

Case Study: Rotorua's Corporate Sustainability Project

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Recent policy developments within Rotorua District Council (RDC) show how research consultancy can be used to effectively support in-house expertise. RDC commissioned APR Consultants Ltd to undertake a series of tasks and create a clearer focus for staff discussions around corporate sustainability.

The project

Under the Local Government Act 2002, all councils are required to take a sustainable development approach to long-term planning. RDC has a track record in inter-agency collaboration and was an early runner in identifying community outcomes and priorities.

Over a period of several years, RDC's Chief Executive had been discussing the need for a more co-ordinated approach to environmental management and the promotion of sustainable development. This was given greater impetus through RDC's involvement since 2005 in the CCP-NZ programme (Communities for Climate Protection New Zealand), including an increased focus on energy management.

Throughout 2008 RDC began working toward a more corporate approach. The aim was to integrate all sustainability initiatives previously undertaken, such as departmental energy and waste audits, and create a policy framework to build on these. A two-stage Corporate Sustainability Project Plan was identified to achieve this.

The process

Due to lack of capacity in-house, particularly in the lead-up to the 2009 Ten Year Plan, it was decided to engage an external consultant. Both stages of the project were awarded separately to APR Consultants Ltd on the basis of written proposals with fixed fees. APR provides consultancy primarily in the Waikato/Bay of Plenty area and has undertaken a range of previous projects for RDC. The researcher in this case had formerly worked as an employee for RDC and other councils.

Phase 1 of the Project Plan was an inventory of existing corporate initiatives. The consultant had access to written records including interviews with personnel from most departments. This was compiled into a comprehensive Sustainability Stock-Take as a foundation for subsequent planning. Various staff members had input to the draft report before being finalised. The Stock-Take report concluded with recommendations for progressing RDC's proposed sustainability agenda.

Phase 2 involved, firstly, a Discussion Document report which summarised the policy approaches of eight 'exemplar' councils and compared them with RDC's activities. The resulting gap analysis added to the list of recommendations from the Stock-Take report. The next step – central to the project – was to facilitate the development of a Sustainability Policy and Action Plans with input from staff throughout RDC. Two workshops were held with identified 'sustainability champions' – firstly to brainstorm ideas and then to refine a Draft Policy and Action Plans document.

Documents resulting from this process comprise a Sustainability Policy; a separate Sustainability Action Plan 2009/10 to 2011/12; and a Local Action Plan for Climate Protection (corporate only). Each is focused on a corporate vision and actions but also establishes a timeframe and indicative costs for developing a Council-Community Action Plan for Sustainability. Key aspects of the corporate action plan include at least four meetings per year of RDC's sustainability champions; reviews of HR and procurement policies; an in-house communication plan for promoting sustainability; various new recycling and energy management initiatives; and possible engagement of an Energy Manager.

The Draft Sustainability Policy and Action Plans were wholly supported and adopted unchanged by Council's Finance Committee on 8 December 2008. Next steps in the process will be managed in-house. This includes seeking public input on RDC's approach to sustainability through the Draft Ten Year Plan 2009-2019.

Key lessons

Lessons are outlined below in the form of questions to be asked of any project:

1. What specific tasks require external consultancy? Can the process be split into bite-sized pieces without compromising the overall process?
2. Can tasks be assigned to a consultant without going through a tender process? Care should be taken before going down this track, but for smaller projects the costs and delays of tendering should be considered – particularly if there is confidence that a particular consultant can achieve the desired outputs for a reasonable fee.
3. What tasks should be undertaken in-house to keep consultancy fees to a minimum and take best advantage of corporate expertise?
4. At what stage should the contract be completed? When should the process be handed back to staff to ensure internal ownership and enthusiasm?

As a case study in research consultancy, RDC's Corporate Sustainability Project was highly successful. Staff members involved in the project are looking forward to putting the action plans into effect and achieving measurable results. The goal is for RDC to lead by example and "walk the talk" prior to promoting increased sustainability amongst Rotorua communities.

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