

Chief Executive's Report – June 2024



To: **Whakatāne District Council**

Date: **Thursday, 27 June 2024**

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1 Reason for the report - *Te Take mō tēnei rīpoata*

The purpose of the report is to provide updated information and advice on relevant Council related matters.

2 Recommendation - *Tohutohu akiaki*

THAT the Chief Executive's Report – June 2024 report be received.

3 Issue/subject – *Kaupapa*

3.1 Long Term Plan (LTP) 2024-2034

When I wrote about the Long Term Plan (LTP) process in my last CE Report to Council, I was expecting that our 10 year work programme and budget would have completed the Government audit process and be presented to Council today for an adoption vote. Indeed, by the end of May we were tracking well according to the project timelines. Councillors had followed a thorough and efficient deliberations process in which they gave staff strong direction to retain key elements of the draft plan, whilst responding to clear community sentiment around keeping rates as affordable as possible. Significant decisions through deliberations around funding essential works for the Rex Morpeth Hub development in the short-term, introducing user charges at the Murupara Refuse Transfer Station, and maintaining our levels of service across all business units were aligned with our strategic outcomes to enable strong and thriving connected communities. Staff worked hard to reflect this direction in the revised Long Term Plan delivered to audit on 27 May 2024 for final review. Since then, however, there have been some delays for a number of reasons.

The change of Government led to a change to water legislation earlier this year with three waters being retained by Councils. The Office of the Auditor General offered Councils options recognising that local authorities were at different stages with waters transitions programmes with respect to audit phases and LTP adoption dates and also that AuditNZ needed phasing of LTP audits to manage with the new workload. Our Council was 'on time' for a late June LTP adoption so opted to defer the 'consultation document' audit and run that later in the year with the full LTP audit.

What we are seeing now are the effects of trying to condense a much longer and more detailed early audit into a much shorter period near the end. Groups of staff in both organisations are working through robust and challenging audit queries and requests for information for, by far, the most complex and significant LTP in decades. This is the case in most councils across New Zealand.

Our audit release date has been shifted and we are now expecting to receive audit verification in the first week of July 2024. A project team has been assessing options for striking the rates in various scenarios should the audit release date be further extended and the LTP project team will of course keep Council informed as information is received from AuditNZ.

3.2 Submissions to Central and Regional Government

It speaks to the Government's pace of change that Council has responded to two submissions to draft legislation during this reporting period. Submissions are time and resource hungry, but an important vehicle for our communities concerns to be heard.

It also speaks to Government's commitment to its coalition agreement that one of those submissions has since completed the select committee process in record time.

Council made its submission to the Justice Select Committee on the Local Government (Electoral Legislation and Māori Wards and Māori Constituencies) Amendment Bill. Mayor Luca, Deputy Mayor Immink, Councillor Boynton and I spoke to our submission, supporting the maintenance of Māori Wards, via zoom on 4 June 2024. On 21 June 2024 the Select Committee reported back their recommendation that the bill proceed with minor amendments.

On 13 June 2024 Council made its submission to the Water Services Preliminary Arrangements Bill which is being considered by the Finance and Expenditure Committee.

Since my last report, Council also presented its submission on the Bay of Plenty Regional Council Long Term Plan. Mayor Luca, Deputy Mayor Immink, Councillors Rangiaho and Boynton and I attended the local hearing day held in the BOPRC Whakatāne chamber Mātaatua on 14 May 2024.

3.3 Connection with Local Government organisations

Connection into the LGNZ, Taituarā and DIA webinars and information sharing remains very important and a source of collegial support.

On the 11 June, together with Mayor Luca, Deputy Mayor Immink, a number of Councillors, Kay Boreham and I joined the LGNZ Roundtable Zoom presentation and discussion on the increase in challenges being faced by Elected Members and staff in many councils across the country.

It was deeply disturbing to hear first-hand accounts of community members turning up to the homes of elected members and local government officers and using aggressive and threatening behaviour in many spaces and forums in relation to council business. For me it was a reminder to keep in balance the silent majority of ratepayers and residents who are out there also contributing to community wellbeing, but to not underestimate sadly, the change in our communities across New Zealand and the apparent willingness of some individuals to harm Local Government and other public servants, in many ways. We have our experiences of increasing anxiety and aggression and need to remain vigilant and ensure we are doing all we can to keep people safe.

4 Conclusion - *Kupu whakamutunga*

This will be my final report as Chief Executive of the Whakatāne District Council. I so fondly remember the pōhiri to welcome me on 19 November 2018 and it has been a privilege to have worked with Mayor's Tony Bonne, Judy Turner and Victor Luca and the Councillors across the last five and half years.

It has also been a huge highlight for me to develop a high performing Executive Team and to watch our staff deliver to our communities, day in and day out, through the myriad challenges of service delivery during an unprecedented time in local government.

Together we have achieved many things, and some have been nation-leading, such as completion of the Awatarariki Voluntary Managed Retreat process with Central Government and the Bay of Plenty Regional Council – the first such post-disaster buy-out in a community. We were also among the few councils in Aotearoa that delivered its full Better-Off-Funding work programme (money invested with Councils as part of the former Three Waters reform process) which saw long awaited projects such as the new Braemar Water Treatment Plant get across the line. Our Hono Hapori mobile Council units will be on the road later this year, delivering greater access to Council services among our rural and remote communities. I know staff have been advocating for both of these projects for nigh on 20 years, so fantastic to be able to bring them to life with external funding.

I remain a firm believer that ‘good things take time’ and that real engagement is a time and resource investment that will always pay dividends. I am proud of the co-design approach to the Matatā Wastewater Project Te Niaotanga ō Mataatua ō Te Arawa Matatā; our Eastern Bay Spatial Plan ‘Our Places’ and the Iwi Collaborative Policy Hub. These projects represent a significant change in the way we are working with Iwi and Community partners. The adage that “if you want to go fast - go alone, but if you want to go far – go with others” is very appropriate for all of these projects as we are taking a long term view and while adapting to new and collaborative methodologies does take longer, the investment is focused on enhanced and more sustainable outcomes.

Council’s commitment to working in friendship and collaboration with Iwi, hapū and whānau is documented in Te Toi Waka Whakareī – our Māori Relationship Strategy. I look forward to watching its continued delivery for the District and all its people. The Strategy was recognised behind the scenes at the recent Taituara Awards with the Taituara team advising us that the project scored very highly and was extremely well regarded by the Judges. Other Councils’ requests for us to assist them with similar strategy development is also a tribute to this key relationship strategy.

Being witness to the Governor General’s pardon of Rua Kenana in Maungapohatu, celebrating a very special Anzac memorial day in 2023, joining in the sad but beautiful memorial service to the late Sir Michael Cullen at Te Uru Taumata, celebrating PGF investments into Murupara and Minginui and across the EBOP, working with Kirsty Luke on responding to Cyclone Gabrielle impacts in Waikaremoana and Wairoa are a few of the many special occasions etched in my WDC experience. These all reflect the rich diversity of our District and the benefits of working together and understanding each other.

As Chief Executive, I have made considerable efforts, at times working necessarily behind the scenes, to support unlocking key projects and programmes across the District. I will also continue to watch those outcomes with very keen interest!

Te Toi Waka Whakareī is among a number of notable strategies that I have been delighted to see adopted that strengthen and provide clarity on Council’s future direction and position with its communities, including the Arts, Culture and Creativity Strategy, Open Spaces and Places Strategy and the Whakatāne District Climate Change Strategy. These give our partners, key stakeholders and the community certainty as to Council’s direction, priorities and focus areas. This can be very underestimated in terms of the co-investment it then attracts from parties sure that their investment will be worthwhile.

Leading through the event and the community recovery from the 9 December 2019 Whakaari White Island eruption is an experience that will stay with me forever, and my thoughts are never far from being drawn to those most directly impacted and their families and our staff and colleagues who have shared that journey. I acknowledge the current efforts of the Whakatāne-Ōhope Community Board in collaboration with Te Runanga o Ngāti Awa and with the support of Council staff to plan for a permanent place of memorial and hope the project receives the wider support required to create a fitting tribute. We have all visited other memorials across Aotearoa NZ and across the world, and they are important civic and cultural investments.

I wish to also acknowledge the key role that the amazing Te Mānuka Tūtahi marae played in this event, as a beautiful example of safe space and manaakitanga that marae play in these really challenging times. Now that Te Mānuka Tūtahi has been recognised as a ‘Waahi Tipuna’ by Heritage New Zealand (on 17 November 2023) and may well be recognised with international certification in the future, I encourage Council and the community to consider how we might play a part in caring for and supporting this iconic cultural heritage site we all are very fortunate to benefit from.

COVID-19 was a huge challenge and I am incredibly grateful for the support of Council when the Executive Team presented our strategy on how to keep our people safe and well, while continuing to deliver essential services to our communities. The decisions we made were unprecedented and I’m so proud of how staff responded as individuals and teams across the organisation in such a challenging and uncertain time. While it affected every person’s work-life I’m still awed by the resilience of our events and marketing team as they dealt with the disappointment of event after event having to be cancelled, and that coming of course so close to the need to pivot the district’s tourism offering post-Whakaari.

Whakatāne District Council secured \$8.2 million in COVID-19 Recovery Funding from the Provincial Growth Fund to undertake a range of projects delivered by the Council and the Bay of Plenty Regional Council. The Kia Kaha Whakatāne programme supported roading, infrastructure and environmental projects, providing urgent economic relief for the workforce, particularly those who had lost jobs through the pandemic.

Out of those times came the EBOP Contractors Forum of which I have been a strong advocate.

The benefits experienced through the establishment of the EBOP Civil Contractors forum is a key highlight for me of this time. Without this sector none of the Councils across the EBOP would be able to deliver our capital works programme and the multiplier effect from the employment they stimulate, and re-invest across the community is substantial. They are great people, running tough businesses, in what has been an extraordinarily challenging environment of late. I trust that Council will continue to see the benefit in this forum and keep energising it to achieve more and do greater things. I also see it as potential model for other sectors to emulate, including the building sector.

2020 (and subsequently) have been years of unparalleled Government regional economic development investment into the Eastern Bay of Plenty, with high value horticulture on Māori Land, aquaculture and the Harbour Project in the Ōpōtiki District; and the industrial inland-port in the Kawerau District attracting Provincial Growth Fund investment. Whakatāne District saw funding for what is now Te Rāhui – Herenga Waka Whakatāne Boat Harbour Project, town wharf renewal and town regeneration. While challenging to implement for many reasons, these projects will continue to create employment, enhance the regional and national economies, attract further co-investment, assist in climate change response and importantly create pride in areas which have gone under the radar for too long, for decades to come.

I’ve enjoyed celebrating many Council and community ‘wins’ over the years, including two Keep New Zealand Beautiful Awards which recognise Council collaboration with multiple community groups.

Seeing the rewards of investment in our people has been a key driver for me during my time at Whakatāne District Council. Programmes such as the Rimu Programme, Leading our People and Growing Greatness support staff to thrive and challenge themselves to achieve their best. ‘Whakapiri’, our People Leaders event held in November last year began a way forward for the Executive to support third tier managers to drive more structured collaboration and best practice across the organisation.

Our people investment has been recognised nationally, with Toitū te Kotahitanga, the transformation of our organisational culture and leadership capability winning the Organisation and People Development category at the 2023 Taituarā Excellence in Local Government Awards. That a fortnight ago Whakatāne District Council won the same category for ‘reimagining work’, our hybrid working policy is simply remarkable. Topping off the latest celebration of our people was the announcement of

the Council team winning the New Zealand leg of the Local Government Management Challenge and thereby progressing to compete against the top Australian local government teams.

“Your organisation’s employees are its greatest asset and your people are your product” is the famous Richard Branson quote and I whole heartedly endorse that. Investment in our people, and unlocking support systems and sound business practices to enable them is the job of an Executive Leadership Team. I want to acknowledge Council’s endorsement of and investment into the recommendations of the independent Health Check 2020 report into our enabling services, and trust that as Councillors have seen the multiple benefits emerge, Council will continue to see that investment in ‘our’ business, leads to improved outcomes for the community. There are no quick fixes, or silver bullets but prudent, sound and sustained investment will ensure an organisation fit for purpose, agile and able to deal with whatever is thrown at it.

Mayor Victor and I have both reported on the impacts of global geo-political instability, economic challenges, climate change implications, workforce changes and expectations, broken Local Government funding and finance systems, inter-generational under investment in infrastructure and other challenges. And yet, while we try as an organisation to be in the best possible position to adapt and change in extraordinary times of uncertainty, it is important to not lose sight of the beauty of the place where we live, our amazingly diverse and resilient communities, and the bounty and importance of the natural environment around us.

I wish to pay a special tribute to our Executive Leadership Team. A highly talented group of leaders who have been willing to lean in, learn together, try new ways of working and who always have the community at the heart of what they do, it has been a privilege to lead, work with and learn from. The amazing work this Council does day in day out is to be celebrated and recognised. I am extremely grateful for the support of and rich experiences of working with both Elected Members and the staff here at WDC, great people dedicated to serving our communities. More Life in Life!

Kia kaha, kia māia, kia manawanui! – Be strong, be brave be steadfast!