



CouncilMARK™ local government excellence programme

Frequently Asked Questions

Overview of the CouncilMARK™ local government excellence programme

Q. What is the programme all about?

A. The CouncilMARK™ programme is best described as a measure of performance assessment and continuous improvement that assists councils to deliver top service and value to their communities.

CouncilMARK™ incorporates an independent assessment system that assesses how councils are performing and the value they are delivering. Councils receive an overall performance rating from a team of independent assessors and commentary on their performance.

Q. What are the key elements?

A. The CouncilMARK™ programme incorporates a set of performance measurement principles, an over-arching performance framework and a set of underlying performance indicators that guide the team of independent assessors.

Q. Who are the Independent Assessment Board (IAB)?

A. An independent board of three members appointed to oversee the Programme's assessment system and the provision of assessment ratings and reports to councils. The IAB is responsible for confirming the performance system, and also recruiting and overseeing the team of assessors that undertake the assessments.

Q. What do the independent assessors do?

A. The independent assessors undertake the participating councils' assessments and draft the assessment reports for the IAB to review.

Q. What is the purpose of CouncilMARK™ – lift reputation or lift performance?

A. The CouncilMARK™ local government excellence programme aims to lift both council and sector performance and reputation; the latter follows the former. The 2015 New Zealand Local Government Survey and recent Colmar Brunton research for the programme found residents, ratepayers and businesses under-value council services and see low value in service delivery.

Performance is as much about demonstrating value as it is about delivering it. If customers and communities know about and value council services, council reputation will improve. Similarly, sector reputation lifts as council reputation improves.

Q. Won't negative performance results make local government reputation worse?

A. Poor performance should be transparent and used to inform debate about areas of improvement. CouncilMARK™ is not a search for failure or individual poor performance. Assessment is a continuous process based on reliable data showing where value sits and where improvements can be made.

Demonstrating service and improved value, and credible action plans to achieve this, lead to a better reputation over time.

Q. Is CouncilMARK™ sector-centric or focusing primarily on lifting individual council performance? How can it be sector-centric unless all councils take part?

A. CouncilMARK™ addresses both council and sector performance by providing data for councils to lift performance. If council performance improves, sector performance will also lift over time.

While CouncilMARK™ is voluntary, over time it will hopefully involve all councils. The more councils involved in CouncilMARK™ the more customers and communities will benefit.

LGNZ invited a small group of Foundation Members to take part in the first year of the programme from July 2016. A new prospectus was released in October 2017 and a further tranche of councils will participate from 2017.

Q. Why are residents and ratepayers termed “customers” and not “citizens”?

A. In the Colmar Brunton research for the CouncilMARK™ local government excellence programme, residents, ratepayers and business people generally preferred the term “customer”. They largely have a transactional relationship with councils, and using the term “customer”, they believe, can incentivise councils to generate increased value for them.

Q. How did you come up with the CouncilMARK™ name?

A. The brand name CouncilMARK™ has been developed as a signal to residents, businesses and the community of the quality of service and value that participating councils deliver.

Q. How will the programme work with Council Control Organisations (CCOs)? Can the same indicators apply?

A. CCOs are not open to assessment although this may be reconsidered in future years.

Assessment process

Q. How often are councils assessed under the programme?

A. Councils will be assessed every three years. As part of the programme’s future design refinement, the IAB may offer a “re-assessment”, where councils may seek to re-evaluate their progress on a more frequent basis, or the rating will be re-assessed due to a material change in a council’s circumstances.

Q. Do stakeholders such as business and the public have input into the programme?

A. Some areas of the programme, such as engagement and communications, involve a 360-degree review, which includes stakeholder and customer feedback.

Q. How is the programme verifiable as independent and credible?

A. The programme is overseen by an Independent Assessment Board, working to a set of guiding principles in order to:

- 1) ensure the assessments are based on accurate and understandable information from councils;
- 2) provide information in a form that allows non-expert residents and businesses to readily and easily assess the performance of a council;
- 3) provide information that is factually accurate in the case of quantitative indicators, or is the genuinely held, reasonable and professional view of an assessor in the case of qualitative indicators, in order to provide an objective and independent judgement of the performance of councils;
- 4) provide a forward-looking, long-term strategic perspective on a council's performance; and

Independence is central to the programme.

The board has appointed independent assessors, who are specialists with skills in the four priority assessment areas. The assessor team has been announced publicly.

Profiles of the independent assessment board and independent assessors are available at www.councilmark.co.nz.

Q. Are there international benchmarks to compare council performance? If so, are they comparable with those proposed for New Zealand councils?

A. International local government performance programmes were considered during development of the CouncilMARK™ programme. However, as New Zealand local government conditions are not directly comparable with those of other countries, the Local Government Excellence programme is a bespoke system, tailored for New Zealand. The programme incorporates overseas best practice and assessment measures used by central government and the private sector. It also complements the SOLGM internal assessment programme (the “Australasian LG Performance Excellence Program”).

Q. What are the four areas for assessment?

A. The four priorities areas for CouncilMARK™ are:

- 1) excellence in governance, leadership and strategy;
- 2) excellence and transparency in financial decision-making;
- 3) excellence in service delivery and asset management; and
- 4) strong engagement with the public and businesses.

Q. What are the actual performance indicators for each priority area?

A. The performance indicators are in the Performance Assessment Framework. They were developed by LGNZ and Cameron Partners and were extensively tested and discussed with councils, stakeholders, and before being used to assess councils.

Q. Can councils be compared with others?

A. Direct comparisons are not always possible, but a rating and commentary are provided so councils and their community can identify where service and value are being demonstrated and delivered.

The assessment rating includes commentary on the council to help readers understand the context behind the results and make comparisons with other councils. Councils are encouraged to share learnings and best practice.

Q. Will there be an audit of the assessment?

A. The IAB review each assessment, and finalise the ratings and overall grade. Results are released to participating councils and to the public on the CouncilMARK™ website www.councilmark.co.nz and the council's own website.

Q. Will you moderate the results across councils?

A. The results from the first assessments of Foundation Members were reviewed and moderated by the IAB prior to being publicly released. This process helped ensure the assessment approach has been applied consistently across councils.

Q. What information is supplied by participating councils to the assessors?

A. Information that councils are already asked to publish by legislation is included in Performance Assessment Framework. However, assessors will typically go beyond this information to understand how a council operates. In addition, performance in areas such as governance, engagement and communications are generally not reported as part of annual statutory reporting by councils. The information required is listed in the Performance Assessment Framework.

Foundation Members

Q. What does it mean to be a Foundation Member?

A. Foundation Members were the leaders and early adopters of the Local Government Excellence programme in 2016. They were involved in the micro-design of the programme, helping to refine the performance assessment system and communication of the performance assessments and ratings. There was no performance threshold for Foundation Members, merely a strong commitment at both governance and management level to be involved in partnering with LGNZ on the programme, for the benefit of the council and the local government sector.

There are 18 Foundation Members. Councils applied to be Foundation Members and were determined by a selection panel that assessed registrations in June 2016.

Post assessment

Q. Are councils required to publicly release their assessment results?

A. The independent assessment board will publish the final report including the grades and overall rating on the programme website www.councilmark.co.nz

The councils are encouraged to publish their reports on their own website and through other targeted channels for their communities. Transparency is a key principle behind the programme.

Q. If a council withdraws from the programme, will this be public?

A. Yes. The programme is fully transparent.

Q. Are the results of the assessment review binding on council plans and operations?

A. No. It is up to councils to decide what to do with results.

The programme provides data, information and ratings to help make service trade-offs more explicit, and help the council and its community make decisions.

Q. Will customers and communities have an opportunity to comment on programme results?

A. The results will be public. It is up to councils to consider customer and community engagement on the reports, areas for improvement and action plans.

Q. What happens if a council does nothing with its assessment?

A. There is no sanction, although councils are strongly encouraged to use the assessment results to lift future performance.

Q. What happens to councils who refuse to participate in the programme?

A. The programme is voluntary.

Q. What will LGNZ and EquiP do to assist in areas needing improvement?

A. By agreement, EquiP will provide services, tools and share best practice with participating councils to help them improve areas of performance identified in the assessment. EquiP will employ experts in these areas who can directly assist and work with councils.

Councils are also welcome to seek support from other councils and external agencies. LGNZ will be encouraging and facilitating the sharing of best practice amongst the sector.

Supporting documentation

[Local Government Excellence programme prospectus](#)