

Report on New Zealand Manager Exchange

2023

Alicia Cutler, General Manager Community Services, Rockhampton Regional Council

and

Dennise Elers, Group Manager Community Partnerships, Central Hawke's Bay District Council, New Zealand

At the outset I want to say that I have thoroughly enjoyed the exchange experience and I would strongly encourage others to apply for it. My hosts, Dennise Elers and the Central Hawke's Bay District Council were so welcoming and accommodating.



Me (right) and the Central Hawke's Bay District Council executive team dressed up in Art Deco style for the conference.

My exchange involved a two-day visit to Central Hawke's Bay District Council (CHBDC) and attending the three-day Taituarā conference in Hastings (also in the Hawkes Bay District). The conference theme was "Thrive". Local government must thrive in these uncertain times. The pace of change is the fastest it has ever been and the slowest it will ever be. An organisation and its leaders must be resilient, adaptable, cognisant of the past and plan for multiple futures with the community at its core.

The international panel at the conference spoke on the top issues facing both England, America and Canada. In a nutshell, we all have surprisingly similar issues facing our communities but, due to each Country's government structure and division of responsibilities, they rank slightly differently. For example, homelessness and/or the current housing shortage ranked in the top issues for every country. Other top issues included climate resilience and financial sustainability.

It was evident from the conference, that, as professionals in local government, we all need the same skills:

Adaptability, emotional intelligence, effective communication, strategic thinking, risk management, innovation, crisis management, resourcefulness, community engagement, team building, long-term vision, self-care, learning orientation, ethical leadership, community advocacy.

Through the week, I observed a number of points of difference between New Zealand and Queensland:

1. *Māori culture is strong and Councils have been leading the way in engagement and ensuring their voice has been heard.*

I understand this is not the case for all New Zealand Councils, but certainly the Councils in the Hawke's Bay Region are leading the way in this regard.

The opening of the conference was very special and cultural. I understand that Hastings Council is one of the leading Councils in acceptance and consideration of Māori culture and the opening to the conference was no exception. We all waited in the foyer of the Toi Toi (conference venue) to be sung in, pied-piper style, into the main auditorium. In the auditorium, we were welcomed with the Haka and a number of Māori speeches, songs and tradition – much of which was not understood by myself and many in the audience.

This is my third visit to New Zealand but my first real exposure to the Māori language and understanding that New Zealand has two, distinct languages. The welcome and opening of the conference took 1 hour, compared to an Australian welcome which might take 15 minutes.

By way of introduction, each speaker acknowledges the area in which they are in, they deliver their "Pepeha", which tells the audience about where their ancestors come from, who they are, what marae they have an affinity with, the mountain and the river that they feel are a part of themselves. It is a way to connect with the audience.

It is a true show of respect to speak Māori and, notably, all the speakers did so. On closing, the conference really left me feeling warmed that there is a model for engagement and working co-operatively that forges the way forward for the good of all in our community.



This is where CHBDC and Local hapu have had great partnerships where they have developed a walk that is tribute to the mana whenua on a sacred site. The walk educates those of the history of the site as well as gives a great view of the Valley below. This day was cold and rainy which was welcome after 36° days in Rockhampton the week before!

At CHBDC they had recently created in history with Council voting in favour of introducing Māori wards for the 2025 and 2028 elections. Council resolved to also invite two representatives for Māori representation in an advisory role. Māori people have a separate role and will vote for those who will speak for them and represent them. These seats at the table are not additional seats but rather will take from the existing Councillor positions.

Queensland and Australia seemingly have much to learn about engagement with, and consideration of, first nations in decision making. While New Zealand has seen similar atrocities to Australia in colonial history, the "Treaty" document made by the first settlers seems a key document that lays the foundation for negotiations to be a win/win.

The Mayor of CHBDC considers that "It is absolutely right for those on the Māori roll to be able to exercise their vote to ensure that an unapologetic Te Ao Māori voice can sit at this table."

Respect is one of the CHBDC values. People are the greatest asset. They value diversity and inclusion, and this is clearly driven from the top down.

The next step is a formal representation review that will determine the total number of councillors, the number and make-up of wards and the ward boundaries and names. This is a publicly notified process which will start next year.

New Zealand certainly seems advanced when it comes to cultural recognition in its decision making. Having said all this, the "Treaty" is still debated and the new Government had suggested that a referendum was needed on the treaty. Disappointingly, they have a clear goal to unwind some of the progress that has been made in this regard.

It has made me think about engagement and decision-making at my own Council and how we must ensure that we have the right people at the table for decisions. Even if not able to be at the table, we must seek the right people out to learn from their lived experience.

This is the new Interpretation centre that was built with the Water Storage and Treatment Plant in the centre of Hastings (Hastings District Council). It is at the end of a walk that pays tribute to where their water source stems from. The way they have made the site both interactive and attractive is impressive.



2. Recovery from Cyclone Gabrielle (Feb 23) will be a long road

New Zealand, including Hawke's Bay, was affected by Cyclone Gabrielle in February 2023. At the height of the disaster, it was estimated that 9,000 people were displaced from their homes as a result of flooding. The Hawke's Bay area is a large flood plain that presently operates via a number of stop-banks (levee banks) for protection.

Following the cyclone, CHBDC sprung into action and met with its individual communities. Over 50 community meetings were held, serving as mechanisms for community to come together to grieve, vent and share ideas for the future. Common themes around resilience and repair were formulated.

The CHBDC have been open with their community that things would need to be prioritised and that not all the actions would be funded immediately. They have given a commitment to coming back and talking with the community on how the plan is progressing. The Civil Defence Unit (our equivalent of State Emergency Service) lead the emergency response and each Council has an Incident Management Team (IMT) which was stood up for this disaster. As a region, all Council's came together to support each other from response through to recovery. Central Government has funded, or part funded, some of the recovery but the majority of the bill will sit with each Council. This includes:

- Damage to CHBDCs road network is estimated at approximately \$150 million. Council has received \$35 million in emergency funding to 30 June 2023 to make the most urgent repairs but this still leaves \$115 million unfunded.
- The immediate cyclone response cost around \$1.5 million. Not all of this is recoverable through funding from the National Emergency Management Agency.

For a small Council of only 15,000 population, these costs are significant. The question is now being asked (as within all areas) what extra protection is needed or even possible to make these communities more resilient?

3. Earthquake proofing buildings -Queensland has enough without Earthquakes thrown into the mix!

Following the Christchurch earthquakes in 2010/2011, where there was substantial damage (over 10,000 homes needed to be rebuild and 3,500 demolished) and a 185 lives lost, new legislation has been introduced across the country to make public buildings earthquake compliant. Despite a 7-year transition period, there are still a number of public buildings that are closed, vacant and/or in need of funding and rebuilding. This was evident in Hastings, Central Hawke's Bay and the capital, Wellington.

Following the Christchurch event, the central government funded buy back of homes with compensation at 100%. Since then, the funding for buy-out of disaster-prone properties has been reducing, with Central government only funding 50% of buy-back following the Cyclone Gabrielle disaster.

With significant portions of annual State and Federal Governments being allocated towards disaster repair, I see such a claw-back of funds in Queensland's future. As communities we must tackle the tough decisions and plan for a number of outcomes, and this must be done at a local level where the communities are somewhat in control of their own futures.

4. Three Water Reform – water, sewerage and stormwater

In 2016, a waterborne disease outbreak in a suburb of Hastings led to 5,500 people becoming ill, 45 residents being hospitalised and four deaths. The reform that ensued from this event has been significant and, from an outsider's perspective, seemingly long overdue. In many areas, due to the quality and reliability of water, long term storage and treatment of water has not been important. The contamination was the result of a drought situation which with hindsight a number of the Mauri community suggested would/could happen.

The Three Waters reform initiative, looked to create a number of regional water entities which would focus on investing in water, sewerage and stormwater infrastructure that would be required now and in future, particularly through the lens of climate change. The proposed reform meant the Council infrastructure and assets would transfer to the new entity and an element of control would be lost. Opposition was similar to that which we saw from amalgamations, large investments need to be prioritised and the smaller communities have a fear that their projects may never receive priority. Water is still a scarce resource in New Zealand.

Depending on their own situation, each Council was taking a position around this future change in their long-term plan, only to find it being a key point of electioneering in the central government change. Now that the Central Government has formed, they have indicated that the Three Waters legislation would be unwound. What will replace it is still unclear.

I do not envy the task of putting a long-term plan in place for the Councils when the future of such key assets and service is unknown.

By comparison, Queensland went through such a change in the 90's but it is interesting that we too are talking further reform with the QWRAP reviews at present. I would suggest due to necessity, we are further advanced than New Zealand, however, we need to continue to evolve to ensure that the investment in such a critical resource (i.e. water) continues for the benefit of current and future generations.

5. Long Term Financial Plans and Accountability

Putting on my ex-finance hat, the job of the finance professionals in New Zealand seems a little more difficult than that of the Queensland professional. Certainly, council organisations are much more accountable to their community for their actions and planning. For every three-year cycle, Councils have to prepare a 10-year the Long-term Plan (LTP) that is audited and which essentially contains three-years of detailed budgets. Budgets are only adopted for one year, but they are reported against the LTP to ensure not materially different. Actuals are reported against the budget and the LTP.

The timing of the LTP's is interesting. By the time Council's adopt the plan, they are essentially committing the next Council to work covering half of their election term. This should allow for more stability at each election.

The annual report includes a report against documented service levels in a great level of detail as well as a financial comparison against budget and LTP. An example of a KPI in a key service area might be for public toilets.

Public Toilets

What Council does

The Council provides and maintains 15 public toilets across the District at parks and other prominent locations.

Public conveniences meet the needs of our community and visitors as they are out and about. They are located for the convenience of people using spaces and facilities such as beaches and playgrounds, or as they travel through the District.

RURAL	WAIPUKURAU AND WAIPAWA	COASTAL
• Forest Gate Domain	• A'Deane Park	• Aramoana Beach
• Otāne Hall	• Coronation Park	• Blackhead Beach
• Otāne Recreation Ground	• Madge Hunter Park	• Kairakau Beach Campground
• Tikokino Hall	• Nelly Jull Park	• Kairakau Beach North End
• Ongaonga (at Ongaonga Museum)	• The Green Patch (Post Officer Corner)	• Pouterere Beach
• Takapau Town	• Bogle Brothers Esplanade	• Pouterere portaloos (Christmas holidays only)
	• Russell Park	• Te Paerahi changing shed
	• Russell Park back Sports Field	• Te Paerahi freedom camping area
	• Waipawa Cemetery	• Whangaeahu
		• White Domain – Pōrangahau

The Public Toilets Activity supports the following goals of Council:



What we delivered

LEVEL OF SERVICE TO BE DELIVERED	TARGETS TO MEASURE OUR SUCCESS IN 2022/23	ACHIEVED LEVEL OF SERVICE
Council provides public toilets that are clean, safe, in good working order, and meet the needs of our community and visitors.	Fewer than eight complaints are received about inadequate maintenance and poor cleaning of our toilets.	Achieved Seven complaints were received for the year. We are continuing to monitor and lift contractor performance in this respect. 2022 Reported: 1 Complaint

Focus is on overall cash funding rather than showing an operational surplus. Council's revenue policy sets a focus of percentage of funding that is derived from rates versus fees for service. This is a nice benchmark when comparing for budget increases but does not allow for fluctuations or larger management across the whole function.

Asset management plans are prepared for 30 years. There seems a much higher level of accountability and reporting to the community in New Zealand than in Queensland.

6. Structure of Local Government

The statement that New Zealand only has two levels of Government, compared to Australia's three levels is a little deceptive in my view. In the Hawke's Bay Area, a ratepayer pays rates to both the district Council and the regional Council. In some areas such as Auckland, they have one rates notice and consider themselves a super Council. Just like Queensland, it is not well known amongst the community where the responsibilities lie. My suggestion is that it would take much more than a week to understand this structure 😊

Conclusion

Thank you to LGMA and Rockhampton Regional Council for this amazing opportunity to participate in the International Managers Exchange. It was a privilege to participate and represent Queensland. Thank you also to Central Hawkes Bay for being my host.