



RESOURCE CONSENT PROCESSING:

**SHOWCASING BEST PRACTICE**

↳ **Thames-Coromandel District Council: E-merging leaders**

**The Issue**

Thames-Coromandel District is a diverse and beautiful district made up of small, widely spread communities separated by farms, bush, beaches and rocky coasts. For many residents, it is literally their second home.

Isolation, distance and absentee property owners can make it difficult for consent applicants to easily access information.

To provide customers with a local counter for service, Thames-Coromandel District Council (TCDC) locates its consents team in several places – the main office in Thames, and in satellite offices in Whitianga, Whangamata and the town of Coromandel. However, these local service counters have made it difficult for the dispersed team to take an integrated, consistent approach in its dealing with customers.

To improve access to consistent information for both customers and its staff, the Council is introducing cutting edge electronic services. These e-services are leading the way nationally.

Mark White, manager of the Council's consents and monitoring team, can attest to the value of TCDC's e-services. "For a relatively small council, TCDC is not afraid to look at innovative ways of improving consent processing. The consents team has had its challenges, however, we are working hard to turn around our



» Thames-Coromandel District Council is proud of its e-services.

performance and the results are already starting to show. E-services play a big part in that turnaround," says Mark.

**The Journey**

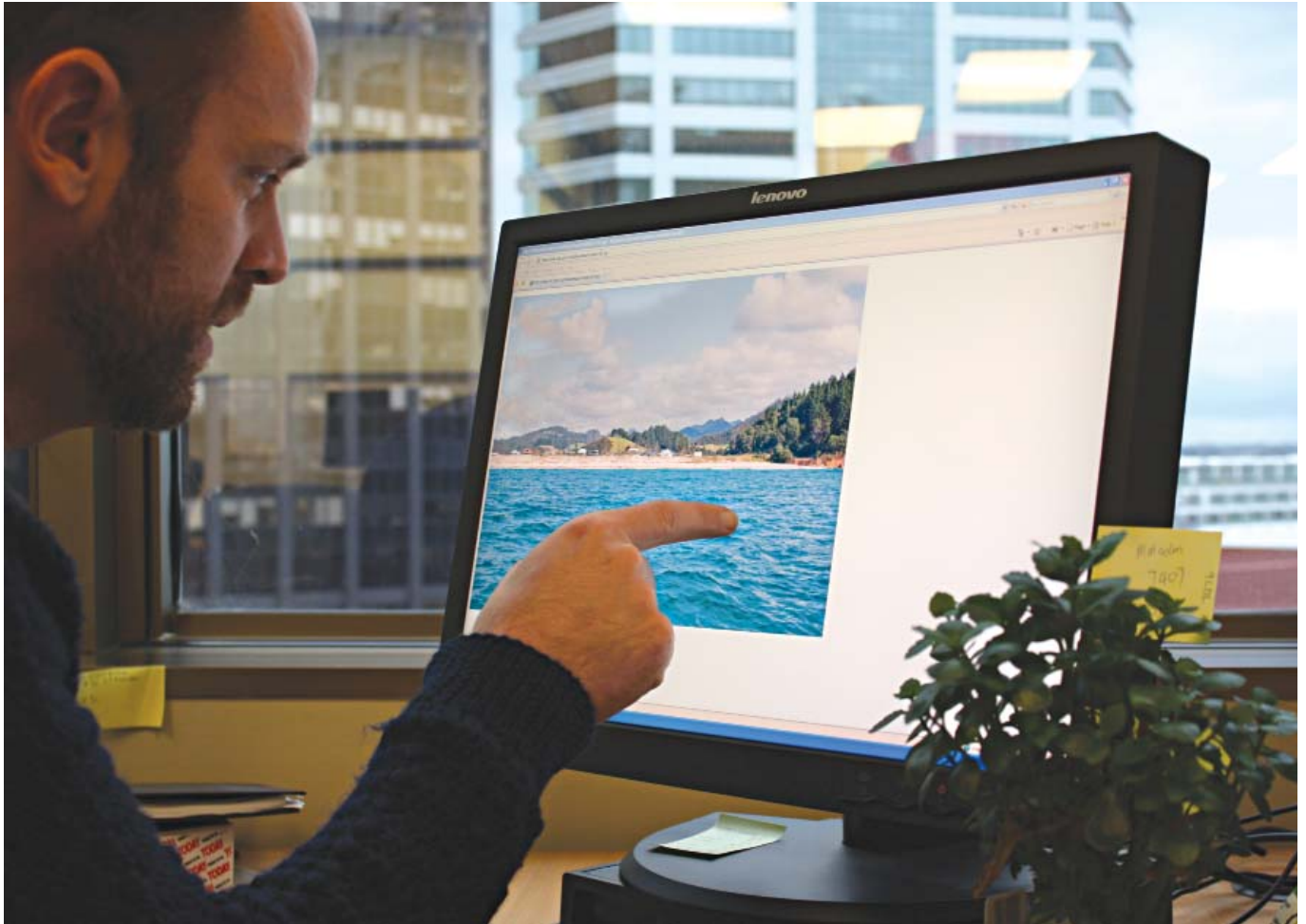
**The Council's long-term commitment to e-services is part of a bigger picture of service improvement to meet the increasing expectations of users and the requirements of the Resource Management Act (RMA).**

At TCDC, all managers from the Chief Executive Office down are supportive of changes to improve the Council's consent processing performance. One example is the recent formation of a focus group, which draws on staff from all the Council's customer-focused teams. The group's purpose is

to identify bottlenecks in the Council's consent processes and practices.

The focus group has emphasised the importance of the relationship between Mark's consents and monitoring team, and the administrative and technical support team managed by Richard Foster. These two teams are working closely together to introduce and manage the suite of e-services.

The services are already improving access to, and the transfer of, information between consent applicants and council offices. This doesn't just apply to consent applications, but also provides a consistent basis for specifying information requirements and timelines. The Council has set a long-term goal to have complete e-services in place by 2013.



» Seaview and its companion Consent Tracking can be accessed from anywhere in the country.

## The Solution

TCDC's e-service capabilities include the District Plan, an online submission system, and the Council's award-winning MasterPlan programme, which allows the user to determine the basic planning and development parameters for a particular site.

All are available on the Council's website homepage, under the 'E-services' tab.

Two TCDC e-services which are currently grabbing the attention of other councils are the Consent Tracking and SeaView programmes.

### Consent Tracking

The Consent Tracking programme allows the public to track the progress of resource or building consent applications online and access documentation associated with any consent. It has a range of search options, such as consent year, consent number, address, and consent type, which makes it easy to locate an application and track its progress.

Cath Long, until recently leader of the Council's customer services team, says, "while there are always going to be

members of the public who don't have access to the internet or who wish to speak to somebody or visit the council in person, Consent Tracking has noticeably reduced the number of planning enquiries. This has freed up consents staff to focus on processing applications."

Consent Tracking is also proving to be a useful tool for consultation. Iwi representatives and other affected parties can use the system to view applications online without needing to visit Council offices or print out large amounts of paper.

TCDC is also looking at providing access to the system for external consultants who process consents on behalf of the Council. This would further reduce the administrative role of consents staff.

Ultimately, Consent Tracking increases transparency about the consent process. Applicants can readily go online and check the status of their application. This gives applicants a sense of ownership, as well as an appreciation for the rigour of the process. It has reduced the number of complaints about delays when, for instance, the Council

is waiting on further information. It also ensures that the Council is kept publicly accountable for its timeframes and helps staff keep accurate records of key consenting milestones.

The programme cost the Council around \$26,000 to install. Richard says it was not difficult to set the system up. "It is not complex, and all maintenance is done in-house, with specialist input from the suppliers of the software only required on a limited basis."

TCDC is so far the only Council using this software, although a series of presentations has sparked queries from other councils.

### SeaView

SeaView provides a detailed visual survey of the District's coastal areas. It is made up of high resolution photographs which have been taken looking back toward the shore from 500–700 metres out to sea.

SeaView helps applicants and consent officers undertake initial landscape assessments of applications in inaccessible locations. The photos provide a common basis for discussions about a particular proposal.

Low resolution images are available free of charge online. High resolution (300dpi) A3-sized images can be purchased from the Council. These high resolution images are suitable for use in consent hearings.

## The Challenges In Practice

**Both Consent Tracking and SeaView have had their challenges.**

The currency of content in the Consent Tracking programme is integral to its success. This requires a commitment by staff to enter and update new information. For instance, documents which are uploaded onto the system need to be final versions and not drafts. The programme has been reconfigured to improve this, and TCDC now has an audit process in place to ensure content is kept up to date. Consent Tracking has increasingly gained the support of staff, as they have become familiar with the software and its benefits.

TCDC plans to build on and strengthen the system for its users. Future upgrade plans will speed up the current search engine, which can be a little slow. The Council is also scanning all historical files, so that all consents before 2007 will be available online. A commitment by senior management in terms of resources is necessary to ensure the programme's continual improvement.

The trial process for SeaView took longer than anticipated, but the extra time enabled issues over the relationship between images and property boundary data to be addressed.

## The Results

**Evidence is emerging that a substantial investment in e-services is leading to improvements in consent processing.**

In the past six months the Council has processed more than 94 per cent of its non-notified consents within statutory timelines, which is a significant improvement on its 2007/2008 RMA Survey result of 74 per cent.

The number of hits on the TCDC website in the last quarter was more than 30,000. Most of the increase from previous quarters can be put down to the popularity of Consent Tracking. More than 54 per cent of users of the programme in this quarter were returning visitors. The number of planning-related enquiries has substantially reduced since the introduction of Consent Tracking.

In Mark and Richard's view, staff morale has improved. Staff from all relevant teams are involved in suggesting, developing and instigating change.

TCDC has received accolades for its e-services. The MasterPlan programme was the Supreme Winner in the 2008 NZ Post Group Local Government Excellence Awards. The Council also won the Best Usability Website Award at the Association of Local Government Information Management (ALGIM) Web Symposium in May 2010.

TCDC is not resting on its laurels and plans to build upon the current suite of e-services. The next in line are packages called the Applicant and Assessor. Applicant will enable customers to apply online. Assessor will then collate information for each application, including relevant district plan objectives and policies, to help officers begin processing the application quickly and efficiently.



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## Checking In With Customers

Dave Lamason, of Planners Plus Ltd, lodges a large proportion of his client's applications with TCDC. Dave refers his clients to Consent Tracking if they enquire about the progress of their application, and he also finds it useful himself to check on Council reports, engineering comments, and community board comments.

Donald Sangster, of Thames Environmental Consultancy Ltd, thinks that: "Consent Tracking is a brilliant idea. It is easy to access and to download information."

Phil Green, of Dunwoodie and Green Surveyors Ltd, believes Consent Tracking has the potential to be a good resource provided it is regularly updated. However, Phil thinks that it is only a small part of the overall system that TCDC needs to have in place to adequately manage the consent process. "Councils like TCDC must develop robust procedures for processing applications and updating tracking systems. They need to monitor and audit compliance to ensure the outcomes are accurate and reflect the actual performance of the Council."

### The Key Success Factors

TCDC's success is due to the following factors:

- » acknowledging that the Council had problems with consent processing performance that needed to be fixed
- » realising the potential of e-services to:
  - » overcome difficulties associated with isolated communities and often out-of-district residents
  - » help consents officers exchange information and reduce the time spent on general queries and administration
  - » provide greater transparency about the consents service and the quality of the experience for its customers
  - » provide a source of common information available to all parties, thereby facilitating productive discussion of issues
- » involving all relevant staff in the process of designing and implementing both e-services as well as other initiatives to improve performance
- » buy-in to continual service improvement by senior management, including providing an appropriate, ongoing budget.

### MORE INFORMATION

To view the Council's e-service programmes go to <http://www.tcdc.govt.nz/E---Services/>

To view the Consent Tracking programme go to <http://web.tcdc.govt.nz/mvxtprod/modules/applicationmaster/default.aspx>

To view the SeaView programme go to <http://www.tcdc.govt.nz/Services-A-to-Z/Maps--Geographical-Data-GIS/Seaview/>

To view the MasterPlan programme go to <http://web.tcdc.govt.nz/MPPuProd/masterplan/enquirer/default.aspx>

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