

Report 99.339
18 June 1999
File: E/6/20/1

Report to the Policy & Finance Committee
from Howard Stone, General Manager

“Community Connections”

1. Purpose

To fulfil the obligation under my 1998/99 Performance Criterion No.1 which reads as follows:

“Report to the Council by 30.6.99 on a methodology to secure an ongoing “Community Connection” which will allow the underpinning of the Council’s future policy development with clear community mandates.”

2. Background

I wrote to the previous Council on 28.7.98 outlining the reasons for pursuing a programme of overseas research in September of that year. Below is an extract from that communication which provides some background for recently elected Councillors.

“The few Councillors who have had a continuous presence at the Council table since the reforms of 1989 will probably recognise the following.

The first three years or so from 1 November 1989 were really ones of significant cultural and operational change to set the parameters for the good fiscal and human resource management into the future. They were characterised by centralised management and internal focus. By 1993 the Council was under control and operating in a very accountable environment.

The next strategic milestone was to introduce the forward thinking and strategic planning which is now inherent in our ten year financial strategy and

the policy framework which supports it. This process again took some 3-4 years to really become part of what we do.

The final phase of development is one which will enable us to make real connections with the regional community at a grass roots level in order to not only support policy initiatives by the Council itself, but also to identify functional and responsibility shifts for Local Government in the greater Wellington region should the community will indicate this is necessary.

Just before we commenced our strategic phase, I felt it necessary to ensure the development of advice to the Council was based upon sound, logical and where possible, proven practice. In 1993 I attended the strategic management programme at Henley Management College to do just that. This visit confirmed that the approach then planned for the WRC was well up with international best practice.

The purpose of my visit to Aspen is to verify the thinking on community democracy and to UK Local Government to look at success stories in practical application.

The combination of these two aspects should then provide a platform for the next three years at the Wellington Regional Council in terms of developing what I describe as a “real time” interface with the community which, in turn, will provide a secure and positive mandate for the development of appropriate and forward thinking Council policies.”

The above is the basis for the performance criterion addressed in this report.

3. Comment

While in the United Kingdom I obtained a paper on the British Government’s policy direction in matters of Local Government. The introduction to the paper includes the following paragraphs written by John Prescott – Senior British Cabinet Minister.

“People everywhere deserve and rightly expect a pleasant and safe environment in which they can live and work. We all want good quality public services, with rising standards in our schools and in our health care. We want local communities where everyone can participate in society, and effective care is available to those who need it.

It is to give people this quality of life that we have embarked upon an ambitious programme to modernise Britain. We want to build a fairer more decent society underpinned by stable economic growth, environmental sustainability, and social justice for all.....

Central to this programme is our agenda to modernise local government. Among all our public institutions, Councils have a special status and authority as local, directly-elected bodies. They are uniquely placed to provide vision

and leadership to their local communities. They are able to make things happen on the ground where it really matters.

People need Councils which serve them well. Councils need to listen to, lead and build up their local communities. We want to see Councils working in partnership with others, making their contribution to the achievement of our aims for improving people's quality of life.....”

We can fantasise that this might represent a leadership statement from our own government here in New Zealand. Unfortunately, it does not and it is left to Local Government to take its own initiatives in advancing the contribution it can make to local communities.

In this endeavour, Councillors have, over recent months, been immersed in debates on local democracy, its place in society and how it may be energised in the Wellington Region. It is interesting to note how closely this Council's conclusions match those of John Prescott.

Prescott goes on to say that wholesale reform of Local Government in Britain is necessary as a precursor to really effective local democracy. In New Zealand, we have spent the last ten years effecting these reforms and consequently, we are well ahead of Britain in our potential to genuinely engage our communities in the business of government. The major question is how?

First – Define Objectives and Desired Outcomes

Councillors are currently engaged in developing the next Long Term Financial Strategy. Unlike preceding processes, the current one has very much a “Top Down” approach. It will inevitably have its “Bottom Up” pressures but the schematic attached (Appendix 1) clearly demonstrates that the principal drivers of the strategy will be determined by what is important to the community. The Council has already obtained some core data on the region to support such decision making – *IN FOCUS* document.

The process of defining and refining the Long Term Financial Strategy will deliver answers to the questions –

- What kind of community do we want?
- What are the community priorities?
- What should the WRC be doing itself?
- What should it be doing with others?
- What should it be advocating to be done by others?

These answers will, in turn, be the drivers for the macro and micro communications activities which will be at the heart of making “community connections”.

This Council has a clear mandate in environmental management and this will feature highly in the WRC driven activities and communications. This could

be largely a matter of creatively implementing the Regional Policy Statement. Initiatives such as the Environmental Education and Communications Strategy are already under consideration and could form a significant part of the “Community Connections”.

However, other objectives may be more effectively actioned co-operatively in association with local authorities, central government agencies, voluntary groups or community associations.

The range, scope and priority for “community connections” will be a matter for the Council to decide as a result of finalising its Long Term Financial Strategy.

Second – Create Awareness and Support for a Central Idea

The “Bullseye” of the LTFS process diagram might be a “Greater Wellington”. The supporting goals might be:

- A safe and healthy community
- A sustainable environment
- An equitable society
- Economic prosperity
- A healthy democracy

The central idea and associated goals will need to be proactively promoted by the Council as its *raison d’être*. They will be the things the Council stands for.

The initiatives and activities which will contribute to the achievement of the goals and the outcome of a “Greater Wellington” need to be developed with, and sometimes by, the community itself.

Therefore there needs to be a combination of “supply push” and “demand pull” communication tools applied to activating the pursuit of the goals in a wide variety of ways. Some options for such tools are presented next.

Third – Determine the Tools

The process of “community connections” is not one of self promotion by the WRC. However, Councillors have already noted that awareness of the WRC in the community needs to be enhanced as part of gaining community support. Therefore, as noted above, a certain element of “supply push” is a legitimate part of any “community connections” strategy.

There is general recognition that the statutory processes for community consultation fall short of making genuine “community connections”. In addition, not all the tools and methodologies for improving this situation will be evident at this stage of the Council’s efforts. Nevertheless, the presentation of options is entirely appropriate at this time to enable effect to be given to the Council’s declared intent.

Targeting Communications:

Key Issue No.1 – Targeting

- We need to empower people to have a say in our region's affairs whenever they want, or whenever it's necessary, and in ways that are meaningful both for Council and the community.

This means creating a communications environment in which the two-way flow of communication between our public(s) and ourselves is enhanced. Presently, the public is always welcome to contact us on any issue, or with any opinion, at any time. The point is: how do they *know* they can do this?

We need to develop our communication relationships.

One approach: Create a targeted communications database linked to the WRC's regional calendar cycle of events.

This database – let's call it 'Connectwell' – is one that provides desirable community connections (as opposed to minimum statutory or regular connections). Within it, on a calendar basis, is the WRC's annual agenda of events, reports, meetings etc. each linked to general and specific audiences via diverse communication avenues.

This information already exists within the WRC, but in a scattered and diverse form. Connectwell is simply a means of enhancing our communications by harnessing the pattern or cycle of communications while at the same time identifying the widest possible communication opportunities.

For example, a programme of possum control using 1080 poison would automatically involve public notices in the newspapers and usually a press release. But this could also utilise other communications opportunities, such as:

- Public notification via our website plus the chance to email questions and comments to WRC;
- Feature article(s) on possums as pests originating from our own WRC communications section for the general media;
- Articles or press releases to appropriate canine clubs, farming groups, residents' associations, tramping clubs etc. for publication in their own newsletters;
- Invitations to Young Farmers, agricultural students, etc. to use the programme as an opportunity to study possum control.

So, the communication avenues can be increased, varied, and targeted according to perceived needs/opportunities. To a significant degree, this work

has already started via the R.I.S.C. group, but the final product of that work could perhaps be co-ordinated into a more useful database, maybe even developed as a PC-based programme.

The gathering, analysis and packaging of the Connectwell information could be handled in-house and shouldn't require much, if any, external cost.

Enhancing Communications

Key Issue No.2 – Enhancing Connections

- How to establish community connections on those issues currently outside the WRC's agenda and/or with people not currently communicating with Council.

Beyond Connectwell there is a perceived need for a mechanism by which our communities can 'get the ear' of the WRC on wider issues, affecting their quality of life.

This mechanism could encourage those who might not realise that their views and comments are welcomed – or indeed needed – by Council, to communicate with us.

Four possible approaches:

1. WRC Customer Service Centre

Call centres have become an established method of communicating with customers. Today they are referred to as 'Customer Service Centres' because of the greater use being made of call centre technology.

A customer service centre is more than a re-vamped telephone-reception system. It is a dedicated communications initiative that involves a team of people trained in customer service.

The difference is evident in a situation such as a member of the public phoning in to enquire about resource consents. Instead of being put through to the consents department, the customer's query (often a Frequently Asked Question, FAQ) is handled by the person who takes the call. This reduces the time the customer spends on the phone, increases customer satisfaction, reduces the number of interruptions the consents department experiences and therefore directly increases productivity.

Further, trained customer service centre staff can be proactive. For example, they can undertake customer telephone surveys on particular WRC issues.

Customer service centre technology allows an organisation to accurately identify trends in its calls, such as number, duration, number on a particular issue, response times, etc. The technology also allows an accurate gauge of responses to advertising and promotion (where a specific phone number is used for that promotion or advertising only).

A customer service centre needs supporting promotion for maximum benefit. This promotion can be general or issues-based, and can cover a variety of media.

A campaign could, for example, use a 'Don't Call Us, We'll Call You' approach. This might run in conjunction with other promotional and/or advertising opportunities, but could form the core of our wider community connection needs.

In simple terms it is a call to action from the WRC (via newspapers in particular) to encourage and empower individuals to let us know what they're thinking, feeling – and maybe even what they're doing – about issues in our region.

The campaign requires a Freepost mail coupon to be returned to the WRC, on which the respondent puts their name, address and phone number, along with a brief two-line description of what it is they want to tell us (or discuss). Tick-boxes on current issues are also an option.

The returned coupons could then be collated by a dedicated team at a Greater Wellington Customer Service Centre, who follow up with personal contact by phone to discuss the nominated issues. Comments made by respondents are noted and passed on internally as appropriate:

- for information;
- for action;
- for further consideration.

Naturally, as part of the advertising, customers would be told that they are always welcome to call us, and that the response coupon is not essential.

Costs involved in the set up and operation of a customer service centre are uncertain without an established plan.

2. Greater Wellington Newspaper

This publication, perhaps a tabloid quarterly delivered to households throughout the region, can be produced in association with other community groups who are concerned with 'Greater Wellington' issues.

While carrying the mantle of the WRC, it brings together groups, organisations and individuals not necessarily associated with the Council, but connected via the Council's areas of influence.

For example, within any single issue of Greater Wellington there might be feature articles on mountainbiking, fishing, healthcare, tramping, commuting, etc. This association with these other groups and causes is a key to helping increase the WRC's profile. It associates WRC with the wider community and

the paper becomes a voice for them to also have a say in regional affairs. The response coupon concept can be used within this newspaper also.

Environment Waikato publishes a quarterly newspaper and has done so since 1994. Their communications section says that *Envirocare* is distributed to 140,000 households, is well regarded, generates a good response, and is being used in some cases as an alternative to taking out advertising on regional council issues in local media (for example, promotion of the draft annual plan). In this respect there are some hidden economies in such a newspaper.

Envirocare is an A4 publication, between 8 and 12 pages, and has full colour throughout. The *Regional Guardian* is an Environment BOP publication, though tabloid-size. It uses layout and content similar to *Envirocare*, and is distributed to 90,000 households. It too has been published for about five years and enjoys positive readership.

So the concept of a regional paper is not new, but the association with community groups in the wider region seems to be an opportunity not currently taken by existing regional council papers.

A four-colour (full-colour) quarterly tabloid publication, produced by the WRC communications team – with design, layout and printing contracted externally – would cost an estimated \$150,000 per annum.

3. The WRC website

New Zealand has the second highest number of PC users (per capita) in the world. The Internet is rapidly becoming a daily medium, to the extent that TMP Worldwide is looking at employment advertisements in newspapers becoming largely a means of directing potential job applicants to relevant websites.

Our own website is well established, but could be doing a lot more for us in terms of community connections. Two website design and maintenance companies have prepared estimates for scoping studies on our site. This initiative is based on making the site more interactive, current, and useful as a community connection.

Considerations:

- An active database approach will allow WRC IT personnel to update information on a daily – if not hourly – basis, as appropriate. This will have great value in terms of giving the public accurate, up-to-date information. However, the website has the potential to encourage and empower the public to respond to current issues ...
- As with the current newspaper public notices, our website can present updated Council meeting schedules, with details on how the public can have their say by making submissions, etc.

- It can also act as an ‘electronic soapbox’ for regional Internet users to communicate directly with Council on issues and concerns, either as groups or as individuals.

Website responses can again be co-ordinated by the WRC’s Customer Service Centre. Promotion of this website communication avenue will be essential and can be achieved in a number of ways:

- WRC website address as part of branding/imagery (already being done).
- Links established to our site from other related sites e.g. mountainbike webpages, tramping club webpages, etc.
- Billboard promotion.
- Media advertising, perhaps issues-based, e.g. in conjunction with the release of the draft annual plan; via the regional newspaper, etc.

Development and maintenance costs for the website have been estimated at approximately \$16,000, though its integration with a customer service centre may involve a greater cost.

4. Targeted Market Research

The success of recent audience surveys, such as on the stadium, water ownership, and Transmission Gully willingness-to-pay issues, has shown that this is an effective method of achieving a clear mandate for the WRC.

The worst scenario would be a definitive 50-50 split on any particular issue, but where the issue is likely to show a majority opinion, targeted market research is a useful tool in gauging genuine public feeling.

A major plus of this type of research is that it wipes out anecdotal evidence and ‘gut feeling’, replacing them with hard-core statistics. Surveys of this type tend to work best when they are issues-based.

The cost of such surveys varies according to their complexity. The stadium survey was about \$30,000 (with another \$10k for advertising), while the recent Transmission Gully willingness to pay survey cost around \$75,000.

An annual budget of around \$150,000 should allow at least four – and perhaps as many as six surveys – though as mentioned some lesser survey work could be undertaken by customer service centre staff.

Participatory Communications:

Much has been made of the phrase “educating through doing” rather than “telling”. A significant thrust of this proposition is the active engagement of and participation with targeted sections of the community, particularly those who have a stake - acknowledged or not – in the work of this Council.

A report on our Education and Communications strategy has been prepared by Dr. Bradbury and Mr Annakin. The contents of this report and the ideas within it can form a further series of options of enhancing “community connections”. This will need to be integrated into the overall programme so that the final package of tools and methods will constitute the optimum approach to enhancing community connections.

A Greater Wellington

Earlier mention has been made of the central idea of a Greater Wellington. It is perhaps appropriate to explain in broad terms the thinking behind this. This Council has been reminded of its obligations to provide vision and leadership by organisations ranging from the Wellington City Council to the Regional Chamber of Commerce.

Clearly there is also a view that the WRC should be constrained in its leadership role. Both views have their merits and the balance that is required to respect them is explicit in the section of this document entitled *First – Define Objectives and Desired Outcomes*.

However, it is difficult to see how any could not support the concept of a Greater Wellington if its manifestation was in line with the kind of environment described in John Prescott’s introduction quoted earlier. The development of the Long Term Financial Strategy will put substance and shape to the generic idea. It will also make clear that an institutional and community commitment to a co-operative approach will be necessary if the concept of a Greater Wellington is to become a reality.

The nomenclature involved captures the cross territorial authority boundary nature of many aspects of life in the Region and hopefully, it will encourage acknowledgements that there are a great many interdependencies across the community of peoples living in the Wellington Region.

Like all ideas and generic aspirations it is helpful in the communication process if there is some form of visible representation of the concept. (A possible branding image is represented in Appendix 2).

4. Conclusion

- Effective communication is an essential and increasingly important facet of public and private sector business.
- Genuine two way communication between a public authority and its constituents is a significant challenge and one which requires commitment, resources and creativity if it is to succeed.
- There are no “tricks” or “off the shelf” tools to make the challenge easy. The tools used must be accepted and embraced by the regional

community and people must be comfortable with them. There will be no mandates for key policy directions if we cannot create an environment of meaningful dialogue.

- There will be some trial and error in pursuit of the best methods of making “community connections”. The options in this paper are a first cut at lifting our efforts in the area of community engagement. They are neither final or complete.
- Increasing public awareness of the Council, its roles and its intentions is a necessary part of engaging the community. Anonymity is a perennial criticism of this Council in the stakeholder surveys we have conducted in the past. In my opinion, responding to this cannot be construed as self promotion.
- It is my intention to pursue the objective of advancing “community connections” on a continuing basis, using the Corporate Communications function as the focal point. The options in this paper will be further developed and no doubt new ones will be considered over time.
- Perhaps it is opportune to seek from Councillors a reaffirmation of the commitment to enhancing the Council’s “Community Connections” acknowledging that the options presented in this paper are merely the start point of that endeavour.

5. Recommendations

- (i) *That the Report be received*
- (ii) *That Council confirm its support for the General Direction of this paper and its commitment to improving “Community Connections..*

HOWARD STONE
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