

Tuesday 10 June 2025 - 11.32am

Kia ora Mary Anne,

Thanks for the opportunity to provide our perspective on the Taxpayers Union article. Our response is provided below;

We welcome public scrutiny and transparency, especially when it comes to how we spend ratepayers money. However, it's important that any commentary reflects the full picture.

We are a \$2.8 billion business, with a \$150 million operating budget. We have to fulfill our duties under more than 44 pieces of legislation, and the Local Government Act requires us to conduct our business openly and transparently and provide opportunities for meaningful participation in decision making processes. Therefore, our communication and engagement team play a critical role in supporting the delivery of multi-million-dollar projects, multiple forms of community consultation every year, emergency responses, supporting key district and community events, and fulfilling legislative obligations – their role is not simply media releases or social media posts.

We're responsible for communicating with more than 60,000 residents across a variety of platforms. In recent months, that's included significant engagement around Ahu Ake -our 30-year spatial plan, the 2025-34 Long Term Plan, and importantly the largest indicated change in Local Government since 1989 – the potential changes to water service delivery. The range of channels for communication is more diverse and the community expects us to use technology and be increasingly responsive. We are always looking for ways to ensure our business is focused on value add for our communities. The investment we make in communications and engagement ensures our residents and valued visitors are informed and involved.

It's misleading to suggest this work is about 'spin'. The external communications and engagement strategy adopted by the Council in 2023 purposefully reset the way we inform and engage with our community to ensure we deliver on our vision of building connected communities, and that we continue to grow trust and confidence in Council. This was a deliberate reset after learnings and feedback prior to that. The overall trust grew from 19 percent to 21 per cent from 2023 to 2024, which indicates we are making progress but there is a long way to go and trust and confidence are only rebuilt with deliberate intention and action.

An example of this action is that we have attracted more than 32,000 followers across all of our digital channels – with growth of 40 percent since July 1 2024, this has been in part a response to a changing media landscape where daily newspapers are no longer able to serve our communities like they did in the past. It is an integrated approach to help ensure people get the right information, in the right way, at the right time.

Simply put: our residents can't engage with what they don't know about. To that end we employ 9.5 full time equivalent positions to carry out all of these functions not the 12 quoted by the Taxpayers Union.

Council has also recently with the support of the Mayor and Elected Members, and in line with best practice governance, has undertaken a programme of strengthening our governance frameworks. With a significant work programme at play, and the Elected Members laser sharp focus on delivery to the end of the triennium, the review work included specific focus on Governance representation & chairs review, the focus of Council meetings vs Committees, the cadence and timing of meetings, and the enhancement of the provision of timely and up-to-date information to Elected Members. As part of continuous improvement and value-add, Council was also looking for efficiencies in the organisational resource required in servicing Council and how we can improve both outcomes and organisational focus. Our interaction with the wider media continues, and is not solely focused on a few outlets. It is a relationship we value highly and understand the importance of the fourth estate.

Nga mihi

Steph

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