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Report to the Utility Services Committee
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Water Supply Communications Strategy

1. Purpose

To approve a communications strategy for the water supply function within the Council.

2. Introduction

The Water Group (Utility Services Division) manages and operates water collection, treatment and bulk distribution assets in order to provide a safe and reliable water supply to the region's four cities: Hutt, Porirua, Upper Hutt and Wellington. In developing a communications strategy it is important firstly to review current water supply outcomes. Given there is a comfort level with these outcomes then the communications strategy should obviously align with those objectives.

3. Water Supply Outcomes and Objectives

As is outlined in our various planning documents, the water supply function of the Wellington Regional Council (WRC) has five broad policy outcomes that:

- deliver a defined standard of water quality
- provide a defined level of security of supply
- the business will be undertaken in an environmentally sympathetic and sustainable way
- the business should operate in a cost effective and efficient manner

- the business will continue to demonstrate a high standard of customer service including providing its customers and the community with up-to-date and relevant information.

The following section outlines the current status of our operation in relation to those policy objectives.

4. **Current Status**

4.1 **Water Quality**

The Region's residents enjoy safe drinking water. The Water Group targets an 'A' grading for water leaving its treatment plants, as defined by the Ministry of Health's Drinking Water Standards for New Zealand (2000). Of the Council's four treatment plants, Te Marua is graded 'A', Waterloo and Gear Island are graded 'B' (the highest grading available given Hutt City Council's requirement that WRC supplies unchlorinated water to its reservoirs) and Wainuiomata is graded 'C'. Water supplied from Wainuiomata meets the 'A' grade standard, however demonstrating a 12-month record of compliance has been delayed by operational changes required following the introduction of new compliance requirements with the 2000 Drinking Water Standards.

Our treatment plant operating systems are alarmed to shut down automatically if maximum allowable values of key Drinking Water Standard criteria are reached, therefore water supplied always complies with the Standards.

A quality management system is in place, that is audited regularly and complies with the internationally recognised ISO 9002 standard. This system includes comprehensive quality testing, catchment management, and reporting guidelines.

Public perception of metropolitan Wellington's water quality is generally good, but some areas do experience taste and odour problems, usually associated with chlorine disinfectant and the condition of local reticulation pipes.

4.2 **Security of Supply**

The Region has sufficient catchment areas and reservoirs to ensure that its present and foreseeable future needs are met.

The Wellington Regional Council (WRC) has pursued a policy of interconnection of Wellington's water supply for some years. The result is three separate water collection areas, four modern treatment plants, and a distribution system that allows any plant to supply to any of our four customers. A formal risk strategy has been adopted and contingency plans are in place to meet unexpected failures in the system.

Water production and supply are recorded on a daily basis. Supply volumes at every customer supply point are measured on a weekly basis. Historical data is used to model demand under different population and weather scenarios using a Sustainable Yield Model (SYM), which is currently being reviewed and updated with the assistance of NIWA. The Water Group uses SYM projections to determine when and where to develop new supply assets. The criteria for undertaking new capital

work is outlined in a Wholesale Water Supply Asset Management Plan (June 1998), which is available to the public. The criteria for capital works can be summarised as growth, security of supply, changing customer needs, safety, public health protection, environmental protection and efficiency of delivery.

Demand management is undertaken to coincide with annual water use peaks. This is intended to conserve resources and postpone or remove the need to develop new supply capacity.

4.3 **Environment**

The natural character of the land and water bodies utilised in supply operations are maintained to a level that complies with the Resource Management Act 1991 and is generally acceptable to the Region's citizens.

The Water Group holds resource consents for its major activities that have an impact on the environment. Interested parties are identified and consulted prior to resource consent applications being lodged. All consent applications are contestable and open to public submissions.

The Water Group operates an Environmental Management System in accordance with the internationally recognised ISO 14001 standard. Policy and objectives describe what we intend to do and define appropriate working practices for operations, training, improvement and reporting. Progress towards these objectives is made available publicly, in accordance with ISO 14001 guidelines.

This year we have introduced Triple Bottom Line reporting to our Quarterly Review documentation.

4.4 **Customer Service and Business Efficiency**

The Water Group carries out its water supply role in a cost efficient manner, and has regard for the wishes of its customers and the community in the management and operation of the water supply.

Customers are consulted about significant policy and expenditure matters. An annual report covering key performance indicators is supplied to them. Weekly and monthly summaries of water produced and supplied are also provided.

Utility Services Committee meetings are generally open and the decisions arising from these meetings are made available to the media. Public notices and media releases are used to publicise issues of significant interest, such as pest control.

In real terms, the total cost of our supply operation has been reduced substantially over the last 10 years, while achieving significant improvements to management systems and infrastructure. The financial performance of The Water Group is published via an annual report of business activity.

5. **Current Issues**

5.1 **Ownership and management**

The Council backs the principle of integrated water services to metropolitan Wellington. Since 1997, several options for integration have been considered between two or more of the five councils involved in water supply to the region, but none have been acceptable to all the councils involved. In July 2001, the WRC rejected an integration proposal developed jointly by officers of Hutt and Wellington city councils and the WRC. An integrated system offers enhanced security of supply and the opportunity to realise cost efficiencies. However, the Council recognises the strong desire of the community for water supply to remain in public control, and is committed to ensuring that its bulk water supply activity remains in public ownership and operation.

A significant part of the water supply communications budget over the last four years has been used to promote the WRC's credentials for taking a leading role in any integrated entity. This paper assumes that integration is not now likely in the near future, but that the WRC continues to support it in principle, and wishes to maintain a profile with decision-making/influential bodies and individuals.

5.2 **Conflicting Messages About Responsibility for Actions**

The division of water supply responsibilities with the local territorial authorities makes it difficult for the public to differentiate between our role and the LTAs', particularly where their interests and ours are not identical. As the bulk water supplier, the Council does not have a direct relationship with water consumers through service delivery. Because our work is not experienced directly by water users, the benefit of what we do can be watered down lost or misrepresented due to the actions of our customers.

Communications regarding water supply matters issued by the WRC and its customers are often not consistent, and may not be easy for consumers to make sense of. For example, we do not control the amount that consumers are charged for water; therefore the savings we deliver may not be passed on. Conversely, retail price increases are presented as being due to increased charges from the WRC, rather than as a result of increased water use within the city. The current pricing structure does not assist with easy communication of pricing issues.

It is clear that many people do not readily understand the respective roles of the WRC and their local city council in water supply, and they are likely to continue receiving apparently conflicting information.

5.3 **Public Apathy Re 'Business as Usual'**

Water supplied to metropolitan Wellington's water users is consistently of high quality, and shortages are extremely uncommon. The public generally takes this level of service for granted, and media coverage reflects this. Exception reporting is the order of the day, and exceptions generally occur when the level of service slips. We do issue 'good news' releases to the media but have little control over whether they are used. Communications need to reflect this by presenting information in a succinct and straightforward way.

5.4 **Lack of a Clear Identity**

Both internally and externally, there is no single identity that is consistently used in relation to the Regional Council's role in water supply. The Regional Council name alone says nothing about our role and anecdotal evidence suggests we are often confused with Wellington City Council. Utility Services uses 'The Water Group' to identify its water supply function, but this name has not been adopted throughout the Council. Wholesale Water and Bulk Water are more commonly used in WRC communications. Water is the most widely recognised function of the WRC, yet without prompting, roughly three quarters of the region's population don't associate this function with this council. It is difficult for any organisation to accrue credit for the work it does if the public cannot readily identify it with that work. Not having a clear identity for our water supply function does not help.

Our vehicles, land, buildings and apparel all present opportunities to promote the WRC's role in water supply more effectively, but taking advantage of these is awaiting the outcome of the branding exercise.

5.5 **Bulk Water Supply's Role in a Sustainable Region**

The Council's bulk water supply role is vital to the continuing economic and social health of the region. Progress has been made to improve environmental performance since 1997. The challenge is to increase the Council's role and profile in promoting sustainability, particularly through resource conservation, while maintaining appropriate quality, security, service and cost standards.

5.5.1 ***Difficulty in Conveying Water Quality Easily***

Given the generally limited public engagement for 'business as usual' communications, water quality messages would ideally be presented simply. However, water quality varies by source and residential area; there is no single water quality measure for our supply area. The water that people receive through their taps determines their perception of the water supply, however we do not supply this water directly to the consumer, and do not have sufficient control of its quality at that point. A simple approach to depict the quality of water in general (e.g. - giving a tick for colour, a tick for taste etc) would not square with the reality of consumers in some areas.

The Ministry of Health grading system provides a straight forward means to convey water quality, however these actually measure the likelihood that a system will result in high quality water being produced and supplied, rather than what is actually supplied. Taken at face value they do not reflect the high quality of water supplied. Much of Wellington City carries a 'C' for source and treatment grading due to Wainuiomata treatment plant. The MOH definition of which is:

"Marginal, moderate level of risk, may be acceptable in some small communities"

In addition, the Eastern Suburbs area of Wellington City has a 'D' grading for water in the distribution system, the MOH definition of which is:

"Unsatisfactory high level of risk"

Neither of these gradings align well with the actual quality of water delivered. The underlying reasons for this situation are relatively difficult to communicate effectively.

There is concern within The Water Group that the cumulative effect of promotional activity from bottled water and filter manufacturers, and the increased use of these products will, over time, lead the public to assume that tap water is somehow unsafe or of inferior quality.

5.5.2 ***Water Quality/Public Safety***

The Council has policies to treat water to 'A' grade quality, manage the health risk from contaminated/untreated water and provide a public health benefit through water fluoridation, which necessitates the use of potentially harmful chemicals. Lobby groups have opposed the use of some chemicals on health and safety grounds. Fostering increased public awareness of the value and low risk associated with these chemicals will help create/maintain a supportive or neutral environment for their continued use.

5.5.3 ***Making Water Conservation Desirable***

With water integration unlikely in the near future, the way to achieve lower costs while maintaining standards is through better resource management or reduced use. We cannot achieve the latter without greater public co-operation and/or metering. Increasing the public's awareness and adoption of water conservation measures can advance meeting the Council's security of supply and environmental standards significantly. Research has shown a lack of understanding about the need or benefits from conserving water in Wellington, resulting in modest uptake of more conservation-friendly water use behaviours.

6. **Draft Communication Goals / Objectives**

Given the policy objectives and background provided above, we believe the overarching communications strategy should be to achieve the following outcome:

Widespread community support and customer acceptance for WRCs role, policies and operating methods in water supply.

In general it is proposed that our approach be to promote water quality, security, environmental and cost issues to support this outcome, but with a short to medium term emphasis on the following areas:

- increasing community awareness of the WRC's specific role in water supply
- increasing community awareness of the contribution of water supply in the achievement of a sustainable Region.
- increasing community awareness of the benefits of a reduction in total and peak time water use, and the methods for achieving this.

- achieving increase community awareness of the importance of catchment protection for both water quality and ecological reasons.
- Maintaining customer contact and reporting at a level that is generally acceptable to them.

Quantifying our progress towards these communication objectives requires further developments. A public awareness survey of all aspects of Council business will shortly be conducted. It is intended to compare the results with a similar survey from two years ago, to assess realistic expectations for increasing community awareness regarding water supply issues.

7. Key Stakeholders

- Wellington City Council
- Hutt City Council
- Porirua City Council
- Upper Hutt City Council
- Kapiti Coast District Council
- Ministry of Health
 - *Regional Public Health Service Provider*
- Ministry for the Environment
- Parliamentary Commissioner for the Environment
- DoC
- WRC Environment Division
- WRC Landcare Division
- Water industry professionals
 - *Water Supply Managers Group*
- Individual water users / business users
- Educational Institutions & teachers
- Community Boards, Resident's Assns
- Local and Cabinet-level MPs
- Iwi
- Conservation / Recreation Groups
 - *Karori Wildlife Sanctuary Trust*
 - *NZ Fish & Game Council*
 - *Recreational Hunters*
 - *Top Adventures*
- Water related lobby groups
 - *NZ Pure Water Coalition*
- Water Group and WRC staff
- Consultants, contractors and suppliers

For most of the stakeholders identified above, communications are directed to a small group of people with specific roles and responsibilities within their organisation. Meeting specified information requirements of these stakeholders is often critical to meeting annual performance objectives for Water Supply, and is therefore rigorously observed. These stakeholders often have a detailed understanding of the issues relating to their area of work/interest, and issue-specific information is provided via individualised tools, such as letters, meetings, workshops etc. The Water Group annual report is a notable exception.

While communication with all these stakeholders remains important, the communications issues identified primarily require attention to engaging the community in general.

8. **How Do We Currently Communicate in the Wider Community?**

The Water Group currently engages with its stakeholders in the following ways.

8.1 **The Regional Council Annual Report**

Provides an overview of the strategic direction for metropolitan Wellington's wholesale water supply, long and short-term performance indicators and achievement against those indicators for the previous year. Generally available to the public through Council offices and public libraries.

8.2 **The Water Group Annual Business Report**

Complementary to the Regional Council's Annual Report, it provides an introduction to the Council's role in Wellington's water supply, the significant political and operational issues of the previous business year and a statistical record of supply quality, quantity, and financial performance including benchmark comparisons. Distributed to customers, media groups, libraries, business and government agencies, Iwi and other interested parties, and made available on the Council's internet site, it has supported the Council's desire to play a major role in any integration of regional water supply. It also fulfils our reporting obligations to our customers. A further report on this order paper proposes some changes to the annual report format.

8.3 **Video – Wellington Regional Water Supply, A Brief History**

Covers the development of metropolitan Wellington's water supply system, the Regional Council's role in water supply, a description of the present integrated system and the benefits that accrue to the public from this system. The video is shown to all groups that visit our treatment plants and is made available on loan to schools and other interested groups. (Created 1998, updated 2002)

8.4 **WRC Internet Site – Water Supply**

Website www.wrc.govt.nz/ws provides details of all aspects of the Regional Council's role in water supply. The site includes 'Wonderful Water' a resource for schools that was developed by the WRC in conjunction with a teaching professional, specifically to meet the needs of teachers. The site address is given to people/groups requesting plant visits or information about Wellington's water supply. The site contains a generic WRC Water Supply E-mail address for making contact with us. (Site completed 1998, updated 2001)

8.5 **Plant Visits**

Operations staff regularly hosts visits to our treatment plants. Visits include a video presentation (see 8.3), an explanation of Wellington's water supply system and the water treatment process. Visit content is tailored to the interests of specific groups. These groups range from water treatment trainees to politicians, school parties to Probus and Rotary clubs. Typically, more than 1,000 people visited one of our water treatment plants each year. In the last few months, plant visits have been made available as part of WRC Regional Parks' Summer Events programme and are promoted to schools that participate in WRC Environment Division's 'Take Action for Water' programme.

8.6 **Water Conservation Campaigns**

Research findings indicate that the majority of Wellington's adult population believes that water conservation is important. The Water Group runs a water conservation campaign every summer, in conjunction with its customers. Our aim is to moderate summer demand for water, thus reducing the environmental impact of our operations and deferring the need for capital expenditure on increased treatment capacity. Research provides public feedback about the campaign, to guide future conservation work.

8.7 **Brochures**

A colour brochure explains the Regional Council's role in water supply to Wellington, and gives operating details of its main water treatment and distribution assets. Brochures are available at the Utility Services reception on the 4th floor and at the water treatment plants. Copies are sent to groups and individuals requesting information. Utility Services is investigating with Environment Division distributing this brochure with Environment's 'Take Action for Water' kit (see 8.8).

8.8 **Education Initiative with Environment Division**

Utility Services has provided \$50,000 annually from 2000/1 for the development of water conservation educational resources by the Environment Division. This money has contributed to the development of the 'Take Action for Water' programme, a structured 'hands-on' learning resource, tailored to the school curriculum, and encompassing a team of educators to work with schools. The programme, launched in March 2002, targets 8-12 year old students and has been designed and tested in conjunction with teaching professionals. Aspects of the programme's objectives and content reflect the water conservation goals of Water Supply.

8.9 **Joint Landcare Initiative - Controlled Public Access to Catchment Areas**

In conjunction with Landcare Division, Utility Services has allowed managed access on a trial basis to Wainuiomata-Orongorongo water catchment area. This public contact is being used to promote the WRC's role in water supply.

8.10 **Press Releases**

Our intention is to support Water Supply business goals by demonstrating the variety and complexity of work the Water Group undertakes, and the value to the public of that work. Officers of the Water Group have initiated 8 releases in the last year. This is in addition to releases initiated by Communications and/or Regional Councillors. Elements provides a further opportunity to promote 'good news' stories.

8.11 **Speaking Invitations**

Officers make themselves available to speak to a variety of groups, including schools, clubs, professional associations and public meetings, as requested.

9. **Development Priorities**

This section identifies areas for development of communications output in relation to the priorities outlined in the Draft Goals section.

9.1 *The community is aware of the WRC and its role and responsibilities in supply of potable water to metropolitan Wellington*

The Water Group believes that the current review of WRC communications must result in stronger service/benefit identification with the council's name. The land, buildings and vehicles used for water supply provide an opportunity to promote that linkage, as do staff uniforms. We await the outcome of the WRC branding review to develop this opportunity.

Treatment plant visits provide a rare opportunity to communicate face-to-face with the public – visits consistently illicit positive feedback from the public about the experience. We are currently reviewing the information content of plant visits, to better support the advancement of water supply objectives. Once this is completed, we intend to promote visits to all schools in the greater Wellington area, with a view to increasing visitor numbers. Further visit and presentation opportunities for the public at large will also be investigated.

Giving greater emphasis to the high quality of water supplied to metropolitan Wellington once Wainuiomata treatment plant has been re-graded.

Use of the WRC newspaper Elements to publicise annual water supply highlights (with reference to water supply objectives) to the public.

9.2 *The community understands and supports the role that bulk water supply has in promoting a sustainable Region.*

Incorporation of sustainability issues in the content of treatment plant visits.

Highlighting water supply's contribution to a sustainable Region to the general public, through new treatment plant visit content and reporting in Elements. This will include giving greater emphasis to the Ministry of Health grading for WRC water treatment plants once Wainuiomata treatment plant has been re-graded.

Options for demonstrating the quality and value of metropolitan Wellington's potable water to the public have been considered. Bottling WRC-produced water as a promotional tool has been mooted, and will be considered further once council-wide branding review has been concluded.

Giving greater emphasis to the reasons why water conservation is worthwhile in Wellington.

9.3 *Information about conserving water has contributed to a reduction in total and peak summer water use (relative to recent years with similar weather patterns).*

Build on the success of the current 'Maggie' campaign by refreshing the advertising content to reflect the findings of recent and planned market research findings.

Give greater emphasis to the reasons why water conservation is worthwhile in Wellington.

Extend the period of water conservation promotional activity beyond high summer to spring. Develop resources to promote water-wise garden preparation.

- 9.4 *Achieving increased community awareness of the importance of catchment protection for both water quality and ecological reasons.*

Incorporation of catchment management issues in the content of treatment plant visits.

Communicating the link between catchment management and water quality to the planned ERMA review of 1080 use in New Zealand.

10. **Budget and Staffing**

The budget for marketing related work for 2002/03, including the annual contribution to WRC Environment Division's Take Action for Water programme, is \$230,000.

One Utility Services staff member, Andrew Samuel, Marketing Analysis Manager, is employed to carry out marketing/communications work.

11. **Measurement of Effectiveness and Reporting**

The following monitoring and reporting techniques are proposed:

- record visitor numbers to water treatment plants and annual change in numbers.
- introduce a formal feedback process for visitors to water treatment plants
- solicit feedback, including from visitors to our Internet site and with all mail outs of Water Supply reports and brochures
- record the number of media releases made. (We have recently started recording when and where these have been published).
- keep a record of all published letters to the editor relating to WRC Water Supply, and respond where appropriate
- analyse water use data and weather patterns to assess the effectiveness of water conservation advertising/communication
- commission market research to identify attitudes and behaviour in relation to water use and conservation.
- record/report the number and type of submissions to Water Supply annual plans
- results of ad hoc WRC service provision/public attitude research. A new survey is about to be conducted by Communications. Results will be compared to a similar survey conducted two years ago.

Reporting of the above measures is made or will be introduced to Utility Services quarterly reports.

12. **Conclusions**

- Communications output must demonstrate or support progress towards the outcomes sought for water supply.
- The current status analysis (above) reflects a generally high standard of water supply to our customers, however there is considerable uncertainty from the

general public about ‘who is responsible for what’. Greater attention is needed to differentiating the WRC’s role and responsibilities through its communications.

- The contribution that the WRC’s water supply operation makes towards an environmentally, socially and economically robust region is substantial. Water Supply’s main ‘improvement opportunity’ in relation to sustainability is dependent on less water being taken, treated and distributed; this outcome relies on public co-operation. Public education about the costs and choices relating to regional water supply conservation will be a communications priority.
- The managed use of potentially harmful chemicals makes a valuable contribution to water quality. The benefits associated with the use of these compounds and the management of risk must be communicated to the general public in support of their use.
- Emphasis will be given to increasing the number of face-to-face educational opportunities achieved with school groups and the general public, and the number of positive news items relating to WRC water supply that are reported.
- The content of water supply educational resources will be expanded to reflect the four communications outcomes identified previously.

NB: Various communications opportunities await the outcome of the WRC-wide communications review currently in progress.

13. **Recommendations**

- (1) *Notes and confirms outcomes sought for bulk water supply*
- (2) *Confirms the water supply communications strategy will have broad objective of achieving widespread community support and customer acceptance for WRC’s policies and operating methods in water supply.*
- (3) *Confirms medium term communications emphasis on:*
 - (i) *raising public awareness of the WRC’s role in water supply*
 - (ii) *promoting benefits of water conservation*
 - (iii) *promoting importance of catchment management to water quality*
 - (iv) *promoting public awareness of water supply role in achieving a sustainable Region*
 - (v) *maintaining customer contact and reporting at a level agreed with the customers.*

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