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Far North District Council

Independent assessment report | April 2021*

An independent assessment report issued by the Independent Assessment Board for the CouncilMARK[™] local government excellence programme. For more information visit www.councilmark.co.nz



A measure
for better
community value.

*
Period of Assessment November 2020

Assessment Summary

AT A GLANCE



The Far North, a large district at the northernmost tip of New Zealand with a diverse demography, is steeped in history and Māori culture. The local economy is founded on rural enterprise, support services and tourism.



The current situation

The Far North district stretches from Cape Rēinga at the northern tip of New Zealand down to the Bay of Islands and Hokianga. The Far North District Council serves the residents of Kaitaia, Kaikohe, Kawakawa, Kerikeri, Paihia and Russell, as well as several smaller settlements and rural and Māori communities. Over the last three years, Council has embarked on a transformation programme to resolve problems with core infrastructure and to improve the quality of service delivery.

Council is led by a Mayor with considerable public service experience, at both local and national levels. Operational leadership is provided by the Chief Executive, who joined the organisation in 2017.

Together, the Mayor and Chief Executive are leading a programme of change to resolve a range of performance issues and improve service delivery. In addition, work is underway to create a coherent and compelling long-term vision for the district. It is hoped that this will resolve the confusion that has arisen as a result of having several vision and mission statements.

The quality of Council's relations with iwi, the business sector and community groups has been variable, despite genuine attempts by both Council and the other parties to engage.

Period of assessment

The assessment was conducted on 1-3 November 2020.



\$2,261m
GROSS DOMESTIC
PRODUCT¹

SERVES

65,250

PEOPLE², A MIX OF
64.2% EUROPEAN/PAKEHA
48.3% MĀORI
4.8% PASIFIKA
3% ASIAN³



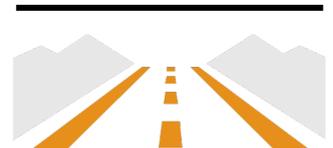
POPULATION TREND
GROWTH

MAKES UP
2.5%

OF NEW ZEALAND'S TOTAL LAND AREA
REPRESENTING FAR NORTH DISTRICT⁴,
FROM AUPŌURI PENINSULA,
ENCOMPASSING THE BAY OF ISLANDS
ON THE EAST COAST AND HOKIANGA ON
THE WEST COAST. AN AREA OF

6,678 km²

RESPONSIBLE FOR
2,507km
ROADS
212km
FOOTPATHS⁵



Key learnings

Council's main focus over the last three years has been on 'getting its house in order'. A significant programme of work is underway to improve Council's capability, systems and processes, infrastructure capacity and performance, and service delivery. Good progress has been made, staff engagement is high, and there are early signs that Council's efforts are starting to be acknowledged in the community.

- > Elected members have big aspirations for the communities they serve, and, together with an experienced Strategic Leadership Team (SLT), they are beginning to understand that high levels of responsiveness and service delivery are needed if community expectations are to be met.
- > Council, having received funding from central government for a \$100 million capital programme, has begun introducing new expertise to meet the challenges that brings.
- > This capability building is urgent, to ensure capital projects are completed on time and expected benefits are realised without compromising day-to-day service delivery.
- > An inherent tension between levels of service expectations and affordability needs careful management, to ensure community groups feel included in Council's decision-making.

[1. MBIE Modelled Territorial Authority GDP Data - 2020](#)

[2. Statistics NZ – 2018 Census Population summaries](#)

[3. Census respondents can select more than one ethnicity, resulting in higher than 100% calculation on ethnicity](#)

[4. DIA Profile – Far North District Council](#)

[5. Roads and Footpaths – Far North District Council Infrastructure Strategy 2018-48, p42](#)

Assessment Summary

continued...

OVERVIEW

Council is part way through a significant change programme to lift its performance and ensure it is well equipped to meet the service delivery expectations of the community. While it has made good progress, attention now needs to focus on delivery and results, to ensure desired service levels are consistently achieved.

RATING



Findings



COUNCIL HAS BIG ASPIRATIONS FOR THE DISTRICT, BUT A NEW COHERENT LONG-TERM VISION IS NEEDED TO UNDERPIN INVESTMENT AND SERVICE DELIVERY DECISIONS.

A compelling long-term vision should provide a platform to formulate strategy and ensure operations and asset management are aligned with community expectations.



COUNCIL SERVES THE NEEDS OF A WIDE RANGE OF COMMUNITY GROUPS, IWI AND OTHER INTERESTS, BUT CURRENT ENGAGEMENT IS PATCHY.

A concerted effort is required if higher levels of satisfaction are to be achieved. That includes Council consistently delivering against service level expectations and telling its improvement 'story' well.



COUNCIL HAS A GROWING CAPITAL WORKS PROGRAMME AND HAS RECENTLY SECURED SIGNIFICANT FUNDING FROM CENTRAL GOVERNMENT.

Careful planning, effective systems, great agility and a commitment to the long-term affordability of operations will be required, to ensure projects are delivered to expectations and desired benefits are realised.

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 legislation 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	Competent	Competent

STRENGTHS

Council leaders show strong intent to lift Council performance and to meet service level expectations and well-being outcomes.

Council has catalogued a series of long-standing problems and has made considerable progress to address them within affordability constraints.

Council has a strong Audit, Risk and Finance Committee supported by a capable Finance Team, as well as good risk and sustainable procurement frameworks.

AREAS OF IMPROVEMENT

Council vision and strategy lacks clarity and coherence, and are not explicitly aligned with asset management plans and service delivery strategies.

Management of three waters assets is weak, with Council struggling to consistently achieve regulatory standards and community expectations.

Relationships with iwi are sometimes poor, despite genuine attempts by Council to improve engagement and to establish support mechanisms.

A concerted effort is required to improve levels of community satisfaction and to tell Council's "improvement story".

Leading locally

Governance, leadership and strategy

Council acknowledges that it has struggled to meet the service delivery expectations of the community in recent years. A new long-term vision is being developed to provide a foundation for more effective decision-making and resource allocation. Competing interests are apparent, and these must be balanced if better outcomes are to be achieved.

Priority grading

Competent

< Council is united in its commitment to improving service delivery performance, for the betterment of all. >

Setting the direction for the community

Council has worked hard over recent years to build a solid foundation for Council planning, decision-making and delivery.

A vision statement “He Whenua Rangatira-a District of Sustainable Prosperity and Well-being” was developed in 2015 following an extensive community consultation process. In 2018, Council developed a mission expressed as “Creating great places and supporting our people”. Recently, the SLT started work on a long-term vision for the district, called Far North 2100 (FN2100).

These vision expressions are individually laudable, and external stakeholders indicated Council seems to be making the right noises in terms of strategic direction. However, the District Plan, vision, mission and FN2100 building blocks are not yet explicitly aligned. As a result, some staff and stakeholders are not sure what Council stands for or is trying to achieve.

The upcoming community consultation on the FN2100 proposal and the 2021–2031 Long Term Plan (LTP) will provide an opportunity to clarify Council’s proposed future direction, and how resources will be used to deliver outcomes.

Creating confident councillors

Council is comprised of elected members with a diverse range of perspectives and experiences. Comprehensive induction and professional development programmes are in place to support elected members. Much of the induction is focused on structural matters including Council assets and operations and the “machinery” of Council meetings. Elected members said the quality of the induction was good and met their needs.

A professional development plan has been formulated for the Mayor and each elected member. These are informed by the results of a competency assessment, and funds to support the plan have been allocated. Elected members indicated professional development received to date has been interesting, but they are less clear on how their performance will improve as a consequence.

The most recent assessment of elected member performance was completed in 2018–2019, prior to the 2019 elections. As several new members were elected in 2019, a new assessment will be required to determine the effectiveness of the current group.

Effective working relationships

Overall leadership of Council is provided by a highly experienced Mayor who has over thirty years of public service. There is a good mix of youth and passion, as well as experience and wisdom amongst the elected members, and they seem to work well together and to be united as a group.

The Mayor and Chief Executive have a strong relationship. They meet every week to discuss topical operational and strategic matters and emerging issues. The Chief Executive’s and Council’s performance is also regularly discussed. The Mayor and the Chief Executive debate issues, sometimes vigorously, and, from time to time, they agree to disagree. However, the Mayor and Chief Executive stand united in public.

The elected members meet as a full Council every six weeks. Committee meetings are also held, with elected member

portfolios and working parties in place. Regular reviews of the committee structure occur. Staff say they get a sense that elected members also interact between formal meetings (they do), and that they are engaged and appear to be well prepared for both workshops and formal meetings.

Council meetings are live streamed to improve access. This innovation proved so beneficial during the coronavirus lockdown period that it has been continued as a matter of course.

The LGNZ Code of Conduct 2019 has been adopted.

Managing the organisation

The Chief Executive is respected by the Mayor, elected members and staff as a strong and capable leader who has embraced an inclusive style of leadership since arriving at Council. A comprehensive performance agreement and a structured professional development plan are in place for the Chief Executive. Key performance indicators are aligned with agreed Council priorities.

Since his appointment in 2017, the Chief Executive has embarked on an ambitious programme of transformation to lift Council performance. Many structural and operational changes have been implemented, but widespread acknowledgement across the community of improved Council performance is yet to be achieved. Some residents remain critical that Council needs to move more quickly on pressing issues, which suggests that Council may not be communicating its vision and priorities or telling its “improvement story” adequately.

Health, safety and well-being

Council aspires to become recognised as a leader in relation to workplace health and safety, but the Chief Executive acknowledges there is much work to be done to achieve this. A five-year plan is in place, and a safe workplace culture is starting to become apparent across the organisation.

Council’s Health and Safety committee meets monthly to consider relevant matters including a report generated by the in-house health and safety system.

Awareness amongst staff of the importance of providing a healthy and safe workplace is high. Most elected members are fully engaged and supportive of a strong health and safety culture and are aware of their responsibilities and duties. However, some appear to be less committed.

Support for the reintroduction of the four well-beings (social, economic, environmental, cultural) is high, especially amongst the elected members. Elected members acknowledge well-being considerations are broad and open to interpretation and accept that a discussion is required to decide what they mean, how they will align with community expectations and what Council’s role to deliver them in the district could or should be.

Informing council decisions

A comprehensive reporting framework is in place to ensure elected members are provided with relevant information to support decision-making processes, and to verify organisational performance.

Officers regularly schedule workshops to explain proposals and to answer questions from elected members prior to formal meetings and decisions. These workshops are appreciated, especially by less experienced members.

However, elected members say Council reports are, in general, too long, that they contain too much detail, and that sometimes decision papers seem to be presented as *fait accompli*. When asked, some elected members could not express what they required to help make informed decisions, despite having received induction and governance training. Refinements are being made to reduce the length of reports to assist with understanding, but this is a work-in-progress. The relative inexperience of some elected members may also be a contributing factor to this issue.

Strengths

Council's Financial Strategy is embedded within its LTP. A strong focus on prudence and sustainability is apparent, despite the elected members rejecting austerity as a policy setting.

Council leaders show strong intent to lift Council performance, to meet service level expectations and to achieve well-being outcomes.

The Mayor and Chief Executive are experienced and respected leaders.

Staff engagement is increasing, indicating staff are supportive of the leadership being provided and the change programme.

A high level of commitment and engagement is apparent amongst the elected members, especially the first term members.

Areas for improvement

Council vision and strategy lack clarity and coherence and are not explicitly aligned with asset management plans and service delivery strategies.

Some groups in the community remain skeptical about how much progress is actually being made by Council.

Council needs to more proactively tell its "improvement story".

Investing money well

Financial decision-making and transparency

Council's Finance Team is capable, with a good understanding of the main issues. Moderate levels of debt are being managed well, and within debt ceilings. However, the large level of debt arrears needs attention.

Priority grading

Better than competent

< Council's commitment to improving service delivery while also delivering on a major capital works programme will impose significant demands on staff, systems and decision processes. Some difficult tradeoffs may be required. >

Planning and evaluating financial goals

Council's Financial Strategy has a strong focus on prudence and sustainability, despite elected members rejecting austerity as a policy setting. The presentation of the Financial Strategy is good, and reporting appears to be compliant with regulatory requirements.

High levels of deprivation are apparent across the district, which presents a dilemma. On one hand, expenditure is required to fund renewals and necessary capital works to correct long-term underinvestment in infrastructure. On the other, there are big challenges with affordability.

Council has recognised that Central Government may be a good source of funds, and several applications have been submitted to secure grants for capital works. Approximately \$100 million has been approved under the Provincial Growth Fund (including co-funding of \$22 million from Council). This support for capital works should deliver significant benefits to the district in the future, so long as Council can convert successful applications into delivered projects and programmes. Scaling up organisational capability to deliver these projects without compromising service

delivery is an urgent priority, and that has been recognised as a major risk. Although, at the time of the assessment, the risk was not explicitly identified in Council's risk register.

Further work is needed to determine the lifetime costs of operating new assets and how that will be funded. Rapid deployment of the government funded capital programme may exacerbate the affordability problem.

Addressing financial risk

Council's Audit, Risk and Finance Committee meets regularly to consider various matters and advise Council. While the Committee is chaired by an elected member, membership includes an independent Deputy Chair who brings much needed rigour to the Committee's work. The Committee's terms of reference is both comprehensive and fit-for-purpose.

Financial knowledge across the elected members is variable but improving. Further training is likely to be beneficial.

Council has recently developed a dashboard to help elected members and managers understand various risk exposures, and the implications of these. Some risk categories, notably key person risks in the building and resource compliance areas, have not been fully assessed. Another area that should be considered for inclusion on the dashboard is risk mitigation.

Council's operational policies are comprehensive, and delegations are well specified and appropriate. Changes in work practices (due to the COVID-19 outbreak, in particular) have heightened risk awareness amongst staff and leaders.

Balancing the budget

Council uses a bottom-up approach to the setting of budgets. Projects listed in the annual plan and business as usual activity provide the starting point. The budget is balanced.

The funding of depreciation is being reviewed, and an affordability model is being created to assess rating affordability given the socio-economic situation of the district and its deprivation index. The assumptions that underpin the 2021–22 budget will be tested rigorously by the Audit, Risk and Finance Committee.

The large capital works programme will be a source of additional pressure and risk for Council. That has been recognised, and

Council has established an external project group to manage the delivery of the capital programme.

Meeting financial targets

Historically Council has struggled to meet its performance targets, especially in relation to service delivery. While improvements have been made, consistent delivery is yet to be achieved. The problem will be further exacerbated as the large capital works programme gets underway. Council should consider adding capability, as a matter of urgency, to mitigate the service delivery risks.

Council is also exposed to affordability issues across the district. At the time of the assessment, Council was carrying approximately \$29 million of rates arrears, of which approximately \$22 million is over Māori freehold land. Council has a process to collect rates arrears on private land, but collection of arrears on Māori freehold land remains problematic.

Council is carrying approximately \$70 million of debt, which is within prescribed headroom limits. However, if proposed national three waters reforms are implemented, Council's options to meet service level expectations will become more limited. Currently, no plans or mitigations for this potential issue are visible.

Being clear and transparent

Council's financial and non-financial performance is reported regularly to elected members through various management reports. Performance is transparently reported to the public through the Annual Report.

Council's rate setting process is a public process. Information on how rates are set is published in the funding impact statement, which is included in the Annual Plan and LTP. Targeted and general rates components are in use. Formal adoption of rates occurs in a public meeting. Residents can access both general information about the composition of rates and information about specific rates for their property online.

A sustainable procurement project is underway at Council. The objective is to ensure environmental and social priorities are considered alongside economic factors when letting major contracts.

Tenderers will be required to demonstrate how their bids support social, economic, cultural and environmental priorities.

An internal audit report has made recommendations to further improve the employee conflict of interest process and it awaits SLT review.

To streamline decision-making processes, Council has resolved to temporarily increase the Chief Executive's financial delegations to directly award professional services contracts up to the value of \$500,000 and to award construction contracts for MBIE-funded projects.

Strengths

Council has a capable Finance Team.

The Audit, Risk and Finance Committee is strong and effective.

Council has a good risk management framework in place, including a graphical dashboard and comprehensive reporting.

Council's sustainable procurement model adds social and environmental considerations alongside economic priorities.

Areas for improvement

Rates arrears are a significant drag on the balance sheet.

Council appears to be under-resourced to meet service delivery targets and to deliver its pending capital works programme.

Further work is needed to ensure Council makes full use of its risk management framework for more effective decision-making

Elected members' understanding of Council's financial performance would benefit from further professional development.

Delivering what's important

Service delivery and asset management

Council has made significant investments in new systems and capability across its asset management and service delivery functions. Now, attention must move to consistently delivering against service level expectations.

Priority grading

Competent

< Council has made considerable progress in the last three years to improve its asset management and service delivery performance. >

Aligning services with vision and strategy

Council's core service delivery and asset management plans are broadly linked to its vision and strategy, and these links are explained in public documents. However, the long-term strategy is being re-thought as part of FN2100, and significant asset planning and major infrastructure improvements are underway or planned. Consequently, refinements will be required to ensure Council's new strategic direction, asset planning and delivery of core services are explicitly aligned in the future.

Council is committed to developing its long-term strategy and associated infrastructure improvement programmes in consultation with the community in a transparent manner. Council recognises it is operating in a challenging environment, which has been further complicated by recent drought and flooding emergencies and the COVID-19 outbreak. Some difficult tradeoffs will be required as Council considers long-term strategy, levels of service and affordability.

Service levels and quality

Council has a comprehensive set of service level objectives and measures covering quality, timelines, value and key deliverables. These are determined in consultation with the community during the long-term planning process.

Road conditions in the district are benchmarked to a peer group of councils via the Road Efficiency Group (REG).

Similarly, Council's performance against Resource Management Act (RMA) and Building Act timelines are benchmarked.

Historically, Council has not performed well against its Key Performance Indicators (KPIs). There has been some improvement in recent years, but external factors such as COVID-19 and the drought adversely affected performance in 2020, especially in terms of response times. While overall customer satisfaction levels (as measured by the latest community survey) show some improvement, they remain stubbornly low, although with significant variability across individual functions. This presents a communications challenge for Council to tell the "improvement story" as progress is made.

Management of water and roading assets

Asset Management Plans (AMPs) are in place for three waters, transport and communities. These were developed in 2015, and they are aligned with previous visions and strategies.

Council acknowledges that their AMPs need to be improved to address gaps and to ensure they are aligned with emerging strategy. Transport asset management is working well, but other areas are still developing.

Programme Darwin has been instigated to address weaknesses in asset management of three waters and community facilities. Significant progress has already been made to provide a solid foundation for long-term planning and decision-making. Longer-term risks such as the effects of changing climate, rising national freshwater standards and the expectations of iwi around access to resources, are all being considered within the work underway.

All asset classes are maintained and monitored in accordance with the KPIs in existing AMPs. However, many KPIs have not been consistently met in recent years (especially requests for service timelines) due to the effects of significant external events.

All water supply facilities meet national standards, but restrictions necessitated by the recent drought exposed resilience issues that need to be addressed. Wastewater treatment plants have compliance problems from time to time. Nine existing wastewater consents have either expired or will do so before 2024, but work is underway to resolve this.

A consenting plan is being developed in conjunction with the Northland Regional Council, but the engagement process is expected to present some major challenges, especially with iwi.

Council works in close partnership with the Northland Transportation Alliance, other councils and NZTA to ensure roading assets are appropriately maintained. Historically, satisfaction levels were low, the road safety record was poor and maintenance and renewal costs were high. Considerable progress has been made on asset management and the development of an integrated Transport Strategy since 2018. Council is now in a stronger position to understand the condition of its roading network and emerging operational, renewal and capital needs.

Community facilities and services

Council owns and manages many community facilities including thirty community halls, several libraries, units for the elderly and other service facilities. A review is underway to provide a better understanding of these facilities, to enable evidence-based decisions to be made about their future management and upkeep.

Five of the six major townships already have a new type of community access hub in operation. These hubs provide a range of services, including access to online services.

Regulatory and compliance

Historically, Council has struggled to meet regulatory and compliance requirements. However, significant improvements in performance have been achieved as a result of a wide-ranging set of initiatives. That includes establishing a Strategic Customer Compliance Framework which seeks to balance appropriate customer experiences with regulatory compliance. Improvements have enabled Council to meet or exceed its obligations in recent months. The addition of online service options (for compliance applications and processing) is expected to deliver further improvements in service quality and satisfaction.

Notwithstanding these improvements, Council's District Plan is outdated, and very discretionary and effects-based. This has led to a lot of uncertainty for developers and the community. Further, the District Plan is not well aligned to Council's emerging strategy. Spatial plans and a new District Plan are under development, and drafts will be out for consultation with the community during 2021.

People and culture

In recent years, Council has built up the capability of its asset management and service delivery functions. It has recruited well, developed staff to fill core in-house roles and used the establishment of regional alliances in roading and three waters to attract and retain key expertise.

Some new roles and functions have been established to provide additional capacity and to support increased productivity. These include a Project Management Office, Services Quality Assurance Management and a Chief Digital Officer. However, capability building remains a work-in-progress. As various improvement programmes and capital programmes are rolled out, further capability and capacity will have to be developed.

Staff engagement has risen (from around 55% average across 13 categories, to now above 70%) and is an indication that staff are responding to the leadership provided and improvement programmes.

Establishing a business case for investments

Council has recently made significant improvements in how it manages capital programmes. A Project Management Office has been established to act as a centre of excellence for project management, procurement and contract management delivery, assurance reporting, and capability development within Council. New policy and guidance frameworks have also been developed for project management, procurement, contract management and business case development. Furthermore, an external project group has been established to manage the \$100 million capital programme recently funded by Central Government.

Strengths

Council has catalogued a series of long-standing problems and is working to address them within affordability constraints.

Programme Darwin should provide a comprehensive asset management framework for three waters and community facilities.

Council's involvement in the Northland Transportation Alliance is improving cost effectiveness and customer satisfaction.

Council's new Project Management Office and guidance frameworks are improving how it manages capital projects.

Areas for improvement

Council will need to further develop its capability and capacity as various improvement programmes and its capital programme are rolled out.

Management of the three waters assets is inadequate. Council struggles to consistently meet regulatory standards and community expectations.

Some AMPs and delivery plans are not explicitly aligned with the current vision and strategy.

The District Plan is outdated, resulting in confusion and frustration for developers and the community.

Listening and responding

Communicating and engaging with the public and businesses

Council has made good progress with community and stakeholder engagement in recent years. However, reputation scores remain low, which suggests stakeholders are yet to link improved performance and engagement efforts with better outcomes. Council leaders recognise that genuine engagement with iwi requires considerable, on-going effort.

Priority grading

Competent

< Council's engagement with its communities is changing. A positive and constructive mind-set is apparent, and a genuine desire to discuss issues openly has replaced compliance-oriented communications. >

Planning effective engagement

Council's engagement with the community, iwi and stakeholder groups is multi-faceted, with many different in-person and online channels in use. A one-page communications framework has been developed to complement Council's Significance and Engagement Strategy. In July 2019, Council began funding a team with a mandate to develop high-quality processes, tools and guidance to support more effective community engagement.

Stakeholders report that Council seems to be willing and committed to engaging well with stakeholder groups and residents. They say awareness and intent are high, but efforts are only just starting to become visible and tangible progress is yet to be observed.

The new Hundertwasser service hub at Kawakawa, which contains a library and a community services desk, is a good example of Council and community working together to co-design a space for locals to use and to access Council services.

Engaging digitally

Council engagement with the community is intentionally moving towards on-line channels and community service hubs.

The 'Nothing but Net' policy has been formalised, and programmes are being rolled out to encourage residents to use the Internet for interactions. The provision of online services has proven popular, but widespread uptake in remote areas has been impaired because many residents do not have adequate access to a computer, let alone high speed broadband services.

Reputation

Council's reputation across the district has been relatively poor over the last decade. Council has acknowledged this, and over the past couple of years has been working hard to improve its performance. However, there is a lag between changes made within Council and the community recognising and accepting that Council performance is improving.

The latest satisfaction results show a small uplift, which Council has interpreted as the community starting to respond to Council's efforts to lift its performance. Notwithstanding this, there are still obvious differences between Council, iwi and the business community.

Further uplifts in reputation will depend to some extent on Council being more proactive in telling its "improvement story", and stronger engagement with the community to test proposed vision and strategic priorities against perceived needs.

Communicating through media

Council's approach to media and social media engagement is founded on common sense. There is no formal media or social media strategy in place.

The Mayor and Chief Executive interact with local journalists frequently (most weeks, sometimes more often), and they are supported by a competent Communications Team.

Some elected members use social media to engage informally with residents. Younger, more social media savvy members are especially active. Topics discussed include summaries of Council meetings and correspondence on issues of interest to residents. The Mayor trusts members to say the right things and to be sensible with what they share.

Building relationships with Māori/iwi

Māori make up approximately half of the resident population of the district. There are 11 iwi, Ngāpuhi being the largest.

The quality of relations and engagement between Council and Māori/iwi has been mixed over the years. The challenge of engaging well with iwi has been recognised, and Council has sought to create opportunities and mechanisms for better engagement. Some iwi leaders say they appreciate efforts by Council. Others are less complimentary, indicating they are not actively consulted on all matters relating to land and water. Papakāinga housing and water issues are topics of ongoing tension.

Several formal relationship engagement agreements have been established to help Māori engage with Council on a range of matters including resource and building consenting, decision-making and planning. In addition, Te Hono, Council's Māori unit, provides a valuable liaison role within Council and with iwi and other Māori groups in the community. An elected member holds the Te Ao Māori portfolio and works closely with staff on matters related to Māori engagement.

Despite genuine attempts to engage well and the establishment of many mechanisms to support effective engagement, Council and iwi are still some distance away from establishing high quality relationships with each other.

Building effective business relationships

Council does not have a formal business engagement policy. However, many Council leaders and staff are active in discussions with business leaders, especially across planning, consenting and service delivery.

Business leaders say that the quality of engagement is dependent to a large extent on whom they get to deal with. They have noticed and appreciated a change in mindset through the recent drought and COVID-19 emergencies, but supporting systems and processes still seem unreliable at times. Engagement around consenting is variable, and other regulatory processes do not provide the certainty being sought.

Relationships with the community

Community leaders say there is often a gap between intention and action. There is a lot of consultation—some say too much—and consistent delivery is a problem.

Community leaders also note what appears to be a lack of cohesion between senior leaders and some staff. They reported the situation has improved over the last twelve months and noted some good examples of Council staff working well with the community. Council acknowledged there is more work to do, and plans have been developed to implement further improvements.

Strengths

The Mayor and Chief Executive have good relationships with the media.

Council is making good use of social media and online services to improve access for residents living in remote areas of the district.

Te Hono is a valuable resource to help Council leaders and staff engage more effectively with iwi.

Areas for improvement

Engagement with the business community and social sector is 'patchy'. There appears to be a lack of cohesion and variable engagement capability within Council.

Council should consider implementing a social media policy, for consistent engagement through online channels.

Relationships with iwi are sometimes poor, despite attempts by Council to improve engagement and to establish support mechanisms.

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