūnanga o Ngā Wairiki Ngāti Apa, the strength of the relationship appears to sit with Te Roopuu Ahi Kaa (TRAK). TRAK is an advisory group comprised of iwi representatives who act on behalf of their people to support and assist local governance and operations. TRAK appears well-respected amongst Council staff and elected members. In

addition, TRAK members have speaking and voting rights on Council standing committees.

There is evident respect for the location of Rātana Pā within the district and an appreciation of the unique role of Rātana within Māoridom. One elected member was born and lives at Rātana, and new staff often visit Rātana as part of their induction. This provides both spiritual and intellectual elements to Council's well-being framework and, to a certain degree, informs Council's governance approach.

Council has a Strategic Advisor who works closely with whānau, hapū and iwi, in accordance with a work programme developed by TRAK and known as the Māori Responsiveness Framework. The Strategic Advisor often takes Council staff to marae to discuss topical issues directly. This direct approach helps build effective relationships and understanding.

The Māori Responsiveness Framework provides several KPIs which serve to measure the effectiveness of Council's engagement with iwi/hapū. Although monitoring KPIs is not available yet, Council indicated it intends to use this information to further inform Council's approach to Māori engagement.

Council's engagement with Māori can be summarised with a quote by one hapū leader, "We no longer have to fight for a place around the table, we are shifting out of survival mode and into a collaborative mindset".

Engaging with the community

Council appears to have an ad hoc approach to engagement with the business community. However, it is developing a Community Engagement Project to provide staff with clear guidance and step-by-step information to support them when formal community engagement is required.

The Mayor is especially active in relation to engagement with key industry sectors. Though commendable, thought should be given to the appropriateness of this approach going forward to ensure it supports and does not circumvent the work of Council's recently appointed Economic Development Advisor.

The Community Development Team has recently started hosting sessions to enable various business groups to meet informally and discuss matters of interest. Council has received positive feedback from event attendees.

Council undertook pre-engagement with the community prior to the formal LTP consultation. This involved taking engagement collateral to the community in various locations — the intent being to go to where the community was, not requiring the

community to come to Council. Council received a high number of submissions, especially in the rural communities.

Strengths

Council's relationship with iwi and hapū is mature and effective.

Te Roopuu Ahi Kaa komiti is well respected and has speaking and voting rights at Council meetings.

Quality and consistency of communications documents is high due to in-house graphic capability.

Council is exploring digital tools for engagement however, opportunities exist for a more holistic approach comprising a variety of traditional and non-traditional channels.

Areas for improvement

Council reputation is not currently assessed within the community or amongst key stakeholders.

Enactment of a media policy and an enhanced social media policy is needed if Council is to utilise these channels effectively.

Communications training for all elected members would be beneficial to reduce risk and ensure capability extends beyond the current Mayor.

Council may wish to consider the alignment of its engagement goals with the resource it provides to achieve them.

Closer alignment between elected member and officer effort in relation to economic development activity would be helpful.

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