



RESOURCE CONSENT PROCESSING: SHOWCASING BEST PRACTICE

Hamilton City Council: Hot solutions

The Issue

Hamilton is New Zealand’s fourth largest urban area, and one of the country’s fastest growing cities. Its rate of growth generates around 950 resource consent applications a year.

As if this wasn’t sufficient pressure on its consents team, Hamilton City Council (HCC) offers a 100 per cent money back guarantee for non-notified resource consent applications processed outside statutory

timelines. The fee refund applies if an application isn’t processed within 20 working days.

The introduction of the Resource Management (Discount on Administrative Charges) Regulations 2010 mean HCC is now also focusing on its timeframes for notified applications.

The management and systems HCC has put in place to support its publicly set targets means HCC remains confident about its ability to meet its commitments.

The Journey

The Council began taking a keen interest in improving its performance in the mid-1990s, and this focus has only increased over time.

This has been under the management of Gulab Bilimoria, who has managed the Planning Guidance Unit at HCC for 20 years. The Unit provides planning advice, processes consent applications, and monitors compliance with consent conditions. It is divided into land-use and subdivision specialists, each with its own team leader. There are also three administrative staff.

Gulab says the Unit is always, “striving to initiate systems that will meet and exceed the customer’s expectations of quality and timeliness. The money back guarantee programme is part of the Council’s journey to becoming a world-class organisation.”

The story began in 1994, when HCC achieved ISO9000 certification. Later that decade, when it seemed possible that resource consenting functions might be privatised, HCC took stock of its business and the Council decided to regard consent applicants as customers and treat them accordingly.

The Council saw that, to most applicants, time is a precious resource and that a money-back programme was a simple but effective way of acknowledging that reality.

The pressure is always on, and meeting expectations only raises them. Initially, HCC offered a refund of 50 per cent of fees for applications processed out of time; this was



» Hamilton City Council really ‘moves’ applications along.

increased to 100 per cent in 2002. Gulab says, “customers expect quicker service now than they received a few years ago. By offering refunds as a guarantee of timeliness of service, we are responding to these increasing expectations, and exceeding them.”

HCC hasn't rested on its laurels. Gulab is still interested in continuous improvement, and ongoing monitoring plays a key role in this.

The Solution

HCC watches its own work like a hawk and therefore knows the impact its initiatives to improve delivery are having.

Front-footing and front-loading

HCC has developed information checklists and guides for potential applicants, leading them through the basic requirements and the consent process. Gulab regularly talks to groups about consenting matters, such as local surveyors, property investors, and service clubs. This engagement with prospective customers helps sell the Council ethic of service and builds contacts for the future.

HCC also fosters early engagement by encouraging attendance at pre-application meetings and lodgement meetings. These meetings are provided free of charge. The Council is willing to fund such encounters because it thinks that good quality applications benefit applicants, council staff and the community. It also knows that a high standard of applications helps the Council meet its own statutory timelines and avoids it having to offer discounts for non-compliance.

For projects with an urban design component, meetings with developers at the pre-design stage are encouraged to foster greater collaboration and promote principles of good urban design and sustainability. With this role in mind, Gulab's Unit includes a resident urban designer.

Systems fit for purpose

In recognition that one size does not fit all, HCC has developed two specific processing tracks that differ from the norm. The Quick Consent track is intended to serve applications for controlled or restricted discretionary activities that:

- » are of very low risk to the Council
- » have no complex requirements, such as stormwater or flooding considerations
- » do not need input from other Council specialists
- » do not need written approvals (or these have already been provided)
- » have effects that are less than minor
- » are accompanied by high quality plans.

The Council aims to process such applications to a decision within five working days.

The Fast Track Consent is available to applicants prepared to pay additional costs over and above standard fees and charges to have applications processed faster. The additional costs enable HCC to either contract a consultant to process the application, or pay overtime to a HCC planner to process it outside normal working hours. This arrangement means that other applications are not held up by those on a faster track.



» “We can't do better in the future if we don't know how we are doing now. Monitoring is key.” (Gulab Bilimoria)

Monitoring and reporting

Gulab produces graphs and pie charts for every aspect of HCC's consent processing function. Monthly reports are forwarded to the General Manager setting out application volumes, summarising key applications, listing major consents granted, consents monitored, and enforcement action taken. Every aspect of the Unit's performance is reported on, including the workload allocated to each officer, and the working days taken for each application by that staff member.

After every hearing, all hearing panel members are asked to give feedback on the performance of reporting officers.

Yearly performance statistics are assembled for the Council's Annual Report, and compared with the targets set out in its Annual Plan for that year.



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» One of the Council's 'Hot' solutions – mugs reinforcing values.

Recognition and rewards

Monitoring and reporting of performance is a vital task, but the Council is keen to give credit where it is due. HCC has developed a values system which applies across the workforce. Staff can report colleagues for exemplary service, and rewards are made monthly, on the basis of the following themes:

- » Hot – we are ambitious and passionate about everything we do. We commit to our work with energy, drive and a can-do attitude.
- » Relentless – we are tireless in our commitment to go the extra mile and agile in finding effective solutions.
- » Unexpected – we will delight our customers in every way. We will demonstrate innovation and smart thinking to deliver great results for our community.

The rewards may be modest (a movie voucher, for example) but staff clearly value it when their efforts are recognised.

Sharing resources and experiences with others

In the 12 months up to June 2010, the Planning Guidance Unit has been visited by officers from four other councils wanting to know the secrets of its success.

The Unit also participates in a three-monthly forum for consent processing staff from all territorial authorities in the Waikato region, to discuss common problems and identify solutions. They have been developing practical tools, such as standardised forms for use across all the councils. Planner exchanges between councils are also being discussed.

The Challenges In Practice

Continuous improvement means there is no end to the challenge.

Although its methodical approach has ensured that HCC hasn't faced too many challenges so far, the upcoming

Resource Management (Discount on Administrative Charges) Regulations will require the Council to also focus on timeframes for notified applications. Gulab has already assembled a list of more than 80 independent commissioners to ensure there are no delays in appointing hearings panels.

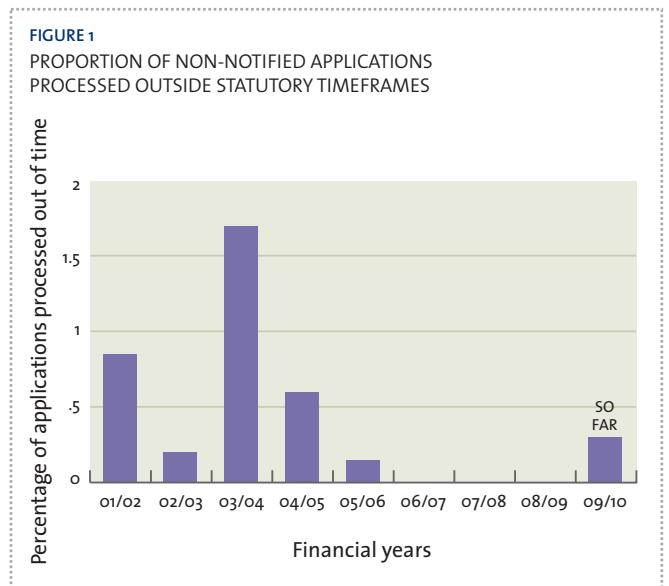
To ensure its ability to meet its own processing targets, HCC needs to have control over priorities and available resources. To achieve this, the Council has put in place clear contractual obligations for any and all outsourcing of consent processing. The consultant is liable for any discount required to be paid because of lateness. The Unit is working to ensure the same understanding applies when timelines are exceeded due to delays in input from in-house specialists. To this end, service level agreements are being prepared with other units in the Council.

Systems also need to keep up with the targets staff set for themselves. An internal database allows links to be made between property records, resource and building consents, invoicing and compliance monitoring. Every consent document related to a property can be tracked from an address or file reference. Unfortunately the staff member who developed the system is no longer with HCC, and upgrading or replicating the successful database will be a challenge.

The Results

HCC's comprehensive monitoring and reporting systems mean evidence of the success of its approach is not difficult to find.

Over nine years, only \$11,511 has been refunded from a total \$4,855,474 taken in fees, and the proportion of applications for which a refund has been due has never exceeded 2 per cent in any year, well below the Council's desired limit of 5 per cent (see figure 1 below).



Extensive use of well-managed pre-hearing meetings means HCC has also been successful at resolving issues raised by notified applications for consent. Around 50 per cent of notified applications don't proceed to a hearing.

Checking In With Customers

Those who work regularly with HCC really rate the Council's performance.

Louise Smith, of Kea Thomson and Farrer Ltd, says, "Hamilton City is the best council I've worked with". Much of this is down to the quality of the people she deals with. "HCC employs good staff and manages to keep them," she says. "They are always accessible or, if not, return calls very promptly."

Louise cites a recent experience involving a high profile development which needed early urban design input and public notification of the application. She says the quality of the Council's communication throughout the process was outstanding. Moreover, the application proceeded to a decision without needing a hearing, and was well within the cost estimate the Council provided for processing it.

Louise suggests that the Council does need to ensure it remains fair and equitable, as sometimes officers' desire to mediate an amicable solution for all parties can be seen as disregarding due process.

Kewwa Low, of Geotec Low Ltd, is also full of praise for the consistency and certainty provided by Gulab and his team. Kewwa thinks the fixed fees for non-notified applications may be a little high, although things generally balance out because HCC doesn't pass on additional costs it may incur – the fixed fee is the fee.



» Louise says the display in Gulab's office shows just how important reporting on performance is to HCC.

The Key Success Factors

HCC has consistently processed almost all resource consent applications within statutory timelines.

This success is down to:

- » consistent, clear leadership from the top
- » close monitoring and reporting of performance and the relative impact of initiatives
- » investment in pre-application engagement, with clear processes in place for this
- » a whole-Council culture of service excellence
- » recognition for exemplary service among staff
- » processing tracks designed to meet the needs of applications at different scales
- » a long-term commitment to continuous improvement.

MORE INFORMATION

For information on the Council's money back guarantee go to <http://hamilton.co.nz/file/fileid/143>

For information on the Council's information checklists and other guidance go to http://hamilton.co.nz/page/pageid/2145827436/Information_checklists

For information on the Council's pre-design, pre-application and lodgement meetings go to <http://hamilton.co.nz/file/fileid/19952>

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For other Resource Consent Processing: Showcasing Best Practice case studies go to www.rma.govt.nz

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