

Several key highlights in a very busy year

The local elections that were a major feature of the year mark the start of a new triennium

With that comes change to the makeup of councils and elected leadership, including new membership for Local Government New Zealand's National Council.

It's a time when Local Government New Zealand (LGNZ) reviews its strategic policy priorities to ensure the right issues are prioritised so the challenges ahead can be met.

This process has begun and will continue in the first part of this year, culminating in LGNZ's 2017-19 Business Plan and refreshed Policy Strategy.

Looking back, key milestones include:

Governance and performance excellence

The past year was a landmark for the sector with the launch of the Local Government Excellence Programme.

The Local Government Excellence Programme is a system designed to demonstrate and improve the value and services of councils by measuring indicators across leadership, finance, service delivery and community engagement.

Participating councils are assessed by independent experts every three years, given an overall rating from triple AAA to C, and the results publicised. Councils will discuss results with communities and use the assessments to plan improvements.

Some 21 councils signed up as Foundation Councils to be assessed in the inaugural year, with the first four completed in late 2016.

Infrastructure and other resilience badly needed

Recent earthquakes in the upper South Island and lower North Island once again highlight the issue of infrastructure resilience, Leigh Auton insists

While accepting we live in a dynamic physical environment of earthquakes, tsunamis and volcanic activity, a question needs to be asked as to our level of infrastructure resilience in terms of such likely impacts.

Ultimately, resilience is a question of how much society is prepared to invest in ensuring relatively positive outcomes in the face of potential adverse events.

The likely answer ultimately lies with how we collectively determine our investment and regulatory priorities, as determined through political and governance processes.

We only need to look north to Japan, with similar geological challenges to New Zealand, to a country that has been prepared to proportionally invest more heavily in infrastructure resilience.

This, of course, has been driven by events with impacts on Japanese society far greater than we have evidenced.

To a significant extent, our willingness to invest in resilience

is tempered by the impact, severity and frequency of major events.

Our community response to the hazards associated with earthquake-prone buildings following the Christchurch earthquakes has arguably waned, outside of Christchurch, with the passage of time.

From observation, the fate of many buildings throughout the towns and cities of New Zealand is yet to be resolved.

Many buildings sit empty because owners, are in effect, currently incentivised to delay any investment decisions by this means.

In other cases, building owners have demolished buildings, with little economic rationale for them to be rebuilt, or higher risk buildings continue to be occupied on the basis of an assessment that the likelihood of an adverse event is low in the short term.

I am not necessarily critical of these responses, but there may be a cost to the social and

economic resilience and fabric of many towns and cities throughout the country based on the potential impact of these choices.

Urgent upgrade

Resilience, in particular, may require taxation incentives for property owners to upgrade or rebuild their earthquake-prone buildings in the quickest time possible, so that our communities may be safer and more sustainable in the face of an adverse event. I am sure the smaller towns of New Zealand in particular would benefit from such incentives.

The Kaikoura earthquakes, with their impacts on cities and towns such as Wellington and in northern Canterbury and Kaikoura, are a reminder of how far we have to travel to ensure effective resilience post the Christchurch earthquakes.

One wonders how acceptable it is for our capital city to be so adversely affected by the recent earthquakes, given the nature of that city being built on significant

fault lines.

Questions have been asked, rightly in my view, as to whether having such an overwhelming concentration of public service entities based in Wellington is the most resilient response to a potential major earthquake in the capital.

Translating these potential adverse impacts to our largest city, Auckland, I do wonder about the resilience of some of its infrastructure.

We know that tsunamis have previously affected the upper North Island coastal regions. NIWA research has highlighted the catastrophic impacts of a series of tsunamis on the Northland coast in the 1500s.

We know that a tsunami originating from an earthquake off Tonga or the Kermadecs could have a devastating impact on coastal Auckland.

Significant parts of Auckland on the Waitemata Harbour would be impacted by a tsunami originating from the north.

The programme is overseen by an Independent Assessment Board chaired by Toby Stevenson, Director of Sapere Research Group and an independent company director with 30 years' experience in strategic risk management. He is joined on the board by Debbie Birch and Albert Brantley, both of whom have significant experience in public and private enterprise.

Further assessments will continue in the early part of 2017, and LGNZ will soon call for expressions of interest from other councils to join the programme in its second year.

Equip, LGNZ's Centre of Excellence, continues to assist councils with expertise, executive management professional development and elected member training.

A shared national approach to addressing regional development and growth

Strong economic performance in the regions benefits the whole country and leads to a stronger New Zealand.

To provide local government with a guideline for best practice economic development, LGNZ has progressed the Stronger Economic Development research programme.

The programme collected data on local economic development to highlight best practices and current information on how councils are using their resources to sustain and generate economic activity.

A draft discussion paper outlining how, where

“The regulatory and legislative burden on local government which imposes unnecessary and undue costs on local communities needs to be reduced”

and why economic development resources are used is planned for completion in early 2017.

Developing a sustainable funding model for local government

LGNZ's 2015 Funding Review has stimulated considerable debate and since its launch LGNZ has responded with several streams of continuing policy work.

As a result, many policy matters around infrastructure are now being addressed, with or by central government.

Early work and wins have included:

- housing infrastructure – LGNZ has worked closely with partners to advocate for tools and resources to facilitate housing development where it is most needed; the government has responded with the \$1 billion fund available to assist high-growth councils advance infrastructure projects
- special economic zones – LGNZ has been working with central government to re-

search the cost, benefits and impacts to implement special zones, which would allow localised policy and regulatory tools such as Urban Development Authorities

- road pricing – through ongoing advocacy the government has acknowledged a need for the use of road pricing to manage congestion and cover the balance of costs for long-term roading infrastructure
- tourism/visitor levy – then Prime Minister John Key told a tourism industry summit the government would introduce a tourist tax with possibilities ranging from departure or bed taxes to tourist levies, but “doing nothing” was not an option
- regional mid-sized tourist facilities fund – LGNZ has repeatedly called for support and the first \$3 million tranche of the \$12 million fund was allocated in November to help those communities that struggle to build tourism infrastructure – this is a start but much greater investment will be needed.

Leading effective infrastructure development and funding policies

LGNZ is laying the foundations for improved risk management for councils, having proposed a central risk agency to assist councils in understanding their risk profiles and to work to a common methodology and set of standards.

Getting better at preparing means communities and the nation can recover from disasters

Indeed, even a small tsunami surge travelling down the west coast of the North Island from that direction would have a significant impact on the Auckland International Airport and the Mangere Waste Water Plant on the Manukau Harbour. Such an event would have a catastrophic impact on the New Zealand economy.

Likewise, we are aware that sea-level rise emanating from climate change will significantly impact storm water and transport networks in the City.

A number of low-lying suburbs are already impacted through their storm water systems by high tides associated with low-pressure systems.

Raising roads

The NZTA is currently taking action to raise the Te Atatu to Pt Chevalier causeway several metres to reflect the likelihood of sea-level rise.

But significant further investment will be needed on the infrastructure of Auckland to develop ongoing resilience.

In the south of Auckland, the corridor for almost all utility services from the rest of NZ, the current road network relies on one primary state highway,

State Highway One, intersecting with the North Island Main Trunk railway at Takanini. Other utilities also confluence around these transport utilities.

Motorists and listeners on morning radio and TV will daily testify to the current gridlock associated with the upgrade of the motorway system from Papakura to Manurewa, including the Takanini interchange.

“Political leadership and prioritisation will be required to develop this infrastructure”

I am totally supportive of this upgrade, but a significant question remains as to the resilience of the transport network.

If a significant adverse event were to impact on the current or rebuilt Takanini interchange, which includes the North Island Main Trunk rail passing through it, then Auckland's transport network link to the Waikato would be very seriously compromised.

The simple answer, and one advanced over 60 years ago, is to build an alternative Weymouth to

Karaka connection to link State Highways 29 and 20 at Paerata and Puhinui respectively.

Urban roads in Weymouth have already been constructed and/or sufficient land is preserved for this eventuality, and greenfield land is currently available in Karaka prior to proposed urbanisation of that area to facilitate this connection.

It is inevitable that this link will be built, it being part of the necessary ‘ladder’ of road networks throughout Auckland to provide the city with resilience.

Political leadership and prioritisation will be required to develop this infrastructure. The proposed alternative Drury to East Tamaki arterial via Mill Road will provide some enhanced resilience, but nowhere as effectively as the option described.

The Waikato expressway is another example of building a resilient roading network linking the growth regions of the North. Great progress is being made.

Transmission Gully and the Kapiti Expressway also reflect the essential requirement to build resilience into the transport networks of the Wellington region.

I could cite other examples. As a nation we are probably doing reasonably well but I fear still not

enough. Some utility providers are doing better than others.

I cite Transpower as a good example of providing electricity transmission resilience to Auckland, in the face of much opposition.

Having been involved in emergency management throughout my career, I believe we are getting better with our planning, response and recovery.

All of this, nonetheless, would be much better supported by the willingness of New Zealanders to better resource our critical infrastructure to withstand adverse impacts such as earthquakes, likely tsunamis and no doubt volcanic activity somewhere sometime.

This costs dollars which will be easily be prioritised elsewhere if we take our eye off the ball. We must make this investment in infrastructure (and other) resilience.

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