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New Plymouth District Council

Independent assessment report | July 2022*

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



Te Kaunihera-ā-Rohe o Ngāmotu

**New Plymouth
District Council**



A measure
for better
community value.

* Period of assessment: April 2022

Assessment Summary

AT A GLANCE



Te Kaunihera-ā-Rohe o Ngāmotu

**New Plymouth
District Council**

With a traditionally strong economy, New Plymouth district is positioning itself for a low carbon future where residents have access to sustainable lifestyle opportunities.



LARGE METRO

**SMALL METRO
AND PROVINCIAL**



PROVINCIAL AND RURAL

RURAL

SERVES

87,300

PEOPLE¹, A MIX OF
85% EUROPEAN/PAKEHA
18% MĀORI
2% PASIFIKA
5% ASIAN



POPULATION TREND
GROWTH

MAKES UP⁴

0.82 %

OF AOTEAROA NEW ZEALAND'S TOTAL
LAND AREA REPRESENTING
NEW PLYMOUTH DISTRICT, ON THE
WEST COAST OF THE NORTH ISLAND
ENCOMPASSING SOME

2,205 km²

\$6,717m

GROSS DOMESTIC
PRODUCT²

RESPONSIBLE FOR

1,285km

ROADS⁵

\$58,040

MEDIAN PERSONAL
INCOME²



- <https://www.stats.govt.nz/information-releases/2018-census-population-and-dwelling-counts> (Census respondents can select more than one ethnicity, resulting in a higher than 100% total.)
- <https://ecoprofile.infometrics.co.nz/newplymouth>
- <https://www.stats.govt.nz/information-releases/subnational-population-estimates-at-30-june-2021-provisional/>
- https://www.localcouncils.govt.nz/lcip.nsf/wpg_URL/Profiles-Councils-New-Plymouth-District-Council-Main?OpenDocument
- <https://www.npdc.govt.nz/media/z3gd423u/transportation-amp-strategic-case-general-volume-pdf.pdf>



Council's current context

New Plymouth District Council ('Council') is capably led by a second-term Mayor and diverse group of motivated elected members. An established Chief Executive is responsible for achieving Council's vision and ensuring accountability to ratepayers, along with the wellbeing and development of 801 members of staff across multiple locations.

Council is in the fortunate position of having a strong balance sheet which provides headroom to meet future economic challenges that may arise in the region and across the country. In Year 2 of its 2021 – 2031 Long-term Plan ('LTP'), Council has a strong focus on infrastructure asset renewals which received support from the community despite the corresponding increases in rates.

Two recent resignations from the Executive Leadership team ('ELT'), with both accepting Chief Executive positions, highlight an environment of continuous improvement where staff are supported to achieve.

Four Community Boards are active across the district and provide a strong voice for the district's diverse communities. Community Boards are well supported by Council and appear to work well with elected members to achieve tangible improvements for the communities they represent.

While New Plymouth is the only city in the district, it encompasses a number of small towns located between the Hangatahara River in the southwest to the Mōhakatino River in the northeast. This includes the communities of Waitara, Inglewood, Urenui and Ōakura.

Key challenges and opportunities

Council recently faced a watershed moment in relation to its asset condition data and infrastructure renewals deficit. Strong progress is being made towards addressing the deficit, with the community uniting behind Council to 'fix our plumbing'. Other challenges and opportunities include:

- > An ability to sustainably increase debt levels, if needed, to smooth the impact on ratepayers of any general economic downturn or, more specifically, to help finance the district's continuing transition to a diverse economy which is less dependent on oil and gas.
- > A strong Council culture underpinned by a clear set of values adopted by staff both in theory and in practice.
- > An approach to building organisational resilience through future ELT appointments to ensure a breadth and depth of strategic skills, relationship management, commercial capability and delivery experience across key portfolios.
- > Continuing to improve relationships with iwi/hapū to ensure that a te ao Māori perspective is integrated more visibly into decision-making at the senior management level and the advice provided to elected members.

Commonly used terms

Term	Definition
Asset Management Plan	A tactical plan for managing a council's infrastructure and other assets to deliver an agreed level 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.

Assessment Summary

continued...



OVERVIEW

With an eye on the future, New Plymouth District Council has a clear plan to accomplish its vision of a ‘sustainable lifestyle capital’ along with the resources to achieve it. Strong leadership combined with the effective use of Committees and Community Boards ensures good governance. At the same time, the Chief Executive has fostered a capable organisational culture geared to deliver operationally.

RATING



Key findings

Council has expended considerable effort to refine its strategic vision, mission, and goals with its communities in order to prioritise expenditure and ensure continuous improvement in service delivery. This focus, combined with a strong financial position and the ability to gain support from the community and stakeholders, puts New Plymouth in a good position to face the future. Notwithstanding this:

- > Council’s Reform Response Unit could demonstrate delivery on its terms of reference through the monitoring and reporting of progress towards achieving stated tasks.
- > The Climate Change Action Framework, currently under development, provides useful guidance at a high level but does not commit Council to any substantive action. The Council’s Emissions Reduction Plan, scheduled for completion this year, may or may not address that gap.
- > Performance measures could more clearly articulate value for money and demonstrate cost efficiency. For example, return on investment in Council’s enviable social infrastructure network should be evaluated and maximised to ensure a high level of return (financial and non-financial) to the district’s diverse communities.
- > In light of recent inflation trends, and recognising the context of some of the more deprived communities within the district, ratepayer affordability should be regularly reviewed as part of the three-yearly LTP update cycle.

Period of assessment

The onsite assessment took place on 28 and 29 April 2022.



Governance, leadership and strategy	Financial decision-making and transparency	Service delivery and asset management	Communicating and engaging with the public and business
Performing well	Performing well	Performing well	Performing well

STRENGTHS

Council has a clear strategic framework that is well understood and integrated throughout key documents and communications.

With a strong balance sheet (large investment revenue and low debt levels), Council has the ability to meet future economic challenges.

Good asset and financial data are used to inform planning. That resulted in a high level of community understanding for, and support of, the rates increases required to address Council's renewals deficit through the last LTP.

A strong Finance, Audit and Risk Committee provides a high level of oversight, although opportunities exist to better utilise the experience of its members in strategic risk and risk appetite discussions.

A comprehensive Portfolios, Programmes and Projects Management Framework (P3M) applied to Council's capital programme represents best practice for good decision-making.

AREAS OF IMPROVEMENT

There are opportunities for Council to have more commercial and financial strategic capability in-house to leverage performance of Council Controlled Organisations (CCOs) and achieve economic diversification.

It may benefit Council to consider the completion of a digital roadmap – an integrated assessment and plan of digital needs - to focus its digital activities and ensure, for example, that it is not missing any cost saving opportunities.

Greenhouse gas emissions targets, and corresponding actions to achieve them, could be developed. A policy for assessing the impacts of all Council-owned infrastructure on emissions reduction and adaptation would be particularly useful.

Issues impacting iwi/hapū could be integrated more visibly into decision-making at the ELT-level and within advice provided to elected members.

Leading locally

Governance, leadership and strategy

After a period of relative stability Council is solidifying its governance, leadership and strategic functions across a diverse and motivated governance group. Elected members are ably led by the Mayor and, despite differences, appear to work well together to progress the interests of the district's communities.

Priority grading

Performing well

< Good use is made of Community Boards across the district. Viewed as an effective way of bringing grassroots issues to elected members and Council leadership, New Plymouth's four Community Boards have a wide mandate and operational support from Council.>

The Executive Leadership Team (ELT) is led by an experienced Chief Executive with deep roots within the Taranaki region. Recent resignations from the ELT have raised concerns amongst stakeholders regarding 'key person risk'. Council has the opportunity to build organisational resilience through future ELT appointments to ensure a breadth and depth of strategic skills, relationship management and delivery experience is maintained across key portfolios.

Setting the direction for the community

Council has a clear vision, mission and goals ('strategic framework'). The vision 'sustainable lifestyle capital' appears to be well understood across governance and operational levels, with integration across the Long-term Plan, Finance and Infrastructure Strategies. The strategic framework is also embedded in Council's Portfolios, Programmes and Projects (P3M) framework which

requires consideration of the Council vision and goals through the project approval process.

Governing in partnership

Discussions across the organisation and with stakeholders indicated that Council has made huge progress over the last two to three years in terms of strengthening relationships with iwi and hapū. From elected members to staff members, Council is proud of its recent vote to establish a Māori ward. The decision was seen as signalling a large shift in the community, which has taken time.

Council provides opportunities for iwi and hapū to participate in local government decision-making through a range of committees and working groups. Te Huinga Taumatua (THT) is a standing committee of Council composed of elected members and iwi representatives. Council advised that recommendations from THT are given significant weight and consideration. The iwi Co-Chair of THT has voting rights as a member of the Strategy and Operations Committee. Otherwise, iwi participation in Council committees and working groups appears to focus largely on providing advice and making recommendations on initiatives for Council to consider as part of its decision-making processes.

While Council's approach to engaging with iwi is generally good, it also remains an area for improvement. Council is proposing to co-design a Treaty Partnerships Project Plan to ensure it has a consistent approach to engagement across Council that is based on Treaty principles, including how it will support iwi capability and monitor and manage the success of future engagement. There is also a desire from iwi, and some staff, for more assurance that issues impacting iwi and hapū are integrated more visibly into decision-making at the senior management level and in advice provided to elected members.

Continuous improvement

A commitment to continuous improvement was demonstrated through the regular use of '360' performance surveys. These evaluated the performance of elected members, including the Mayor, as well as the relationship between elected members and the Chief Executive. Findings demonstrated a strong and cohesive relationship between the Mayor and other elected members and

a respectful, honest and constructive relationship between the Chief Executive and elected members.

Funding is available for the professional development of elected members. Apart from financial reporting of professional development expenditure, however, no evidence of professional development monitoring was observed. For example, no set performance objectives and progress towards meeting those objectives was available. This could be a timely addition to ensure that the professional development of elected members is targeted and adds value to Council.

Holding to account

Despite a spate of incidents in national media over the past few years, elected members appear to work as a team and understand the tenet of collective responsibility. They cited educated and respectful challenges amongst each other, where elected members could 'agree to disagree'. It was acknowledged that good chairing by the Mayor played a role in growing an open and inclusive meeting culture.

Notwithstanding, the first formal complaint using Council's Code of Conduct process was received in 2021 following an allegation regarding an elected member. Council considered this alleged breach of the Code of Conduct and took no further action.

In addition to the Code of Conduct, the Mayor established an internal Complaints Panel to deal with complaints received from members of the public against elected members. Council advised that complaints were discussed verbally and decisions were not documented or reported. It is unclear how many complaints are received or resolved and what action had been taken. The Mayor was clear that not all complaints would be actioned given the resourcing that would be required to do this, but that all complainants were contacted to 'close the loop'. While the need for a proportional response from the Complaints Panel is acknowledged, a degree of transparency around the process, and accountability regarding decisions made, would benefit ratepayers. Independent (external) support with this process may increase its credibility.

Risk management in practice

Council has a strong Finance, Audit and Risk Committee (FARC) with an independent Deputy Chair. Risk management updates are provided quarterly to FARC. While these updates have a focus on strategic, 'high', and 'extreme' residual risks, any changes to risk registers (for example escalations, downgrades, and risks added or removed) are also considered.

FARC also receives quarterly reporting on performance and progress towards meeting Council's objectives and key performance measures, as set out in the Long-term Plan (LTP) 2021-2031 (this includes financial performance). In addition, Council provides quarterly health and safety and legal compliance reporting to FARC.

Council advised that it undertook an early risk session during development of the current LTP and that risk is also integrated into operations through project initiation and reporting processes. However, risk assessment appears to be largely 'bottom-up' based on advice from staff. There is an opportunity for FARC to utilise the broader experience of members to inform strategic risk and risk appetite discussions.

Informing council decisions

Council appears to be performing well in terms of management reporting. A self-evaluation survey regarding the timeliness, quality and type of reporting provided by staff to FARC was completed in late 2021. Results indicated members agreed or highly agreed it was provided with appropriate and high-quality reporting. That was validated by an improving external policy advice rating.

Strengths

Council has a clear strategic framework that is well understood and integrated throughout key documents.

Council has an effective governance environment that is committed to continuous improvement and collective responsibility.

Effective use is made of Community Boards to, amongst other things, bring grassroots issues to elected members and the ELT.

A strong Finance, Audit and Risk Committee provides a high level of oversight. The broader experience of FARC members could also be used to inform strategic risk and risk appetite discussions.

Iwi relationships have matured over recent times and iwi committees and working groups are remunerated on par with elected members.

Areas for improvement

With two recent resignations, opportunities exist to expand the breadth and depth of experience within the ELT.

While the need for a proportional response from the Complaints Panel is acknowledged, independent oversight of the process could provide an opportunity to improve transparency.

A structured professional development programme should be established, and monitored, for all elected members.

Opportunities exist for issues impacting iwi and hapū to be integrated more visibly into decision-making at the senior management level and in advice provided to elected members.

Investing money well

Financial decision-making and transparency

Council's financial management systems and controls appear robust and comprehensive. Good quality financial and non-financial information is reported to elected members, who demonstrate a high level of interest in the data provided.

Priority grading

Performing well

< With a conservative and sustainable financial strategy, Council finds itself in a very strong financial position. This provides options as the district readies itself to meet the challenges of energy transformation and impending global financial insecurity.>

The Council is in the fortunate position of having a strong balance sheet (large investment revenue and low debt levels) which provides "head room" to meet future economic challenges that may arise in the region. It is able to sustainably increase debt levels to smooth the impact on ratepayers of any general economic downturn if this is required, or more specifically, to help finance the district's transition to an economy with a decreasing reliance on the oil and gas industry. The latter transition is being addressed through Council's commitment and partnership with the government, iwi and other councils through the Taranaki 2050 roadmap. As this develops and Council's role becomes clearer, the transition will likely require support from stronger financial and commercial leadership.

Strategic alignment and positioning

Council's Financial Strategy is well integrated with its LTP and Infrastructure Strategy (a notable improvement from Council's last assessment). Asset Management Plans (AMPs) and service

delivery strategies are largely up to date, fit for purpose and well aligned with the LTP and Financial Strategy.

The Financial Strategy builds on Council's strong financial position and sets clear prudential limits which are well understood by elected members, senior management and finance staff. This is confirmed by Audit NZ reports with the S&P Global rating moving from AA to AA+, the highest possible rating for local government.

However, because of its strong financial position, the Financial Strategy is naturally quite conservative. Council should regularly review these settings in order to respond effectively to any future economic challenges experienced across the district.

The latest LTP addresses a significant historical renewals deficit and a doubling of the capital programme. The resulting rates increases put Council on a sustainable financial and asset management footing over the long term.

Financing the renewals deficit

As a result of the Global Financial Crisis in 2007, and especially its impacts on Council's Perpetual Investment Fund, Council made significant cuts to infrastructure renewal budgets over a number of years to offset the need for rates increases. As a result, there is now a backlog of approximately \$126m of assets that have reached the end of their operating lives, on top of the assets reaching the end of their operating lives during the period of the 2021-31 LTP.

To address this, Council used good asset and financial data to inform the LTP, Financial and Infrastructure Strategies. It persuaded the community of the need to address the infrastructure deficit and fund depreciation going forward so as to put renewals on a more sustainable footing. In making the decision, Council considered financial information on the impact for ratepayers, resulting in a 12% rates increase (to be followed annually by approximately 7% increases for five years) and the taking on of more debt to smooth the rates burden.

The latest LTP also sees a significant increase in capital funding with this doubling from the previous LTP period to almost \$1 billion, mostly due to the estimated \$248m required for Three Waters improvements.

The right tools to do the job

Council has developed a comprehensive Portfolios, Programmes and Projects Management Framework (P3M) for its capital programme which represents best practice for good decision-making. P3M embeds the use of business case methodology as well as good monitoring and reporting. While there are elements of the framework still being worked on, for example, the Strategic Case Template, it is well understood by staff across the Council and ably led by a Project Management Office.

All budget managers within Council have access to the financial management system (FMS). Some managers still run separate spreadsheets outside the financial model, but these are being consolidated to provide 'one source of the truth'. Audit NZ report that the financial model is fit for purpose, but that Council would benefit from a more integrated system or spreadsheet model, with built-in integrity checks and a breakdown of significant balances.

Accordingly, Council aspires to better integrate the FMS with project planning and the asset management system – a “gold standard” approach. It is not known whether any other council in Aotearoa New Zealand has achieved this integration, given the complexity involved.

Balancing the budget

The annual budget has not met its 100% benchmark in the last three years reported (2018-21), largely due to the treatment of equity and expenditure relating to the Council's obligations under the New Plymouth District Council (Waitara Lands) Act 2018, and because depreciation had not been fully financed. The Waitara Lands Act issue is an artifact of changing the accounting treatment and the depreciation is addressed through the LTP which moved to fully fund depreciation from income over seven to eight years. The FARC is fully across these issues and the approach is in line with Council's balanced budget policy set out in its Financial Strategy. The LTP forecasts a return to a balanced budget in the current year. The approach has been confirmed by Audit NZ.

Values-led procurement

Council has adopted a values-led (versus cost) approach to procurement, utilising a mix of financial and non-financial attributes. An example of this is the development of an innovative “supply chain leadership” approach to procurement that prioritises local firms. It is already demonstrating improved value for money and has recently been recognised nationally through the Beacon Awards. Business stakeholders strongly endorsed Council's approach to procurement.

Council's procurement policy and approach are publicly available via its website and are based on the Government Procurement Rules. All procurement is guided by the Council's Procurement Manual as well as the Infrastructure Procurement Strategy. When tendering, attributes are scored and balanced to ensure Council achieves the most appropriate and best value for money. Contracts include performance measurements and KPIs to ensure suppliers meet the required standards.

Active investing

Council has a broad investment portfolio, potentially the envy of territorial authorities across the country. It includes a \$367m Perpetual Investment Fund (as at March 2022) managed by New Plymouth PIF Guardians Ltd (a CCO) in line with a Statement of Investment Policy and Objectives. Since its establishment in 2004, annual releases from the PIF have offset general rates including \$9.3m in 2021/22.

Council's portfolio also includes Papa Rererangi i Puketapu Limited, the New Plymouth Airport CCTO, and Venture Taranaki, a regional economic development CCO. This is in addition to two joint venture forestry initiatives on Council-owned land, and the administration of numerous property leases and agreements.

There are opportunities for Council to have more commercial financial strategic capability in-house. In particular, there are both commercial opportunities and risks associated with the CCOs and other facility services, especially around the use of sporting and facilities such as Yarrow Stadium operations and a proposed multisport hub. Longer term, as Council's role becomes clearer in transitioning the region's economy away from oil and gas focus, it will likely require more commercial and financial strategic capability in-house to leverage CCO performance and achieve economic diversification.

Financing for community wellbeing

Council thoroughly assessed the impact on ratepayer affordability in promulgating the LTP and the rates increases it contained. However, in light of recent inflation trends and recognising the context of some of the more deprived communities within the district, ratepayer affordability should be regularly reviewed as part of the three-yearly LTP update cycle. Council has significant headroom to smooth rate increases by taking on additional debt for its capital programme, and possibly renewals short term.

During the coronavirus pandemic experienced over the past few years, Council proved itself agile in responding to immediate community need. For example, a \$20m 'Get Us Back On Our Feet' package of measures was implemented to kick-start the local economy. That reinforced Council's community focus and demonstrates it is well positioned to respond to future strategic challenges and external crises.

Strengths

Council's Financial Strategy is well integrated with its LTP, Infrastructure Strategy and AMPs, clearly explaining both challenges and intervention logic.

Council's supply chain leadership approach to procurement and contracting is already delivering value and value for money and has strong support from the business and contractor community.

Good asset and financial data were used to inform the LTP, Financial and Infrastructure Strategies, resulting in a high level of community understanding for, and support of, the rates increases required to address Council's renewals deficit.

Council demonstrated agility in responding to the Covid pandemic and is well positioned financially to respond to future strategic challenges and external crises.

A comprehensive Portfolios, Programmes and Projects Management Framework (P3M) applied to Council's capital programme represents best practice for good decision-making.

Areas for improvement

There are opportunities for Council to have more commercial and financial strategic capability in-house to leverage CCO performance and achieve economic diversification.

In relation to its financial model and forecasts, Council would benefit from a more integrated system, or spreadsheet model with built-in integrity checks, and a breakdown of significant balances.

Council should regularly review the settings within its Financial Strategy, including rates affordability, in order to respond effectively to any future economic challenges experienced across the district.

Council could utilise governance teams more deliberately in the evaluation of strategic risk.

Delivering what's important

Service delivery and asset management

Council has effectively embarked on a programme of work to rectify a significant historic renewals deficit. That was well communicated via the 'fix our plumbing' campaign that brought elected members, ratepayers and other stakeholders along on the journey.

Priority grading

Performing well

<The impact of Cyclone Gita highlighted the vulnerability of Council's infrastructure network, exacerbated by a low level of confidence in asset condition data. Council has fully committed to a condition assessment programme that now rigorously informs strategic direction and decision-making for both capital and operational expenditure.>

In some ways Cyclone Gita in 2018 could be considered a fortuitous catalyst for Council to embark on, what staff described as, a 'journey of education' to create awareness of the need for continuous investment in infrastructure renewals alongside the risks of not doing so. Council is now proactive in explicitly reconciling asset conditions with its strategy for infrastructure provision, renewals and service level goals.

The Transport, Three Waters and Solid Waste AMPs are the most comprehensive, with high or moderate confidence in asset condition. However, staff acknowledged the facilities AMPs were somewhat weaker, and need more work in

order to better understand the condition of those assets, and the transport AMP will need updating and aligning with the integrated transport strategy once it is completed later this year.

Planning and evaluating service goals

Council's Infrastructure Strategy is closely aligned to its strategic framework as articulated in the most recent LTP and Finance Strategy. The LTP provides very clear intervention logic, and the Finance and Infrastructure Strategies were developed in parallel, with a common language and guiding principles throughout.

Assessing service quality

Various systems are utilised to effectively monitor assets to ensure that agreed service levels are delivered. These vary between asset classes. For physical infrastructure, Council has completed substantial work over the last two years to understand the condition of existing assets. For social infrastructure, Council uses the Enterprise Asset Management system for asset inventory, asset history, work order management and maintenance scheduling.

Three Waters

The current LTP has a strong focus on, and provides funding for, renewals of its Three Waters. Council appeared committed to this course of action, focusing on handing over assets in good condition as a result of Three Waters reform.

The cost of delivering Three Waters is understood and communicated via Funding Impact Statements contained in the LTP. In addition, the Financial Strategy provides a breakdown of the total estimated capital expenditure to accommodate growth, improve service levels and renewals for each of the three waters over the LTP 10-year period.

Council appears to work well with iwi to understand expectations for Three Waters services. A Three Waters Education and Engagement Team and He Puna Wai

Working Group provide opportunities for iwi and hapū to contribute to Three Waters planning.

Waste Management

Council has a current Waste Management and Minimisation Plan in place and offers kerbside collection from households within a defined collection area.

'Zero Waste 2040' represents Council's goal of having no rubbish or waste going into landfill by 2040. To achieve this target Council established The Junction Zero Waste Hub which, within its first year of operation, attracted 13,000 visitors and sold 34,000 items. It also intends, over the next three-years, to implement a zero-waste action plan for Council facilities and procurement, amongst other measures.

Roading

Council's roading network, including footpaths, is well documented and understood. This was corroborated by a positive review from the independent Road Efficiency Group (REG) with an improvement in score from 69 to 83 for the 2020/21 year. Staff advised it was due to collaboration with other territorial authorities to utilise a tool to reduce errors in known data.

A 30-year Integrated Transportation Strategic Plan (ITSP) is currently being developed. It will seek to achieve emissions reduction, integrated planning and an increased uptake in shared and active travel.

Council has a services contract with an external contractor that was the result of substantial engagement with the contracting market as well as a Section 17a Service Delivery Review. One of the benefits identified during the review was the opportunity to reduce the administrative costs of drafting contracts and tendering infrastructure projects. In addition to regular road maintenance activities, the contract includes several activities that previously would have been separately contracted out. Council staff reported the relationship was working very well, with a number of Council staff co-located at the contractor's site office.

Community services

Council's Infrastructure Strategy includes both physical and social infrastructure (community services). As noted by one staff member, New Plymouth has 'an embarrassment of riches' in terms of its community facilities: including museums, libraries, galleries, stadium, aquatic centre, zoo, and an expansive parks and open space network of approximately 1,600ha in size.

In addition, a rates-neutral Elderly Housing Programme maintains 145 units across the district, with an average age of 35-40 years. The portfolio appears to be well run with the current surplus being reinvested in maintenance and renewals.

Delivering capital projects

Council effectively utilises Committees to provide oversight of capital project delivery. The Strategic Projects Committee, for example, oversees the delivery of capital projects (including whether projects are completed on time, budget and scope). This includes regular reporting and 'deep dives' into specific projects.

All capital work delivery is managed through the Project, Planning and Portfolio management system (P3M) recently implemented by Council. P3M includes preparing comprehensive business cases for capital investments based on the Treasury's Better Business Case framework (strategic, economic, financial, commercial, management). Capital budgets are linked to strategic goals in the long-term plan, recorded in the Point of Entry Business Case, and subsequent business case iterations, if relevant. The programming of capital expenditure links projects to community outcomes by way of strategic and asset management alignment requirements for all demands/points of entry business cases. All capital investments are scored using a prioritisation multi-criteria analysis to maximise return on investment.

Planning for the future

Population forecasts are aligned across Council's land use, transport and infrastructure planning functions. The Proposed District Plan (PDP) is currently under review and will soon be up to date with national planning directives. This includes one of the first ePlans² in Aotearoa New Zealand that is compliant with the National Planning Standards.

An iwi group, Nga Kaitiaki, evolved from a wāhi tapu reference group to inform the wider PDP process. The group worked with an independent planner to discuss issues and test draft provisions. That greatly assisted the PDP process by allowing the integration of a te ao Māori perspective and enabling understanding of iwi priorities.

External stakeholders from the development community noted a legacy issue with the slow pace of rezoning land to provide for growth. It was believed to have led to land supply lagging behind market demand and development capacity, although it was acknowledged the District Plan review is rectifying the situation.

Both staff and external stakeholders identified the merging of Council's infrastructure and planning teams as an excellent organisational change providing a more integrated approach to growth and a reduction in silo mentality.

² An 'ePlan' is an online interactive policy statement or plan

Growing capability

Council has several operational systems in place supporting learning and development, performance and leadership development within the organisation. However, an overarching strategy to ensure Council has the appropriate capability and capacity to deliver services at agreed levels, now and in the future, appears to be absent. This will be particularly relevant as the implications of sector reform impact the structure and resourcing requirements of local government.

Council was also unable to clearly articulate a digital roadmap (or strategy) for the next five years. Although not shy to adopt new technologies and software in the past, that appears to have been undertaken on an ad-hoc basis without a clear line of sight to a digital strategy. It may benefit Council to consider the completion of a digital roadmap to focus its digital activities and to identify, for example, if Council is missing any cost saving opportunities.

Accountability reporting

Service delivery levels are reported on a quarterly basis to Council and on an annual basis via the Annual Report. Comparison is provided for the immediately previous financial year only. Trend analysis over a greater period of time may be beneficial to provide a clearer picture of the achievement of service levels over time.

Reporting is clearly articulated in Annual Reports, which are published on Council's website. These Annual Reports are visually appealing and summarise information via tables, visual aids and graphs. The reports also contain comprehensive overviews of Council services and activities (including why the service is provided, effects of the service on community wellbeing, and any significant challenges experienced over the year).

Strengths

Council is proactive in explicitly reconciling asset condition with its strategy for infrastructure provision, renewals, and service level goals.

The cost of delivering Three Waters is understood and communicated. Council appears to work well with iwi to understand expectations for Three Waters services.

Council has developed one of the first ePlans in Aotearoa New Zealand that is compliant with the National Planning Standards and made good use of its Nga Kaitiaki reference group to inform the wider Proposed District Plan process.

Council is to be commended on its adoption of software to enable the online lodgement of building consents. This eliminates the need for paper plans and achieves processing efficiency.

The merging of Council's infrastructure and planning teams has been beneficial to achieving a more integrated approach to growth.

Council has an online interactive delegations register. It provides a highly transparent overview of delegations from the Chief Executive down.

The roading network, including footpaths, is well documented and understood. A 30-year Integrated Transportation Strategic Plan, currently under development, will align transport planning and spending across district boundaries.

Areas for Improvement

An overarching strategy to ensure Council has the appropriate capability and capacity to deliver services at agreed levels, now and in the future, would be beneficial.

It may benefit Council to consider the completion of a digital roadmap to focus its digital activities and ensure, for example, that it is not missing any cost saving opportunities.

There is still work needed to improve AMPs for some facilities and to align the Transport AMP with the Integrated Transport Strategy once completed.

Council's Asset Management Strategy pre-dates the current strategic framework and would benefit from a refresh to better articulate service delivery alignment between the strategic framework and Asset Management Plans.

Listening and responding

Communicating and engaging with the public and businesses

Council engages with the general public and community groups often and effectively, using a range of channels and feedback mechanisms to suit audience needs. It involves testing issues with the community in advance, polling progress during engagement, and a willingness to adjust methods if needed.

Priority grading

Performing well

< The Marketing, Communications and Design team is capable and well-resourced, and works closely with internal business partners to support and ensure strategic alignment of each group's communications and engagement initiatives.>

Protocols are in place around the use of social media by Council staff and elected members. Internal communications are also a priority, ensuring there is consistency between external and internal messaging. Staff engagement surveys show high levels of engagement.

Planning effective engagement

Council has a comprehensive reputation strategy which is clearly aligned with its strategic framework as set out in the LTP. Underneath this strategy sits several integrated frameworks and policies – including a Significance Policy, digital communications framework, media framework and brand and marketing plans. The reputation strategy is well understood and supported by the Mayor and other elected members, ELT and staff.

The engagement process completed for the recent LTP has been recognised as best practice with Council recently being made a finalist in Taituarā Great Consultation Documents Competition. For the campaign Council began by seeking the community's feedback on potential "hot items" for inclusion in the LTP.

Consultation on the proposed LTP was then undertaken through the "Your Home, Your Say" consultation document, to which 4,563 submissions were received. That is a very high level of engagement in comparison with other territorial authorities. The LTP engagement also used digital media such as billboards, videos and Facebook, as well as the more traditional print media. In addition, Council's roadshow for the LTP involved elected members in 30 events across the district, providing a range of in-person engagement opportunities.

Building good relationships

Māori/iwi

Council's commitment to working with mana whenua is clearly set out in the LTP and its approach to partnership and engagement with iwi has been transformed in recent years. It has consciously moved from a consultative to a collaborative approach, and this is generally working well. However, iwi expectations are growing in terms of level of support and decision-making roles, and there are further improvements that could be considered.

For example, Council is proposing to co-design a Treaty Partnerships Project Plan to ensure a consistent approach to engagement across Council, based on Treaty principles. Opportunities exist for that document to identify how Council will support iwi capability-building and how it will monitor and manage the success of iwi engagement in the future. There was also a desire expressed from iwi, and some staff, for more assurance that issues impacting on iwi and hapū are integrated more visibly into decision-making at the ELT-level and within advice provided to elected members.

Business

The overall strategy for engagement between Council and the business community is set out in the LTP and statements of expectations/intent for Venture Taranaki Trust (VTT), the main vehicle for working with business on economic development. At a strategic level, challenges and initiatives are well articulated through 'Tapuae Roa: Make Way for Taranaki Strategy and Action Plan' and 'Taranaki 2050 Roadmap'. Overall, the relationship with business is strong, notwithstanding some frustrations from stakeholders about timeframes and delivery of consenting and projects.

Central government

Both internal and external stakeholders noted the Mayor's relentlessly proactive approach to engagement with central government on behalf of the district and wider region. Council has recognised the need to effectively engage with the Government's reform agenda. In particular, the Government's decision in 2018 to stop issuing new permits for offshore oil and gas exploration and the Council's subsequent involvement in creating the Taranaki 2050 roadmap in response. Council is also closely involved in the Three Waters reforms and demonstrated awareness of the implications of Resource Management reform.

Under the leadership of the Chief Executive, Council formed an internal Local Government Reforms Response Unit to ensure it engages and responds to the reform agenda in a coordinated and strategic way. Unfortunately, reporting on progress against tasks assigned as part of the Reforms Response Unit could not be provided making it difficult to gauge the effectiveness of this initiative and what role the Council has, or should have, in leading change.

Council may wish to consider putting some structure around its central government engagement through a strategy or similar, to ensure resilience in the event that current key personnel are not available to perform these duties in the future.

Communicating through the media

A Media Framework and Digital Communications Framework for Council provide clear social media guidelines for staff and also outlines the senior organisational leaders mandated to speak to media when required. The Mayor and other Council spokespeople are provided with training and support especially on complex or controversial issues. Relationships with key media outlets are nurtured through regular officer catch-ups, proactive pitching of content, and media are invited to attend targeted opportunities and events, such as the unveiling of the City Centre Strategy.

Council has protocols in place for the use of social media by staff and elected members as contained in the Officers' Code of Conduct and Councillors' Code of Conduct. There have been several public complaints concerning elected members statements on social media leading to a review of the Councillors' Code of Conduct.

Occurrences of online bullying and trolling of elected members were not unusual in the district, with the Mayor focusing on retaining a safe working environment. It was noted that a large volume of complaints against elected members were typically lodged by a small number of parties. Regular and consistent reporting of such incidents and complaints would provide the data necessary to expose such behaviour and enable responses to be developed and communicated.

Reputation

With a strong focus on actively managing its reputation, Council utilises independent research survey methods, a pulse checker panel (and in the case of the LTP, a representative panel), satisfaction surveys, media monitoring, and direct engagement with stakeholders to understand reputational risks and opportunities. The analysis is used to set annual KPIs and inform the "reputational radar" which ELT and elected members use to monitor its reputation strategy and improve plans and responses.

Overall community satisfaction levels are very high, most likely reflecting the generally high level of service provided by Council, its good practice in communications and engagement, and the important role of Community Boards. This strong reputation is acknowledged by a number of stakeholders, however, some were also of the view that they wanted more delivery and faster decision-making from Council.

Strengths

Communication and engagement initiatives are tested and adapted if desired results are not being achieved.

Council has a comprehensive communication and engagement framework, guided by a commonly understood reputation strategy aligned with the LTP.

Recent LTP consultation has been recognised as best practice and utilised a number of channels to reach ratepayers, including a mix of online and traditional media along with in-person engagement opportunities.

Council, and the Mayor in particular, is recognised for a relentlessly proactive approach to engagement with central government on behalf of the district and wider region.

Areas for improvement

A clear process or strategy for central government engagement would ensure that the success of such duties is not solely reliant on specific key personnel.

Opportunities exist for an upcoming co-designed Treaty Partnerships Project Plan to identify how Council will monitor and manage the success of future iwi engagement.

Regular and consistent internal reporting of online bullying and trolling of elected members may provide the data necessary to develop appropriate responses.

Council could consider how to better communicate progress on initiatives, particularly in relation to delivery.

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