

WE ARE.

Lifting council
performance

“Agile bureaucracy”

Far North District Council
CouncilMARK™ Case Study



Key Insights

The Far North District Council (FNDC) is using the CouncilMARK™ Programme as a key lever in its continuous improvement transformation programme. This Case Study outlines the rationale for that path and the FNDC's expectations for subsequent assessments and its on-going improvement challenges.

There are those organisations which use an assessment framework as a point-in-time validation of their success or, as in credit rating terms, a reflection of their astuteness in managing the resources they have at that time. There are others which take the reality of an independent assessment and shape it around the opportunities they see as possible rather than just the present; using this as one critical component in a much more comprehensive toolbox of challenge, change and growth, to add value to the community they serve. FNDC has chosen the latter path in their desire to be progressive in their decisions and actions; excellent in all they do; and faithful to the commitment to better, and continually, serve their constituents. To that end, FNDC are strong advocates of LGNZ's CouncilMARK™ Programme and have embedded this into their overarching transformational improvement programme where any potential "distraction" associated with assessment reflection is viewed as an essential investment into becoming a better and stronger organisation.

Key insights into how the FNDC views its participation in the CouncilMARK™ Programme, and the importance of continuous improvement include:

- 1. The Programme is seen as a means to an end, not an end in itself** – CouncilMARK™ is seen as an essential tool by FNDC for continuous improvement, rather than an outcome in itself, and is embedded into the organisation as part of its DNA.
- 2. Every component of assessment and review adds value** – to become better will always require an investment in time, commitment and engagement. FNDC see review, reflection and planning as a critical investment which adds value, rather than a cost of doing business.
- 3. Benefit of a point-in-time stocktake** – the assessment score is a validation of a point-in-time and through a brief but comprehensive assessment window. In spite of assessment face-to-face time, there is sufficient rigour and robust drilling to assess the fundamentals and appreciate the momentum in place.
- 4. Each part of the puzzle matters** – CouncilMARK™ is a long-haul journey and only one lens against which FNDC should be viewing its short-haul sectors to achieve best value and benefit. Any industry benchmarking is useful, notably where this provides comparison and assessment against peers. FNDC remains aware of this and has articulated the relevance, impact and value it sees in maintaining and developing its CouncilMARK™ focus as a critical component in delivering excellence.
- 5. Proactively seeking feedback** – FNDC has embarked on initiatives, such as its Shadow Review, as mechanisms in the assessment process and criteria that show how it has developed and improved, rather than as a "time stamp" metric. For continuous improvement, the steps, gains, changes and recalibrations are equally as important in determining benefit and value as a score card.
- 6. Progress and change as an element of culture** – A change culture becomes the norm when a methodology such as CouncilMARK™ is integrated as a component of the change transformation journey. CouncilMARK™ is not seen as a "bolt on" but a key driver behind the continuous improvement mind-set which is now embedded in FNDC.

SERVES

64,400

PEOPLE



MAKES UP 2.729%

OF NEW ZEALAND'S
TOTAL LAND AREA

7,316 km²



Background

FNDC's 2017 CouncilMARK™ assessment resulted in an overall “B” rating; somewhat of a shock result, and much lower than expected but unsurprising given the turmoil within FNDC at the time. A fractious Council table; delays in the appointment of a permanent executive; underperforming infrastructure, and apparent lack of investment; and an unwillingness to front the public, rightfully anxious to know what FNDC was delivering or, more importantly, failing to deliver for them.



OBSERVATIONS FROM THE 2017 COUNCILMARK™ ASSESSMENT REPORT (2017)

Driven by its commitment to the district, FNDC is open and willing to pursue continuous performance improvements and to take steps to address its challenges.

“The FNDC has improved its performance but there are several identified areas for improvement. There is willingness at the Council for this to occur. The Far North, which is still suffering in parts from deprivation, needs economic growth and an active Council to support this. There is little room for an increase in Council income from residents who are often on fixed and low incomes, and Council rates and charges are already high compared to average household incomes. The Council is responsive to its communities and has committed staff whom are open to improvement...”

The FNDC has significant issues in providing cost effective and affordable levels of service that its residents expect and require. Priorities and hard decisions will be needed on what services to deliver, at what cost and when.

To assist efficiency, the FNDC would benefit from a clear separation of governance from operations. These are not clearly separated, which constrains operations from being fully productive and inhibits the development of a supportive culture.

The FNDC is committed to performance improvements. With a new (2017) Chief Executive, it has the opportunity to further lift its performance and to facilitate the district's economic growth.

< This Case Study is a snapshot of an organisation which has taken a shock defeat and is using that as a game-changer to drive excellence in stewardship and service delivery through a tough but fundamental commitment to continuous improvement. >

THE FOCUS WAS TO UNDERSTAND:



How the FNDC has reacted to its CouncilMARK™ assessment (2017) and subsequent Shadow Review (2019);



The way in which FNDC is embarking on a journey of continuous improvement with CouncilMARK™ as a key assessment tool; and



The expectations of FNDC in terms of assessment criteria.

Part A:

Establishing the base line

“Sometimes you have to fail to learn.” The brutality of this statement is a constant reminder to FNDC that, based on their disappointing (in their view) 2017 “B” rating, they had some way to go.

Albeit can a “B” rating be considered a failure and is this mark in time the definitive end point of what should be a continuum? Anything short of excellence is now a disappointment for FNDC which is seeking to challenge and improve itself daily, while actively responding to its community needs and delivering value over and above the cost of service.

Elected members will readily admit that “there is humility in learning from others and from ourselves”. The response to the CouncilMARK™ assessment, and subsequent shadow review, has been received with humility where a plan of response and action has been moulded to meet the framework provided. The intent of a now joined up FNDC, is justifiably not humble, but rather forthright in the drive and expectation it has on its performance, improvement and service delivery to its constituents.

As paraphrased from the words of a novice Councillor with organisational and governance intuition beyond youth:

< “We have rules, statutes, legislation, guidelines and frameworks. These should not be seen as constraints or nooses to restrict and hobble us. These should be seen as a means to protect and steer us within our decision-making and to make good decisions for our communities. Bureaucracy isn’t a negative thing, in fact, when used appropriately it can be very powerful – for us, we just need to be seen as being more fluid and flexible within these guidelines – we need to demonstrate agile bureaucracy! CouncilMARK™ will help us with that.” >

The “B” word

As His Worship, John Carter, long-serving Mayor of FNDC, so eloquently states in response to the 2017 CouncilMARK™ assessment Grade: “There’s nothing flash about a ‘B.’”

Indeed, as a stand-alone marker in time this may very well be true. For a local authority intent on being progressive, commercially astute and community responsive, this “B” signals a challenge which they would now easily translate into: be Better, Bolder, Bound, and Bountiful.

The 2017 CouncilMARK™ assessment could have gone two ways for FNDC. Either receiving the mark and rejecting its currency, or accepting it as a valid reflection and doing something about it. The acceptance of a “B” was the jolt FNDC needed to spur them into a needed change process. Let’s not underestimate the magnitude of this process, it requires commitment throughout the organisation, the ability to be unified in defending decisions, on-going review and reflection to verify the correct path is chosen and vulnerability and a readiness to expose the gaps so these can be addressed.

Fundamentally, it needs to know what the base line is so it can chart and measure the journey to betterment. To understand FNDC’s continuous improvement journey requires a stocktake of the assessment process and progress. Before dealing with the detail of any improvement process, the following is a summary of the issues at the crux of the matter that needed to be addressed.

(How) Can we work with each other?

Overcoming the first challenge: developing trust

THE 2017 COUNCILMARK™ ASSESSMENT NOTED:

< “To improve operational efficiencies and to develop a more constructive working relationship between councillors and staff, councillors need to minimise their intervention in operational matters.” >

Governance interference can only occur less or not at all where and when there is sufficient trust in the organisation which they lead.

The situation of governance overreach is not unique to FNDC but one, at the time of assessment, felt to be of sufficient magnitude as to result in a variable result in the assessment quadrant of ‘Governance, Leadership and Strategy’. The fix has needed to be deliberate and well considered at all levels as the result of self-reflection and review. Assistance has been sought, welcomed and implemented with initiatives such as the embracing of LGNZ’s Governance Diagnostic tool and the structured on-boarding

programme engaged for the last triennial election. Any past governance and management divide cannot be remedied by isolated events alone. To be relevant and meaningful requires a culture of trust and respect, and this awakening has been the driver behind meaningful change which appears to be benefiting the organisation as a whole.

“The battle rhythm between governance and the organisation had been out of sync.”

This sentiment was expressed by both elected members and senior managers. While the battle rhythm may have been discordant, the wake-up call to take action was sufficiently recognised and appears to have been heeded. The Mayor reports that he is proud to lead outstanding Councillors and an outstanding Council and the work that is going into ensuring a cohesive organisation is paying dividends.

“Elected members are not the enemy - although some have made enemies of themselves in the past. We just need to be informed; it’s a team effort”.

There is universal agreement that, in the past, staff have been under siege both from their communities and elected members.

Listening and responding is now the norm. This is a bold move from what was a closed and protective organisation, often plagued with friction and factions at a governance level, and an organisation struggling to maintain currency against an arsenal of assault more typically evidenced in the battery of guerrilla warfare; staff often used as both the targets and ammunition, rather than a joined-up collective approach to strategy through its execution. Roles and responsibilities are now formalised and normalised with the demonstration of boundaries understood and accepted as right and proper.

“Emergencies and crisis tend to focus you...”

The responses to Covid-19 and to the drought have been outstanding from a governance view. However, the onslaught of new projects coming through the relief packages will add pressure to an already strained organisation and FNDC must find ways of resourcing this or dealing with it through robust prioritisation. This may result in an overhaul of legacy capital projects, once deemed non-negotiable, or a comprehensive reprioritisation of services and works, with additional projects assessed and programmed logically and meaningfully.

With little surge capacity in FNDC, this situation has been inevitable. A foundation of high calibre staff remains overlaid with issues in attracting more staff with similar credentials and capabilities to offset capacity issues. Demand for capability is now a nationwide issue and FNDC will be competing with its peers and the private sector contractors required to deliver operationally. Adding to the project pile simply to appease will lead to frustration and angst both regionally and nationally. A currently strained organisation will need to respond to this.

“The more we share the better we are.”

Governors acknowledge that the business is led by a Chief Executive who is open, with this openness cascading through the organisation. This openness manifests itself in the readiness of all to seek advice and counsel, to alert pressure points early and to ensure and enable a willingness to forewarn, which are all now seen as part of the normal. This openness and connectivity is shoring up the trust between governance and the organisation.

There is a noted significance in the change of relationship between elected members and staff which was acknowledged as being lacking at the time of the initial assessment. Relationships between senior leadership team and staff, and senior leaders and elected members are strengthening. Both sides are listening to each other and recognising that there is benefit in being informed. FNDC has initiated a “date and promise” ideology which provides members with updates and status reporting on issues raised and of identified significance. While still in its infancy, this process is destined to develop into a system of consequence and accountability rather than update, which will further enhance the level of trust and understanding of elected members. As a collective, there now appears to be a willingness of staff compared to an obvious resistance in the past.

Reputation in and of the sector is critical.

It is this reputation that compares and contrasts similar Council delivery with the anticipated benefit of shoring up trust and confidence from residents and the public at large. CouncilMARK™ is seen as an aid to prove a robust reputation, and enables the flexibility, through the application of continuous improvement, to foster innovation and enterprise of the progressive Council imagined and shaped by its leaders.

With a growing internal reputation, the next challenge is to build wider standing and support from central government and neighbouring councils.

Do we all know where we are going?

The second challenge: a Strategy for change

< The Council would benefit from a more focused and integrated vision that is supported by affordable and achievable goals for its district. To be effective, the vision should consistently be applied in all Council decision areas and documents. >

The 2017 assessment highlighted that FNDC had no view of the future, its function was to respond to disparate and random requests along with a single-focus agenda. The assessment resonated organisationally and culminated in a Target Operating Model – a view of what the end-state would and should look like.

The resulting assessment score was the catalyst needed to fill the vacuum of the continuous improvement journey. Focusing specific initiatives into a transformation programme has been informative and telling in providing clarity around the scope and scale of the challenges ahead which are essential in closing the assessment gaps.

This has been a very reactive Council – silo orientated and disconnected. The endorsement of the district strategy and vision (FN2100) has been a means of connecting and correcting that. The end game is now visible and the contributing parts to achieve that are congruous across the quadrants of leadership, finance, infrastructure and service delivery, and community engagement.

Continually reviewing strategic intent against the CouncilMARK™ assessment commentary and grades is reportedly improving the maturity around the transformation programme through its structure and local government angle.

Who are we doing this for?

Challenge three: Recognising that our community is at the heart of what we do

< “The Council’s communications and customer services should work more closely together, to ensure issues are managed in a coordinated way and the Council’s messages are consistent. Customer services would benefit from improved systems for measuring the customer experience.” >

An organisation that is in tune with, responds to, and acknowledges its customer needs appears to be emerging. An operating rhythm is unfolding that should, in time, deliver a well-balanced and calibrated service offering, naturally pegged to affordability and the future. While people, process, and systems envelop the customer, these are progressing in a way which maintains the needs of the customer (resident, ratepayer, stakeholders, and affiliates) as the fulcrum around which the support structures pivot. This said, the issues noted above regarding the impact of Crown funded projects to fuel economic recovery need to be woven into the community messaging to the extent that residents understand the balance between level of service experience and the preparation of services for future generations.

The concept of communication will still need to extend across the organisation. Foundation work in building on the customer experience is progressing with the expectation that, in time, all staff will be communicators with this not just the role of the communications team.

How do we resource, fund and grow?

Challenge number four: It’s also about demand for services and how we fund them.

< The quality of the data on the Council’s assets (particularly underground assets such as water) needs to improve, so that it can be used effectively in performance management. The Council’s performance management criteria also needs to be improved, to better manage infrastructure planning and to deliver what the Council says it will deliver. >

The 2017 Assessment resulted in a variable grade for service delivery and asset management.

The complexity of managing assets and services is being hampered by the lack of reliable data and quantifiable condition assessments of visible, but more significantly, the buried assets of the water networks. The cost of renewing, maintaining and replacing these is typically astronomical, with good decision making only supported by reliable and sensible information.

Readiness of data and information will be on-going with variability for some time to come. The FN2100 strategy has identified growth and development areas that attract priority, and therefore priority of asset data. Without confidence in asset condition, it is inevitable that all quadrants of the assessment will be negatively impacted: leadership and strategy is likely to be fixed on a short-term horizon pending the ability to make long-term infrastructure decisions that are meaningful; financial decision-making remains hampered by the physical asset uncertainty that these decisions are reliant on; communicating and engagement likely settle back to the reactive state and target a defensive position around catch-up and uncertainty.

The solution can only be to aggressively progress plugging the data and information gaps with capital works promoted actively and passionately – focusing on the value creation for the long-term rather than the cost of the current.

“The Council’s commitment to shared services needs to be matched by investment in resources to support these services.”

In response, FNDC commented that “alliances are challenging and, in turn, being challenged; the roading alliance has finally found its feet with the water relationships still needing some time to reach equilibrium. While some finessing is needed, and willingly sought by all parties, progress has been pleasing.”

< “The Council would benefit from considering additional sources of revenue, or growth in the current sources, as means of increasing funding fairly across its communities and reducing its heavy reliance on rates.” >

“Migration to the Far North is a double-edged sword. For many retirees arriving from the likes of Auckland for life-style reasons it stimulates some growth, but they are often scaling back in terms of their disposable income, and still expect the same levels of service they have had in Auckland, and we just can’t afford to provide that.”

Resourcing remains an issue which is greater than the physical delivery of capital works programmes alone. There are challenges in the North, as in many parts of the country that need to be factored and assessed. Certainly the delivery of capital programmes aligned to agreements in the Long Term Plan should be a focus and this will become more constrained by the addition of Crown funded projects allocated to the North in an attempt to further stimulate the economy. As noted, these legacy programmes should rightly be subject to ongoing review and reconsideration, in light of a vastly changing and challenging landscape.

The attraction of talent to the region remains a consistent struggle. It is not just about filling spaces in terms of capacity, but having the right capability in those spaces. FNDC continues to challenge the organisation around delivery and people gaps, and continues to offer support to fill and fund these, but the challenges of the right fit remain. If there is one issue that is likely to challenge the tsunami of trust which has swelled, it is the harsh reality of the debate around capacity and capability; confident governors will be prepared for it and capable managers will have factored it.

“To assist with district and economic development, the Council should increase its involvement with Māori/iwi. Active involvement of Māori/iwi in the long-term planning process would signal the Council’s increased commitment to iwi.”

Northland’s economic woes feature routinely in the national press and FNDC continually scans and evaluates its options for economic development. FNDC has resolved to enter a regional economic venture where this may not be residing immediately in the Far North’s geographic jurisdiction. However, economic development and investment do not need to be on one’s own doorstep to be generally beneficial. For example, getting people and goods to Whangarei more efficiently and economically has a flow-on effect to the Far North in tourism, freight and logistics, and transport efficiency generally. It’s where you put your efforts, energy and finances for greatest return that is the strategic cue and, for now, that resonates with the Far North.

Part B: Continuous improvement with CouncilMARK™

The narrative covered to date has touched on FNDC's responses to its 2017 assessment with an overlay of actions taken, or recorded by FNDC, as relevant to its needed change journey.

FNDC is confident that change is happening. The 2017 assessment served to put a stop to any over-confidence that was clearly alive and very active at the time. The disappointment of the assessment grade served to:

- › Recalibrate the elected member and management interface. The chasm that existed appears to have been bridged in an investment programme that hasn't required infrastructure funding;
- › Affordability considerations questioned. This challenge requires recovery in both internal and external transformation initiatives. Elected members are unified in their commitment to infrastructure spend as both necessity and through the current recovery where options for funding greater than the Rates take are being sought.
- › Capital works delivery is actively questioned. This has progressed from a blame culture of non-performance to an inclusive debate around on-going affordability and development appropriateness in light of community need and value.

The rationale behind the initial foray by FNDC into the CouncilMARK™ Programme may have altered from that of up-start juvenile flexing its muscle to find its peers not needing to, to that of a learning and developing organisation. The start point is now irrelevant; what is telling, though, is the message that FNDC took from its initial assessment as a key learning, rather than the grade noted on the front cover.

< Driven by its commitment to the district, the Council is open and willing to pursue continuous performance improvements and to take steps to address its challenges. >

A planned and fortuitous series of events followed the initial assessment in 2017. The most significant being the term commencement of a new Chief Executive and the then reformed leadership team tasked with moving the organisation from the point of internal perception to matched reality.

In any organisation a change and culture development programme will have its detractors, challengers and challenges, and wobbles. This is an organisation that acknowledges the existence of these and pushes forward regardless. With external support and guidance the "battle rhythm" is now developing to more a harmonic beat rather than a discordant thud, where battalion rigidity is nuanced with the essential human focus of interaction, collaboration, engagement and growth.

CouncilMARK™ is seen as an essential tool for continuous improvement, rather than an outcome in itself, and embedded into the organisation as part of its DNA.

With the disappointment of the 2017 assessment grade being a stark reminder of the impact of an independent and objective review, FNDC has advanced a number of initiatives aimed at developing preparedness for the next 3-yearly review cycle while reinforcing its transformation change programme to demonstrate that.

In mid-2019, FNDC requested a shadow CouncilMARK™ review, a two day representation and presentation of its subsequent improvement journey post-2017. The shadow review uses the same information, data, and framework as the independent assessors, but was designed to remain outside of the CouncilMARK™ Programme so as to maintain absolute independence and integrity of that process. Following the review, report commentary was provided and grades allocated to each review quadrant. An overall assessment rating was not provided. It is understood by FNDC that this shadow review is not part of the formal CouncilMARK™ process but useful in providing challenge and calibration of remediation and action.

While indicating areas of improvement and development, the shadow review maintained a stance of impartiality and objectivity, complimentary in the planning and preparation that has occurred but requiring demonstrated action and accountability in a number of areas. FNDC has, again, embraced those findings and integrated recommendations into its dynamic improvement framework.

The shadow review provided a mid-point stock-take of the change programme and served to renew accountabilities, reprioritisation of initiatives and essentials. This has served as a structured calibrating tool against the continuous improvement landscape.

Subsequent stock-takes have been undertaken, again with independent assessment to validate the improvement trajectory and rightly question approach, decision and action. CEO, Shaun Clarke, has presented to the LGNZ Rural and Provincial Sector about the FNDC CouncilMARK™ experience, along with its application as a continuous improvement tool. Even these examples have served to highlight that reflection aids self-assessment and further provides an opportunity for reconsideration and further change.

As reported by FNDC, value has already been delivered. It is not only about the next score or assessment process – that will remain an essential calibrating tool. While an improved assessment grade will provide affirmation of the continuous improvement journey it is not the critical metric for FNDC. The criticality is around how the organisation is developing to deliver much needed value to its communities.

Council will summarise the improvement journey with the following:

- The assessment framework and mind-set has altered thinking to that of greater than the dollar spent to one of value delivery and community benefit.
- Both staff and elected members are acutely aware of how CouncilMARK™ fits into their continuous improvement mind-set. The language is changing across FNDC; there are now agenda items on improvement and development along with the impact of CouncilMARK™ as a calibration. Future expectations of grade are discussed and debated with objectives clarified around gap closure.
- The lens and focus is not solely on the score, either current or projected, but on what the improvement will do for customers, residents and the community at large. Any change must add value, and CouncilMARK™ is adding to that value.
- Lessons learned from both the original assessment and shadow review have been received positively both vertically and horizontally through the organisation with a clear understanding as to what needs to be done, and by whom.
- In spite of the first smouldering of continuous improvement, FNDC is still occasionally guilty of fighting fires ignited by the minority voice. The journey to continuous improvement, supported by information flows and structured planning, will position FNDC to understand and accept that it is not necessary to react to everything.
- Succession at the council table is now a consideration thanks to a closer focus on governance, leadership and strategy. No longer is the status quo of “wait and see” who is elected and what has to be lived with. There is responsibility for managing and leading the strategic direction of FNDC at the council table which now translates into a cohesive and unified strategy and vision for the district.
- A benefit of subscribing and supporting the CouncilMARK™ Programme is rounding out the understanding as to what part each component plays in the organisation and the delivery of services and internal and external expectations. Support from LGNZ, wider than the CouncilMARK™ assessment but linked to each of its quadrants, has been beneficial in terms of governance diagnostic, on-boarding of elected members, and through to the finer detail of performance indicator establishment at an executive level.
- Performance reporting against the improvement plan is becoming more regular but there is a desire to see this presented as a routine agenda item both at the strategic leadership and council forum.

- In local government context, there is a poor perception of councils and often with no substance. Where the perception is reality, CouncilMARK™ is a solid framework against which to benchmark and from which to leverage to achieve and deliver value.
- Elected members, through portfolio allocations, are seeking ways to drive excellence both through their areas of responsibility and into the organisation. CouncilMARK™ is seen as an opportunity to reach excellence through the way it has confronted the organisation into action. Another example of where LGNZ is assisting with best practice delivery is in the development and introduction of more conversational executive key performance indicators. A bold move for many where the assessment becomes more subjective but essentially more attuned to the nuances of an organisation’s fabric and fibre, where absolute and objective are not always paramount or relevant.
- For new elected members, participating at the council table can often be a baptism of fire, notably where any dysfunctionality exists, lack of leadership prevails, single-agenda stances are taken, or the level of strategic direction is as far-sighted as the next complaint to be dealt with. FNDC appears to have matured to where any elements of this having existed are dissipating. Certainly there are areas to be improved; greater cohesion and links with community boards; clarity for portfolio holders around their terms of reference; occasional governance overreach into the operational arena etc. However, there is agreement that these gaps are being addressed. Largely as a result of transparency and information, and a unified strategic objective for FNDC.

Reputation matters?

FNDC is representative of many local authorities in terms of its internal challenges and external issues. What is significant here is that this is an organisation that has chosen to grow up. Rather than barricading itself behind the comfort of compliance, and the decision-delay mechanism of deliberation, FNDC has chosen to use the CouncilMARK™ independent assessment mechanism to confront itself with, and state to its peers, the gaps, short-falls and limitations it has. It has used these as a platform and benchmark against which to embark on a unified, cohesive and ambitious assignment of continuous improvement, against which it will be measured again at its next assessment in late 2020.

Will it succeed in improving its assessment rating? Of course that is totally objective and only known when the result comes in. What is more important for FNDC is the subjectivity of its own assessment, internal assessments and self-reflection. For any improvement in base-line score and overall rating, what remains unwavering is that this is a continual and exciting process that doesn’t stop at the end of each assessment cycle but occurs on a daily basis.

What is clear is that nothing short of excellence will suffice and the harshest critics will be FNDC themselves.

Part C:

Into the future

”Elected members are not the enemy - although some have made enemies of themselves in the past. We just need to be informed; it’s a team effort”.

Is the notion of agile bureaucracy a rallying catch cry to focus the troops on the battlefield of local government, or a diversionary smoke screen aimed to shield the FNDC from future assessment disappointment? The proof will become apparent at the next CouncilMARK™ assessment where the criteria for that assessment are transparently understood by FNDC at all levels. The common narrative and enthusiasm transmitted by FNDC’s elected members and staff alike would certainly lead to belief it is the former. There is a sense of unification across the entity that could not be contrived or whitewashed. Equally there is a sense of commitment and purpose that will be reflected in a value, against which FNDC will take heart, or perhaps stock.

For that process, FNDC will need to be cognisant of the following as part of its improvement journey:

How does FNDC prioritise and reassess its improvement initiatives?

CouncilMARK™ is recognised as a well-structured assessment approach to FNDC’s continuous improvement journey. As an improvement step change, FNDC could do with a more realistic approach to what actions and activities it bites off as part of its improvement prioritisation. The 2017 review resulted in an ambitious, somewhat zealous, listing of initiatives aimed to plug the gaps identified. There is a risk that, without robust prioritisation, there will be no semblance of order to methodically and logically deliver cohesion and the value to community sought by Council.

Has the improvement momentum resulted in augmented reality in the organisation?

Any issue with perception versus reality that needs to be addressed will become apparent with each objective assessment and it will take a bold organisation to accept that. Acknowledge success where you have determined it; celebrate success where others recognise it.

How does FNDC move from a focus on planning to plan, to planning to do?

A danger of trying to fix everything is that, often, many projects or initiatives are added to the list in an attempt to demonstrate activity, rather than action. These can be overwhelming, staff and contractors become overloaded, and finally the drivers become overlooked. The organisation must be flexible to deal with this by ensuring the end score is not the key metric, but the progress around delivery and action, relationship cohesion, and integrated decision-making take centre stage.

How is continuous improvement scaled where the closer the move to “excellence” and “perfection”, results in smaller increments to advancement and improvement?

Other than status quo, when you are at the top there is only one way to go. The issue then becomes how daily and long-term improvement initiatives will resonate with those charged to deliver them, where this isn’t easily translatable into an improved external metric. This becomes the challenge of the learning organisation where the heart is very much turned to the customer and art of service delivery.

How does FNDC develop a better understanding of the interrelationships between the assessment quadrants?

While the quadrants of governance, leadership and strategy; financial decision-making and transparency; service delivery and asset management; and communicating and engaging with the public and business, are each graded separately, there is an intrinsic interrelationship between each and all of them. FNDC cannot take pride in the movement in one, or several of these, without consideration for the total shift.

How have recent issues of drought and pandemic response distracted from a continuous improvement mind-set?

The new normal reinforces an on-going distraction to business as usual. FNDC’s adoption of an improvement mind-set has enabled it to quickly respond to challenges of significance such as these. The ability to reprioritise in motion; an increase in meeting frequency as a result of technology adoption; flexibility of working arrangements and the resulting efficiencies from this; signal flexibility of an organisation that is prepared to move from talking about what they will do, to actually doing it.

How will the organisation respond if there is no significant improvement in the next assessment grade?

FNDC will acknowledge that a similar or marginally improved assessment will be painful, but will be something they can deal with as part of an over-arching transformation programme. The reality is that it will matter and it will hurt, and it will likely destabilise any organisation for a period. FNDC has taken advice, counsel and challenge to know what is required of it to improve its assessment grade and how that will be calculated so as to avoid this pain and there is acknowledgement that this is understood.

How does FNDC view its current assessment grade against its peers?

Should the measure be only against only those who have been assessed through the CouncilMARK™ Programme, or the entirety of the local government collective? FNDC, being strong supporters of CouncilMARK™, would rightly question the voluntary aspect of this assessment framework in its ability to provide universal gauging. As more councils engage with this initiative the question becomes less relevant. The most meaningful parallel must, however, be made against one's own expectations and achievements.

For further information

Please refer to the CouncilMARK™ website www.councilmark.co.nz, or contact:

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A measure
for better
community value.

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