

WE ARE.



**Making our
communities better**

Taupō District Council

Independent assessment report | February 2018

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 2017

Assessment Summary

AT A GLANCE



Taupō is a district with a strong heart and a vibrant economy founded on farming, forestry, energy and tourism.



LARGE METRO

SMALL METRO AND LARGE PROVINCIAL

**SMALL
PROVINCIAL
AND RURAL**



REGIONAL

The current situation

Taupō District Council services several towns (notably Taupō and Turangi) and numerous smaller communities (Mangakino, Kinloch, Kuratau and Pukawa amongst others) located around New Zealand's largest lake, Lake Taupō. The Council is now well led by a capable Chief Executive and a highly-regarded Mayor. Relationships with Māori/Iwi, the business community, ratepayers and other external stakeholders are well informed, producing effective outcomes for all New Zealanders to enjoy.

The Council does not have a singular vision for the district. The Council is aware of this and considerable effort is being expended to rectify this deficiency in the near future. External stakeholders are encouraging the Council to finalise the vision quickly. Despite this, core infrastructure services continue to be delivered reliably and cost-effectively by a capable team.

The Council is in a strong financial position, prudently managing debt, investment, and rates.

Approximately 28 per cent of the district's population identify as Māori. Tūwharetoa is the dominant iwi. A genuine sense of engagement with all iwi is apparent.

Period of assessment

The assessment took place on 23 and 24 November, 2017.



\$1,940

GROSS DOMESTIC¹
PRODUCT

SERVES

32,907

PEOPLE², A MIX OF
72% EUROPEAN AND
27% MĀORI



POPULATION TREND
GROWING

MAKES UP

2.36%

OF NEW ZEALAND'S TOTAL LAND AREA³
REPRESENTING **TAUPŌ DISTRICT** FROM
RANGIPO AND TURANGI THROUGH TO
ATIAMURI AND MANGAKINO. AN AREA
OF

6,334 km²

NEW ZEALAND'S LARGEST LAKE,
LAKE TAUPŌ 616KM²

RESPONSIBLE FOR

763km

ROADS OF WHICH >90%
ARE SEALED⁴



Key learnings

Taupō District Council is doing many things well, most notably its management of finances and engagement with the community it serves. Māori/Iwi and other stakeholder groups report a genuine sense of engagement. This is in spite of the Council lacking a single, coherent vision and formal strategy for the district. Work is currently underway to rectify this. Other key learnings were:

- > The Council manages its infrastructure spending in accordance with the assessed condition of assets and within the limits of what local ratepayers can afford. This is despite the relatively dispersed nature of the communities in the district and the costs of maintaining numerous independent water supply and wastewater systems.
- > The Council has recently implemented several innovations to reduce operating costs without compromising service delivery or environmental impact.
- > Councillors and staff are both committed to finalising a coherent vision for the district, and to better align resources and activities with this vision accordingly.
- > Taupō district has considerable opportunity for economic development while concurrently preserving the lifestyle choices of residents. A coherent economic development strategy and continued strong relations between various stakeholder groups will be crucial to realising the latent potential across the district.

¹ MBIE 2016

² Stats NZ Census 2016

³ DIA 2013

⁴ Ministry of Transport 2013/14

Assessment Summary

continued...

OVERVIEW

Taupō District Council is well-led and the delivery of core services is effective. A strong internal culture is positively reflected amongst staff and in their interactions with councillors, the broader community and key stakeholders. The Council’s conservative approach to risk will be tested as it considers options to construct a new administrative centre or, potentially, a multi-purpose facility incorporating administrative and community services.

RATING



Findings

>	>	>
<p>TAUPŌ DISTRICT COUNCIL IS PERFORMING WELL IN MOST OPERATIONAL AREAS.</p> <p>The Council has a committed Mayor and councillors who work well as a team and are responsive to the needs of the community. However, financial expertise at the Council table is inadequate. Management support mitigates the immediate shortfall, but additional training and capability development of councillors is needed.</p>	<p>COUNCIL MAINTAINS STRONG AND MUTUALLY-RESPECTED RELATIONSHIPS WITH KEY EXTERNAL STAKEHOLDER GROUPS.</p> <p>The strong focus on community engagement is producing some positive results. However, careful prioritisation is needed to ensure teams meet service delivery expectations.</p>	<p>COUNCIL FINANCES ARE WELL-MANAGED AND COUNCIL IS IN A STRONG FINANCIAL POSITION.</p> <p>Good public accountability requires a strong sense of purpose (vision) for the future, against which major proposals can be developed and community outcomes realised. It is essential that strategic decisions are made in support of a well-articulated and understood district vision.</p>

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 (playground public toilets, libraries, museums, galleries and public art etc), town centres, and other facilities.
Local Government Act 2002	The legislative act that provides a framework and powers for councils to decide which activities they undertake and the manner in which they will undertake them.
Long Term Plan	The document required under the Local Government Act that sets out a council’s priorities in the medium to long-term.



Governance, leadership and strategy	Financial decision-making and transparency	Service delivery and asset management	Communicating and engaging with the public and business
Competent	Better than competent	Competent	Better than competent

STRENGTHS

Council is well-led by a highly-regarded Mayor, capable Chief Executive and competent senior leadership group.

The Council has a genuine commitment to working with Māori/Iwi, and to make decisions of benefit to all stakeholders.

Core infrastructure is in good condition and is well managed by a competent team.

Communications and engagement with external stakeholders is both strong and multi-faceted.

Council's financial strategy and management deliberately balance debt, investment and the propensity and capacity of residential ratepayers.

The Chief Executive and senior leadership group ensure that Councillors are well informed of their obligations.

AREAS OF IMPROVEMENT

The lack of a singular vision is emerging as a constraint to longer-term planning and economic development.

Councillors would benefit from a greater focus on professional development and performance evaluation.

Councillors would benefit from enhanced financial literacy.

The Council should revisit its assumptions on the long-term capacity of district growth and the capacity to absorb rate increases

Council would benefit from more complete understanding of the true value and life of underground assets, to inform decision-making.

Leading locally

Governance, leadership and strategy

The Council has a strong operating culture, ably led by a highly-regarded Mayor and a capable Chief Executive.

Positive relationships exist between councillors, management and staff.

Priority grading

Competent

< The Mayor, councillors, Chief Executive and the senior leadership group have a strong sense of purpose, underpinned by a positive culture of doing the right thing through mutually-respected relationships. >

Setting the direction for the community

The Council currently lacks an overall vision and strategy to align effort and galvanise action around an agreed goal. However, Council is working on a new overarching vision to frame the growth and development of the district. Currently, two vision statements exist. One developed by management and the other by councillors. The Council recognises the importance of now converging the two visions, separating activity, outcomes and performance metrics, and explicitly aligning internal processes with deliverables, on behalf of the community.

External stakeholders, the business and economic development communities in particular, reported some frustration at the slow rate of progress towards a coherent long-term vision.

Despite this, elements are visible and a common pattern is emerging in the work undertaken to date. Five strategic priorities have been identified and are becoming increasingly well understood: Taupō district a great place to live; promotion of economic development - and what this actually means;

protection and wise use of water resources; quality infrastructure; and, affordable rates and, manageable debt. Also, strong undertones of “we are in this together” are apparent, operational work continues and the Council is well regarded.

The Mayor, councillors, Chief Executive and senior leadership group have an increasingly strong sense of purpose, underpinned by a positive commitment to do the right thing through mutually-respected relationships. These relationships are commendable; the Mayor is genuinely ‘loved’ by the community, and has a deep sense of both responsibility and humble engagement.

Unassuming leadership

There is a positive working culture evident throughout the Council including with stakeholders, which is founded on mutual respect and trust.

The Council has an induction programme for incoming councillors. Induction documentation is comprehensive. External providers, including LGNZ, are used to deliver relevant training. However, professional development of councillors beyond functional responsibilities and compliance subjects is limited. There is no training dedicated to effective governance or financial literacy, for example.

The collective or individual effectiveness of the councillors, or of the Council’s collective decision making is not reviewed in any formal manner, as would be expected. The pursuit of effective oversight and decision-making, while not being left to chance, is almost solely intuitive.

There is a perception that some councillors do not assess management proposals critically, in effect rubber stamping them. More training may alleviate this concern, notably financial skills across the entire gambit of financial performance, financial position, measurement, investment, discounting, depreciation and performance metrics.

While the levels of professional and technical competence and experience (especially and importantly financial) amongst the councillors is variable, both the councillors and the Chief Executive report that the councillors work well together as a group and with the senior leadership group in general.

Effective working relationships

The Mayor and Chief Executive have an effective, strong working relationship. Both are long-standing and respected members of the Taupō community. Their visibility across the community is high. They attend community events (together or separately), sometimes simply to listen and learn. They share administrative support and their offices are separated by the administrator's desk. There is both visible transparency and trust between the two.

The Mayor, who is in his fourth term (second as Mayor, returned with an increased majority) also enjoys strong support within the Council, from councillors, the Chief Executive and senior leadership group.

Strengthening risk management

Taupō District Council has a formal Audit and Risk Committee (ARC), chaired by an independent member with recognisable technical skills. The current chair was an independent member of the ARC in the previous triennium. All ARC members have attended relevant LGNZ training courses.

Documentation and reporting appears to be appropriate for a council of Taupō District Council's size and complexity. Of note is the risk management charter (RMC), a comprehensive document based on ISO 3100/2009. It is used to assess and respond to risks of various types, in accordance with a four-stage risk cycle. The RMC was independently reviewed by PricewaterhouseCoopers in 2017 and recommendations for further improvement have been incorporated.

Focusing on health and safety

The Council has a comprehensive occupational health and safety management system/programme. A health and safety committee meets regularly to both review identified health and safety matters, and to provide reporting to the senior leadership group and councillors. Health and safety reports, minutes of meetings and associated documentation were sighted.

A formal assessment of the Council's workplace practices was undertaken in September, 2016. Tertiary-level (highest) accreditation was achieved.

The Council uses a software tool (Vault) to capture health and safety incident information. Reporting is both adequate and timely. However, more use could be made of lead indicators to augment the lag indicators now in use.

Effective information and advice

Councillors meet monthly in accordance with a published meeting schedule. The reports considered at these meetings are both comprehensive and timely. Extensive use is made of graphs and tables to enhance the effectiveness of the reports.

While Council meetings are convened and chaired by the Mayor in accordance with the published schedule, the Chief Executive himself actually sets the agenda and provides the reporting mechanism. As such, the Chief Executive and the senior managers lead the Council, rather than the Mayor and councillors (with the exception of council-level decision-making).

However, senior manager engagement with councillors is underpinned by a very strong sense of 'duty', to ensure that councillors are equipped with both adequate and relevant information to make informed decisions. Unimpeded lines of communication between individual councillors and individual managers are apparent (including below the senior leadership group), meaning that flows of information are direct, effective, personal and understood.

The senior leadership group described a two-fold responsibility; one to ensure that councillors are equipped with appropriate information and expertise to make good decisions, and secondly to ensure they are not embarrassed. Strong engagement between councillors and management, including critical analysis and challenge, is vital to support effective decision-making.

Extensive use is made of workshops by the senior leadership group as a mechanism to make presentations and provide: briefings to councillors; to discuss emerging matters of interest; and, elicit feedback from councillors to inform proposals in development. Workshops are also used (by the corporate services team, in particular) to provide professional development briefings to councillors to ensure that they are adequately knowledgeable about matters requiring support in chambers.

Strengths

The Council is well-led by a highly-regarded Mayor and capable Chief Executive.

The Mayor, councillors, Chief Executive and staff have a strong sense of purpose, a commitment to serve the community together.

The Council's approach to audit and risk is sound.

The Chief Executive and senior leadership group ensure that councillors are well informed of their obligations.

Areas for improvement

The district lacks a singular, overarching vision to guide future growth and development. That this is being rectified is noted.

There is no formal, annual assessment system in place to evaluate individual and collective capability of councillors.

Health and safety reporting is devoid of lead indicators aligned with strategic risks identified in the LTP and supporting documentation to highlight areas of systemic risk.

The financial and governance expertise of the councillors is lower than what is required for effective decision-making.

The Chief Executive and senior leadership group ensure that councillors are well informed of their obligations.

Investing money well

Financial decision-making and transparency

The Council has sound financial management practices, a clear and balanced financial strategy, and long-term debt is being managed prudently. As a consequence, rates increases have been set at levels that are affordable for the community.

Priority grading

Better than competent

< The Council's financial position is strong, with sufficient income to meet the community's needs. >

The strong focus on rates control and prudent expenditure on basic infrastructure renewal has been appropriate. However, a major capital project (a new Council administration centre) is expected to both place additional demands on, and bring new opportunities to the district.

Planning and evaluating financial goals

The Council's finances and associated reporting appear to be compliant with the requirements of the Local Government Act. A forward-looking strategy, complete with quantified goals, is in place, the principles of which are sound and clearly documented.

The Council's financial reporting, both internally and to its community via the Annual Report and other documents, is clear and transparent.

Assessing financial data

Councillors receive a high-level monthly overview supported by more detailed quarterly financial reports in accordance with generally accepted practices. The Chief Executive's reporting to councillors, which incorporates financial information, makes extensive use of graphs and tables, to assist with effective information transfer and, importantly, enhance understanding.

Councillors reported no concerns interpreting financial reports provided by management. However, managers expressed some concerns, speculating that while councillors do ask questions, an adequate level of competency in financial matters is not always apparent. In addition, a considerable imbalance in technical knowledge between the councillors as a group and management

was evident. Management goes to considerable effort to ensure councillors are well-informed through workshops.

A professional development programme (to improve the financial literacy of councillors) should help reduce this imbalance, and equip councillors to confidently ask probing questions about financial reports and management proposals.

Addressing financial risk

The Council maintains an Audit and Risk Committee (ARC) with responsibility to provide oversight of risk management and internal control practices, and the effective thereof. The ARC is chaired by a Council-appointed independent external member with full voting rights.

The Council responds promptly and effectively to external reviews. The Management Report produced by Audit New Zealand for the year ending 30 June 2017 (received 24 October) identified seven necessary and one beneficial activities (nothing urgent). Management responded internally by 1 November with a list of seventeen activities to be completed by 30 June 2018.

Audit New Zealand noted that it was presented with a full and well-prepared set of financial statements and supporting evidence at the beginning of the most recent audit, and that management and staff were helpful with queries and prompt in following up any queries.

Balancing the budget

The Council uses zero-base budgeting, in accordance with good practice guidelines. Managers are provided with three prior years of history as a reference point. The review process is thorough and proposed budgets are reviewed against LTP, strategy and project priorities. The resultant budgets are compliant with balanced budget requirements.

The Council makes prudent use of carry-forward provisions. While the amounts vary from year-to-year, only 'live' projects are carried forward across fiscal years.

Meeting financial targets

The Council's financial position is strong, with sufficient income to meet its needs. It enjoys an AA credit rating from Standard and

Poors. Debt exposure is managed well and in compliance with relevant benchmarks.

Rate collection is very high. Approximately 42 per cent of the rated population within the Taupō district does not live full-time within the district (holiday homes). Despite these people placing a low demand on services (off-peak), rates are typically paid both in a timely manner and in full.

Councillors and managers are both acutely aware of the need to balance potentially competing aspirations of the local resident community by delivering what they want within the capacity of the residents to meet rates charges.

The demography of the district is such that caution is extended to local ratepayers to ensure they are not alienated through the rates setting process. Hence rate increases while perhaps easily met by the non-resident population are carefully considered from the perspective of locals. Further, rates deliberations were observed to extend to the communities of both Mangakino (whose influence featured well) and Turangi (whose influence featured comparatively poorly).

The Council recognises the need to improve its approach to capital project planning and delivery. To this end, a project management office (PMO) is being established to provide better control over the management of capital projects and ensure expected outcomes are achieved.

Being clear and transparent to all

Council describes how rates are set in its funding impact statement, in accordance with relevant documentation. Rating information is also published on the Council website. Details are both readily accessible and presented in a straightforward manner.

The Council has an on-going review programme to ensure important financial documents are kept up to date. For example, a new procurement policy is in the process of being adopted. Other documents will be reviewed in 2018.

Strengths

Council has enjoyed a sustained period of stable financial management, supported by high levels of financial acumen and a highly experienced CFO.

Council's financial position is strong.

Reporting of financial information is comprehensive and easy to understand.

Areas for improvement

Financial literacy of councillors (as a group) appears to be inadequate.

The trade-off between debt, rates increases, consumption and investment is not well understood.

Assumptions about the long term capacity of the rating base may not be robust.

Delivering what's important

Service delivery and asset management

The Council's delivery of core infrastructure services is sound. Recent developments including innovative stormwater management systems and condition-based maintenance programmes have resulted in significant cost savings.

Priority grading

Competent

< The Council subscribes to, and applies internationally recognised standards to ensure core infrastructure and associated services are managed effectively. Service delivery is fit for purpose, with 'free' capacity to meet periods of high demand. >

The significance of Lake Taupō (the Lake) to the Council, stakeholders, ratepayers and the region economically, environmentally and socially is an important consideration for all.

Aligning services with strategy

The Council's core infrastructure documentation is both current and complete, as described in the individual documents pertaining to each of the asset groups. Most of the key documents are contextually relevant to the district's demographics, population distribution and economic factors.

Cross-references between the LTP, AP and AMPs are apparent, indicating adequate alignment between services delivered and strategy. However, the absence of a clear and cohesive overarching vision means that infrastructure documentation lacks a defined foundation upon which optimal strategic decision-making can occur, especially in relation to major capital projects.

Lake Taupō is the source of both distance around the district and ribbon development (around the Lake, south to Turangi and north

to Mangakino). The health of the lake's ecosystem, and how people engage with it (either passively or actively) sits at the foundation to the region and the Council in particular.

Monitoring and assessing service levels

Service levels are set in conjunction with the local community, via surveys (most recently in September 2016). The results are used in long-term planning and to inform decision-making for other district initiatives.

The Council has an inspection programme to assess the condition and service life of infrastructure assets. CCTV is used widely to determine the condition and, therefore, effective remaining lifespan of in-ground infrastructure assets. The programme has revealed considerable savings (approximately \$6m to date) because the realistic life of some pipe work is greater than original expectations or that identifiable from drawings/schedules. This integrated approach to asset management and mapping extant infrastructure has been identified as a source of savings to fund the delivery of other services elsewhere.

Service delivery quality

The Council owns 19 water supply systems, all of which provide chlorinated water for human consumption. Water safety plans and catchment risk assessments have been prepared for each water supply. While there have been no breaches or warnings, close evaluation of the Government's Havelock North drinking water report may reveal opportunities to further improve the quality and safety of fresh water.

Council has comprehensive consents in place for stormwater discharges, and an ongoing programme to improve its understanding and capacity to continuously improve stormwater collection, treatment and discharge.

The Council has experienced some dry weather overflows from its waste water / sewerage system, caused by blockages resulting from the public using the system in a careless manner. An education programme is seen as the most appropriate and cost-effective longer-term remedy.

Environmental monitoring and reporting

The Council appears to be meeting its statutory obligations for environmental monitoring and reporting, but could take a leadership role on behalf of the broader community and nation.

While there has been a spate of sewerage overflows in the past, improved maintenance has halved the number over the last two to three years. Staff meet with the contracted service provider every month to monitor service delivery performance. No compliance breaches have been recorded or charged.

While the Council is not required to publish environmental data, the significance of and public interest in Lake Taupō and the adjoining waterways and tributaries suggests there is an opportunity to work closely with the regional council and Land Air Water Aotearoa (LAWA) to report progress against environmental standards in a transparent manner.

Assessing capability and capacity

A series of Section 17a reviews have been undertaken, the majority of which have been conducted by Council staff. Findings and recommendations are being acted on.

The Council appears to be adequately staffed with appropriately qualified people. Managers reported no difficulties attracting suitable staff to the district. However, the human resources function is a weakness. The option of realigning the HR Manager's role within the senior leadership group is to be encouraged.

Over the last two years, there has been a small succession of internal promotions and external appointments to the organisation. Several more are now expected, as the Chief Executive continues to build a strong team and a harmonious and effective organisational culture.

Addressing regulation

Taupō District Council appears to be compliant with all relevant legislative and regulatory requirements.

Building Control Authority (BCA) standards are assessed independently by IANZ. The Council's performance exceeds the minimum standards specified by the BCA.

Council has a comprehensive regulatory programme in place, with a high emphasis on understanding and education. Blatant or repeated infringements are dealt with through the enforcement provisions however, and subject to formal 'lessons learned' evaluation. A third-party provider is used for out-of-hours compliance services.

Policy planning

A long-term vision for the district was developed in 2006 (Taupō District 2050). This provided a platform for subsequent long-term, annual and district planning activity. A review is now scheduled.

This is timely given the work underway to refine the Council's vision on behalf of the district.

External stakeholders called for greater alignment between the long-term vision, Council documentation and strategically important capital projects. A comprehensive knowledge of expected changes in demographics, population distribution within the district, land use and environmental policy settings will be crucial if a robust and useful update is to be produced.

The Council is reviewing its long-term plan for the 2018–2028 period. Considerable community consultation is planned, despite an expectation of 'incremental change', suggesting space to tackle major capital projects including, for example, the new council office, premises and potentially a 'district heart'.

Capital investment decisions and delivery

The quality of business cases to support informed and defensible decisions has been mixed in the past. However, a formal business case approach is now being implemented for major capital projects. Further improvements are expected once the Council's vision is clarified, to provide business cases for capital projects with a solid and transparent foundation.

The Council is implementing a project management methodology to provide better management and oversight of major capital works, which should lead to better project delivery outcomes. A strong commitment to training to ensure staff are adequately capable is also apparent. More effective reporting against project plans, to both the senior leadership group and councillors should provide additional transparency and, hopefully, better accountability. Additional training of councillors may be required, for appropriate oversight, especially finance.

Strengths

Adoption of condition-based replacement infrastructure replacement programme has resulted in considerable savings.

Council is compliant with all relevant legislative and regulatory requirements.

The highly consultative process used to review freedom camping and develop a new bylaw.

Robust strategies are in place for the continuous improvement of core infrastructure, notably the three waters.

Council uses sound conventional processes for service delivery resulting in a reliable quality of service.

Areas for improvement

The Council could work more closely with the regional council to ensure environmental data is published by the Council.

There is no overarching framework (coherent district-wide vision) to support the development of cost-effective and contextually-relevant asset management plans.

Council lacks leadership in defining and maintaining standards on behalf of the community.

Listening and responding

Communicating and engaging with the public and businesses

The Council's Mayor and councillors, Chief Executive and staff all have a strong commitment to effective communication and high levels of engagement with community stakeholder groups including the business community, Māori/Iwi, government agencies and local community associations.

Priority grading

Better than competent

< Council engagement with its community is strong and effective; multifaceted and respected interactions include considerable informal engagement. >

Despite high levels of engagement, staff are very aware that the Council currently lacks a cohesive overarching vision, and that a single vision and strategy is crucial if a coherent communications strategy and associated messaging is to emerge.

Planning effective engagement

The Council has a comprehensive and multi-faceted communications strategy in place, incorporating print, radio and electronic channels. Regular in-person updates are also provided, by the Mayor, Chief Executive or other designated leaders, to community and business groups, and Iwi.

There is a strong focus on community engagement, including informal engagement. The Mayor is often seen 'popping into shops' and chatting with locals, irrespective of them being members of the business community, a tourist or a local gardener. The Mayor is widely liked across all sectors of the district, especially in the Taupō township but also in the outlying communities of Mangakino and Turangi.

There is direct and formal engagement with Iwi and business communities, and local residential groups, especially over specific projects. The Chief Executive provides quarterly updates to business groups and others.

Electronic communications are being increasingly used to reach more rate payers and residents. Interestingly, communications with out-of-town rate payers (so-called non-residents, which are 42 per cent of the Taupō rating base) tends to be paper-based such is their preference. Extensive use is made of the local newspaper to communicate with local residents.

Engaging with the community

Most of the Council's communication is clear and direct, and most of its key accountability documents are easy to understand. However, the reporting on what has been delivered, by whom, and how well, would benefit from a clear linkage with desired community outcomes. This would more clearly reflect how the Council's actions contribute to the community's well-being and the district's attractiveness.

Engaging through digital means

The main methods of online communication and information dissemination used by the Council is the Council's own website and social media (i.e., Facebook) pages. Both are functional and stakeholders reported that the information provided is helpful.

An extensive portfolio of online services is available through the Council website. These include a portal for various consent applications and payments; requests for information; applications; and, submissions.

Ease of access and clarity of message are important considerations for the Council. Many residents live in rural communities, so access to information and on-line services are very important.

How the community views the Council

The Council subscribes to the National Research Bureau (NRB) survey to elicit feedback on Council performance. The survey is conducted every three years, and the results are used to assess satisfaction ratings.

The Council's reputation is not formally measured. However, anecdotal feedback suggests that its reputation is good. An independent stakeholder survey would enable anecdotal feedback to be validated or rejected, and trends over time to be tracked.

The Council's intention to construct a new Council building will test its reputation and ability to lead well. The Council faces a choice, to pursue a straightforward accommodation proposal for staff and service delivery, or a more expansive proposal to develop a multi-use community 'hub', a more expensive option with very different outcomes. Understanding what is required, what is needed, the scale of the opportunity and the cost will require strong leadership and much consultation.

Communicating through the media

The Council's relationship with the media is largely positive. The Mayor, Chief Executive and senior staff make themselves available to the media to discuss topical matters as required.

A media engagement research report commissioned in May 2017 has provided insights to inform an updated communications and engagement strategy now being drafted.

Civil defence and emergency management

A strong and capable emergency management team is in place. Many examples of emergency responses and preparedness exercises were described. The emergency management team maintains strong relationships with iwi groups, the local 4WD club, the New Zealand Army (Waiohuru Military Camp), and with residents of outlying towns and settlements to ensure preparedness in the case of an 'isolation' event, typically weather related, which are not uncommon.

Community response plans have been developed in conjunction with local residents, with guidance and support of the Council. The senior leadership group maintains a strong commitment for effective emergency management that is deployed frequently.

Building relationships with Māori/iwi

The Council enjoys positive working relationships with Māori/iwi. There is a strong sense of genuine engagement between the Council and iwi. Formal and informal arrangements in place. Mayor and Chief Executive are regular participants on marae and at meetings with iwi. Some Council meetings are held on marae.

The Council has dedicated staff in place to both liaise with iwi, and to provide coaching and protocol support to Council staff. Iwi leaders report this genuine commitment to a strong and enduring relationship. Iwi leaders also report the Council is both open and easy to contact, at all levels.

Iwi leaders see the relationship with the Council as being one of trusted stakeholder; noting that their Treaty partnership is with the Crown directly, not the Taupō District Council.

Building relationships with the community

The Council has established robust formal and informal relationships with special interest groups across the community, resulting in an extensive web of linkages.

Community stakeholders say that they appreciate the Council's level of engagement. However, some stakeholders expressed concerns over the Council's ability to say 'no'; it being better to say no than to take on too much.

In the last 12 months (under the leadership of the new Chief Executive), considerable analysis of, and relationship building with community stakeholders has occurred. While this has been appreciated, stakeholders are keen to see the listening and discussion now being converted into credible action and effective implementation.

Engaging with the community

Most of the Council's communication and documentation is clear, concise and delivered in a direct tone. The Council recognises that it is 'lifting from a low base' to now communicating well, with increasing expectations and a positive culture.

Though highly motivated, the communications team is very busy. It does not seem to be adequately resourced; a matter for consideration of Chief Executive as part of a future organisational structure and resourcing review.

There is an opportunity for improved communications and reporting when the Council's vision is finalised. The goal is to provide strong, direct and bi-directional linkages between external stakeholders, operational and project teams, the AP and LTP and, ultimately, the district's vision.

Strengths

Strong and well-developed emergency management system.

A genuine and mutually-respected relationship between the Council and iwi is apparent.

A strong commitment to effective communication with the community, which is supported in both practice and effect.

Areas for improvement

Council appears to become over-committed.

The Council should involve the community and business directly in the development of the District vision and goals

Integrate social media with conventional information channels that enhances channel deliverables rather than replicate one another.

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