

Supporting Effective Governance in Auckland Council

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Executive summary

1. Introduction and background

This report focuses on how staff can support effective and accountable governance in Auckland Council and identifies critical components of staff performance for use in building a new performance measurement framework.

It outlines the key themes from interviews and focus groups with elected members and staff on how to best support effective governance within Auckland Council. It also sets out insights on the critical aspects of staff performance that support effective and accountable governance within Auckland Council.

The research is part of the wider Elected Members Research project. The aim of this broader project is to understand how to improve the service that staff provide to elected members, to support members to do their job well. The project also included a headline survey, undertaken in July 2021. The survey monitored trends in elected members' satisfaction with the staff advice and support they received.

The purpose of the present research was to identify:

- the staff functions and behaviours that enable elected members to do their job well
- any behavioural or other barriers that stand in the way of good governance practices for robust governance outcomes
- how best to build and maintain trusted advisory / support relationships between staff and elected members.

The themes identified from this research connect with several other council reviews, including the governance framework review (2015), council-controlled organisations review (2020), and hauora / wellbeing review (2021).

The research also supports other governance-related initiatives including:

- Kura Kāwana (elected member development programme)
- Quality Advice programme
- Governance Fundamentals programme
- Elected Members Code of Conduct.

The research was carried out in August and September 2021 by staff from council's Research and Evaluation Unit (RIMU) and Governance Capability team. Twenty-four elected members and 35 staff members from across the council group participated.

2. Key themes

Many Auckland Council staff have a role to provide support to elected members. By and large this support is of good quality and enables elected members to do their governance roles well. Independent assessments of Auckland Council reports by the New Zealand Institute of Economic Research (NZIER) show that the quality of formal advice is generally high and continues to improve. Similarly, based on the recent headline survey results, overall elected members' satisfaction with the support they receive from staff is moderate to high.

The themes identified through this research, and summarised below, focus on broad areas of staff support that we heard were important for elected members to do their governance roles well. Many of these themes have also been identified in other council reviews, although not all in the level of detail as presented here. Where appropriate, we have considered the results and findings from other relevant work to provide a balanced assessment of potential improvements for some aspects of staff support.

Continued identification of these themes highlights that many of the underlying issues remain relevant to both staff and elected members. Ensuring momentum to address these issues is important to supporting robust governance outcomes.

Understanding of and respect for the governance model

Understanding of and respect for the governance model is essential for both staff and elected members. This includes an understanding of the different governance and operational roles. However, we found that staff do not always see how their work contributes to governance outcomes, they may lack respect for the role of elected members, and elected members can sometimes stray into operational matters.

Key insights
<p>Good governance practices are supported when:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• both staff and elected members understand and respect the governance model• staff are skilled in navigating the political environment and can operate within the grey areas of governance and operations, formality and friendliness• staff are impartial in their advice• elected members know how to ask the right questions• people leaders provide coaching and debriefing support, prioritise learning and development, and role model expected behaviours to help their staff to build good advisory skills.

Advice and support provided by staff

Quality of written and verbal advice

Staff and elected members highlighted the importance of high-quality written and verbal advice. While significant efforts have been made by the council to improve the overall quality of advice, participants noted that there is still work to be done, particularly to improve analytical skills. Many felt the ability to analyse impacts and assess options well, went hand in hand with engagement

capability. People leaders play an important role in supporting and enabling their staff to build good advisory skills.

Key insights
Good governance practices are supported when: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• written and verbal advice meets the quality advice standards• advice draws on Māori and community views in options assessment and analysis• engagement mechanisms are easy to implement and enable diversity in engagement participation• verbal advice is correct, clear and interpretable.

Advice that links to broader strategy, plans and priorities

It can be challenging for elected members to balance the needs of current and future communities. Advice that explicitly links to the Auckland Plan 2050, local board plans, the organisation's strategic objectives and previous decision-making helps to address this challenge. Some staff and elected members felt advice could make these links clearer.

Key insights
Good governance practices are supported when: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• advice demonstrates how it meaningfully contributes to broader strategy, plans and priorities, including both regional and local• advice makes clear links to previous decision-making.

Ability to 'bring elected members on the journey'

Staff need to prepare elected members for future decision-making by taking the time to help them build the required background knowledge and rationale for change. They can do this more successfully by meeting with elected members throughout a project at the right times and in the right ways to build a knowledge base.

Key insights
Good governance practices are supported when: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• staff engage with elected members at the right times in the right ways• staff use innovative mechanisms to keep elected members connected to and updated on projects• people leaders and senior leaders support staff to be innovative.

Other support provided by staff

Direct support staff play an important part in helping elected members to be more effective in their governance role. For example, helping them to navigate the organisation and triage requests. Support staff can also be an important resource for advisory staff by helping them navigate the political environment. When advisory and support staff develop and maintain collegial networks across the organisation they can better help elected members make connections between projects and access information easier.

Key insights

Good governance practices are supported when:

- staff are open-minded towards understanding elected members' needs and finding solutions
- there are effective processes and procedures in place to triage elected members' requests for information and advice
- staff communication meets standards of responsiveness and timeliness
- staff have good working relationships with each other and collaborate well.

Relationships between staff and elected members

Mutual trust and respect

Mutual trust and respect form the foundation of good advisory and support relationships. However, trust and respect between staff and elected members can be undermined by perceptions of an employer-employee relationship; high workloads; staff turnover; and the lack of a reliable process to resolve relationship issues.

Key insights

Good governance practices are supported when:

- relationships between staff and elected members are underpinned by mutual trust and respect
- staff deliver free and frank advice and can state what is known or unknown, including timeframes and what's realistically achievable
- staff can confidently navigate formal environments, such as workshops and meetings
- staff and elected members work in partnership to get things done and can see things from one another's view.

Maintaining formal boundaries

Formal boundaries are an important part of maintaining trust and respect within relationships. Navigating appropriate levels of informality with one another can be difficult for staff and elected members. Staff with political nous can navigate this boundary well.

Key insights

Good governance practices are supported when:

- both staff and elected members maintain formal boundaries with one another
- staff are professional toward elected members in all circumstances.

Poor behaviour and managing relationships

Auckland Council's hauora / wellbeing review identified issues with unacceptable behaviour, and the capability and capacity of people leaders to deal with hauora issues. These issues were echoed in this research. Other contextual factors that influence elected members' behaviour and relationships with others, aside from staff, were also identified.

Key insights

Good governance practices are supported when:

- staff are equipped with the tools and support to manage challenging interactions with elected members
- staff are given hauora / wellbeing support
- chairing enables fair discussion and debate
- chairs keep their members abreast of engagement activities and important matters
- elected members set agreed ways of working together at the beginning of the term
- both elected members and staff are culturally competent
- staff support elected members to build relationships with Māori.

Other barriers to enabling effective governance

Staff workload and resourcing

Many staff experienced high workloads and resourcing challenges. Staff turnover, long recruitment timeframes and regular change processes were seen to perpetuate under-resourcing and stretch existing staff to capacity. Participants noted the impact that staff turnover has on relationships and project continuity, with handover between staff sometimes not occurring smoothly.

Key insights

Good governance practices are supported when:

- there are adequate record keeping mechanisms and project handover processes
- reporting processes and allocated meeting times are proportionate to the subject
- staff are supported to manage their workloads against other priorities
- there is adequate staff resourcing and staff turnover is minimised.

Elected member role expectations and requirements

The variety and complexity of an elected member's role is immense. Participants felt that many do not have a clear understanding of the expectations and requirements until they are established in the role. Areas where elected members' expectations are not always met include the level of staff support, the scope of local board decision-making responsibilities, working within council processes and procedures (e.g. strategic planning and budget cycles), and workload.

Key insights

Good governance practices are supported when:

- elected members understand the role expectations and requirements
- elected members are equipped with the right skills and tools to manage the daily requirements of the role
- elected members are given hauora / wellbeing support.

Elected member skills and development needs

Elected members come from different backgrounds and have a range of expertise, meaning they have different levels of skills and knowledge required to do their governance role. Learning and development is crucial to ensure all members can function in their role well. Developing a culture for professional development, tailoring the training and pace for new versus returning members, and making clearer which trainings are mandatory or core and which are optional could help increase uptake of learning and development amongst elected members.

Key insights
Good governance practices are supported when: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• elected members have the right skills and knowledge to fulfil their governance role• there is a culture amongst elected members for continuous development• training and pace is tailored for first-term versus multi-term members• elected members are given clear direction on which training is core versus optional.

3. Next steps

In 2022, work will begin on phase two of the Elected Members Research project to build a new performance measurement framework that reflects how staff support effective and accountable governance. The Governance Capability team will establish appropriate methods and frequency for measuring indicators of staff performance. The team will also work closely with others across the organisation to consider the key themes and insights in this report and develop any necessary actions and responses.

Table of contents

1.0	Introduction.....	1
2.0	Context.....	2
2.1	Findings from the 2021 elected members headline survey.....	3
2.2	How this project links to other work.....	3
2.3	How staff support elected members.....	5
3.0	How the research was conducted and who was involved.....	6
3.1	The methods we used.....	6
4.0	How the main themes are presented.....	7
5.0	Factors that enable elected members to do their job well.....	8
5.1	Understanding of and respect for the governance model.....	8
5.2	Advice and support provided by staff.....	11
5.3	Relationships between staff and elected members.....	17
6.0	Other barriers to supporting effective governance.....	24
6.1	Staff workload and resourcing.....	24
6.2	Elected member role expectations and requirements.....	25
6.3	Elected member skills and development needs.....	27
7.0	Critical components of staff performance.....	29
8.0	Key ingredients for effective relationships.....	31
9.0	Discussion and next steps.....	32

1.0 Introduction

This report focuses on how to support effective and accountable governance in Auckland Council.

The research was conducted as part of the wider Elected Members Research project. The overall aim of this wider project is to understand how to improve the service that staff provide to elected members, so that elected members can do their job well.

Auckland Council is governed by 170 democratically elected members who make up the Governing Body and 21 local boards. Elected members have decision-making responsibilities, while staff are responsible for providing advice and support to elected members and for implementing their decisions. The nature of the support, and the way in which elected members and staff work together, is crucial for a well-functioning local democracy.

This report outlines the key themes and insights from interviews and focus groups with elected members and council group staff on how to best support effective governance within Auckland Council. It also sets out the critical aspects of staff performance, for later use in a staff performance indicator framework.

The research was carried out in partnership by the Research and Evaluation Unit (RIMU) and the Governance Capability team within Auckland Council.

The purpose of the research was to identify:

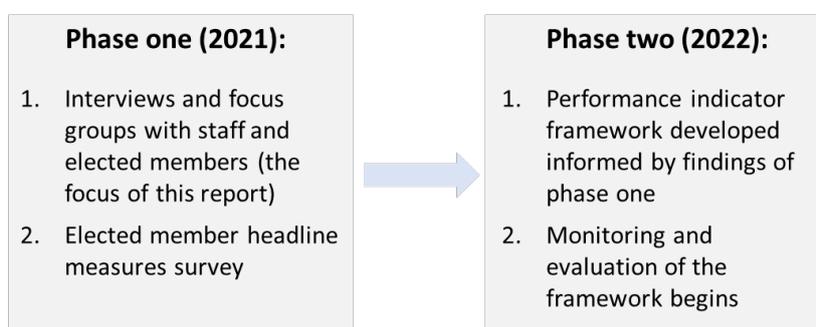
- the staff functions and behaviours that enable elected members to do their job well
- any behavioural or other barriers that stand in the way of good governance practices for robust governance outcomes
- how best to build and maintain trusted advisory / support relationships between staff and elected members.

2.0 Context

In the past, Auckland Council has conducted a survey every 18 months to measure elected members' satisfaction with staff advice and support. The last survey was conducted in 2019.¹

The council's Governance Capability team has reviewed this approach by seeking feedback from staff in different departments and some elected members. The general sentiment was that the survey does not provide enough valuable insights to drive meaningful change. Results tend to remain static, and do not enable staff to understand and address elected members' needs and expectations.

As a result of the review, a new way of measuring and improving staff performance has been developed, the Elected Members Research project. The project has two phases:



The first phase involved interviews and focus groups, carried out in August and September 2021, with elected members and staff to gather qualitative data. The findings of the research are the subject of this report.

The first phase also involved a short survey (the elected members headline survey), based on the previous 2019 survey, with the purpose of continuing to monitor high-level trends in overall satisfaction. Selected findings from this survey are presented in Section 2.1.

Together, the qualitative research and survey results from the project's first phase will be used to build a performance indicator framework for council group staff in phase two. The framework will measure how staff support effective and accountable governance. This work will also shape capability building programmes across the council group, provide input for other council workstreams (such as the hauora / wellbeing review) and inform performance measures for the Auckland Council Chief Executive and council-controlled organisations (CCOs).

From 2022, work will begin on phase two, which will evaluate and monitor ongoing improvement in staff performance based on the new performance indicator framework.

¹ The full report can be found at: <https://www.aucklandcouncil.govt.nz/about-auckland-council/how-auckland-council-works/elected-members-remuneration-declarations-interest/docselectedmembersurveys/elected-members-survey-2019-full-report.pdf>

2.1 Findings from the 2021 elected members headline survey

As part of the first phase of the Elected Members Research project, a headline survey was conducted earlier in 2021.²

The survey was based on the previous elected members survey and enabled us to continue monitoring key trends in elected members' satisfaction with the advice and support they receive from staff. The survey ran for three weeks, from 2 to 23 July 2021. All elected members were invited to participate and just over half (52 per cent) responded.

Because the survey was significantly pared back from previous versions, not all the results could be compared to previous survey results. However, where comparisons could be made, elected members' satisfaction increased. For example, in comparison to 2019, overall satisfaction with the quality of staff advice and support has increased by 24 per cent, to a total of 84 per cent.

From the quantitative and qualitative survey data, the following areas for improvement were identified for local boards:

- legal guidance, advice and support
- tikanga and Māori responsiveness guidance, advice and support
- opportunities to input into and influence CCO projects and decisions
- timely CCO engagement.

And for the Governing Body, the following areas for improvement were identified:

- communications guidance, advice and support
- community facilities, services and development advice
- professional development advice and support.

All elected members wanted to see more proactive, timely and responsive staff communication.

Where applicable, we have considered these survey results alongside the research findings contained in this report.

2.2 How this project links to other work

This research links to several other key reviews commissioned by the council, including the governance framework review (2015), council-controlled organisations review (2020), and hauora / wellbeing review (2021). This project will help give effect to organisational priorities and work that is planned or already underway.

² The full report can be found at: <https://www.aucklandcouncil.govt.nz/about-auckland-council/how-auckland-council-works/elected-members-remuneration-declarations-interest/docselectedmembersurveys/elected-members-headline-measures-survey-2021.pdf>

The governance framework review³, commissioned in 2015, looked at the operation of the governance framework, how effectively Auckland Council had implemented the 2010 legislative reforms, and how to make the framework work better. The review made findings and recommendations across four broad themes. While progress has been made on some of the recommendations, this research identified that many of the issues outlined in the review remain relevant, particularly regarding understanding and respect for the governance model.

A review of Auckland Council's CCOs⁴ was commissioned in 2020. The review considered whether CCOs were an efficient and effective model for delivering services, and whether the CCO decision-making model had enough political oversight, public transparency and accountability. Many of the findings overlap with those identified in this research, particularly regarding how staff collaborate, shared values, and behaviour across the council group.

The hauora / wellbeing review⁵ was commissioned in early 2021 and considered how the council provides hauora support for employees. The review was instigated in response to events in 2020, and to progress the chief executive's aspiration for Auckland Council to be an exemplar among New Zealand employers, in terms of how it supports staff hauora. The review made findings and recommendations across four broad themes. Given the review's recency, many of its findings were reiterated within this research.

The council also has several current programmes that the wider Elected Members Research Project will feed into.

This includes the Governance Capability team's work to support staff and elected members with respect to the council's governance. The team is responsible for three specific work programmes.

- Quality Advice: this programme sets the organisation-wide quality advice framework and aspirations, builds advisory capability and measures progress towards quality advice goals.
- Governance Fundamentals: to be relaunched in late 2021, this programme helps staff understand both the wider local government context and the council's governance model.
- Kura Kāwana: this programme is a comprehensive three-year development programme to support elected members as governors and decision-makers.

Also relevant is the work of the Governance Services Department, which implements the elected member code of conduct. The code was adopted by the Governing Body earlier in 2021 and sets out:

- the expected conduct of members towards one another, staff and the public
- how information is disclosed
- the legislation that applies to the actions of members
- the relationship between elected members and management.

³ Full report can be found at: <https://ourauckland.aucklandcouncil.govt.nz/media/na4muzck/auckland-council-governance-review-released.pdf>

⁴ Full report can be found at: <https://ourauckland.aucklandcouncil.govt.nz/media/uwlh0s0s/cco-review-final.pdf>

⁵ Full report can be found at: <https://ourauckland.aucklandcouncil.govt.nz/media/ob1h4e2g/auckland-council-hauora-wellbeing-review-17-may-2021.pdf>

2.3 How staff support elected members

Elected members' performance of their governance role is influenced by many factors, most of which are unique to them as individuals.

We have identified three broad but critical areas where staff influence elected members' ability to provide effective and accountable governance. They are:

- exhibiting appropriate behaviours, such as impartiality and professionalism
- providing support, information, and advice
- implementing decisions.

Throughout this report we refer to advisory staff, support staff and general staff. These roles are outlined below.

- Advisory staff are people from across the council group who engage with elected members as part of their role. Advisory staff functions support elected members' decision-making and implementation of those decisions; for example, through the provision of quality written and verbal advice at workshops and business and committee meetings.
- Support staff are people who interact with elected members daily. Their functions support elected members in their day-to-day governance role, for example by helping them navigate the organisation or supporting democratic meetings. These staff members work primarily within the Local Board Services and Democracy and Engagement departments.
- General staff are people from across the wider council group who interact with elected members infrequently. They carry out operational functions, for example as parks rangers or facilities coordinators, but must still abide by the behavioural expectations set out in Our Charter.⁶

⁶ Our Charter contains six principles that have been adopted by the council group to set the expectations and bottom lines for conduct that all staff have to meet, regardless of role, location or seniority.

3.0 How the research was conducted and who was involved

This research was qualitative in nature and was designed to identify important themes, not to measure statistics about the frequency of different attitudes. In total, 24 elected members and 35 council group staff participated. Interviews and focus groups took place in August and September 2021. The approach adopted in this research – including recruitment methods, informed consent and participant confidentiality – was assessed by Auckland Council’s Research Ethics Advisory Group.

Elected members were invited to self-nominate if they wanted to take part. Local board members were also nominated by local area managers. Staff were nominated by their managers. To ensure a cross-section of elected members and staff, we selected final participants with a range of ages, ethnicities and experience. It was also important that participants had a strong understanding of what contributes to effective governance in an Auckland Council context.

Of the elected members, five Governing Body and 19 local board members participated. Seven were first-term members and 17 were multi-term members. Thirteen were chairs or deputy chairs.

Staff participants came from different departments within Auckland Council and the four CCOs, with an emphasis on staff who had extensive experience supporting and advising elected members.

3.1 The methods we used

The research was carried out by the four authors of this report, who draw from the council’s Research and Evaluation Unit (RIMU) and the Governance Capability team. We conducted the focus groups and interviews using Microsoft Teams due to Auckland being in COVID-19 alert level 4 in August and September 2021. Each interview and focus group had a lead facilitator and a note taker.

We subsequently thematically analysed the interview notes and transcripts, using the approach outlined by Bree and Gallagher (2016).⁷ The main themes to emerge from that analysis form the sections of this report.

⁷ Bree, R., and Gallagher, G. (2016). Using Microsoft Excel to code and thematically analyse qualitative data: A simple, cost-effective approach. *All Ireland Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education* (AISHE-J), 8(2), 2811-2814.

4.0 How the main themes are presented

This report outlines the main themes of the research in two broad sections.

The first – Section 5.0 – discusses the factors that enable elected members to do their job well.

The second – Section 6.0 – discusses barriers to supporting effective governance, which were out of scope of the performance indicator framework but still provide valuable insights for the council.

Unless a distinction is drawn between local board and Governing Body members, ‘elected members’ refers to the whole. Although the responsibilities of Governing Body and local board members differs, there was similarity in the experiences between both sets of governors in many areas.

Verbatim excerpts from interviews are used throughout the report to demonstrate the themes that emerged from the data. Some quotes have been edited slightly to maintain the confidentiality of participants, or to aid readability. Excerpts from elected members are indicated by ‘(Elected member)’; those from council and CCO staff are indicated by ‘(Staff member)’.

5.0 Factors that enable elected members to do their job well

From our conversations with both staff and elected members, we found there were several factors that enable elected members to fulfil their governance roles well. The most frequent of these were:

- understanding of and respect for the governance model
- advice and support provided by staff
- relationships between staff and elected members.

5.1 Understanding of and respect for the governance model

Auckland Council's governance model⁸ is designed to enact local democracy. It comprises 170 democratically elected members who make up the Governing Body and 21 local boards, and are supported by staff from Auckland Council and the CCOs⁹.

Auckland Council's governance model was established by the Local Government (Auckland Council) Act 2009¹⁰. The model specifies the responsibilities of the governance and operations arms of the council, and how they should work together to achieve outcomes. Essentially, the Governing Body and local boards have decision-making responsibilities, while staff are responsible for providing advice and support to elected members and for implementing their decisions.

Understanding of and respect for the different roles within the governance model is important. Both staff and elected members highlighted the need to know how their respective responsibilities differ from one another. However, many staff and some elected members reported beginning their roles with little understanding of the governance model they will be working or governing within. Over time, although most advisory and support staff and elected members are likely to obtain a good understanding of the difference between governance and operations, we heard how in practice the line can be blurry and boundaries difficult to navigate. Both elected members and staff were better able to do their jobs well when they could skilfully navigate these grey areas.

We found that poor knowledge of and respect for the governance model is evident amongst staff at all levels, including people leaders. While there are many staff who do understand the governance model and navigate it well, issues arising from poor knowledge and / or respect for the governance model were identified frequently by all research participants. A particular theme that emerged was a lack of connection for some staff in how their role contributes to enabling effective and accountable governance. Some staff reported how other colleagues perceived engaging with elected members as a tick-box exercise, demonstrating a misunderstanding of the members' role.

⁸ For more information on the governance model see: <https://www.aucklandcouncil.govt.nz/about-auckland-council/how-auckland-council-works/Pages/auckland-council-explained.aspx>

⁹ The model also includes appointed and selected bodies, such as the Independent Māori Statutory Board, advisory panels, co-governance entities and CCO boards. These are not discussed in detail here because they are out of scope for this project.

¹⁰ <https://www.legislation.govt.nz/act/public/2010/0036/latest/DLM3016017.html>

[For] a lot of people [staff], the governance context is secondary to the way that they work...It's seen as a barrier, or the elected members are somehow gatekeepers...It makes our advice in a lot of cases not that helpful. (Staff member)

I was talking to a manager and [they] didn't seem to understand the roles of elected members, or why elected members would be making a decision in a specific situation. And it happens relatively regularly in terms of treating elected members, or their role, as an annoyance or nuisance or a tick box exercise. (Staff member)

Some staff also described how it could be difficult to balance passion for advice with dispassion for the eventual decision that is made by elected members.

I don't think you can ever not be disappointed [when your recommendation isn't adopted] because you've done the work. But you have to learn to suck it up and move on. That's why they're [elected members] in that role. There're other things at play for them apart from just the advice and the analysis. (Staff member)

Similarly, several elected members who we spoke to appeared to not grasp that staff were employed by the organisation and required to be impartial in their support and advice. They thought staff should be able to provide support to progress their individual political priorities. In addition, they thought that staff should give their personal view on advice and, in certain instances, saw staff advice as separate to the advice of the organisation. One description by an elected member indicated to us that some staff may enable this view.

I often ask [them to] give me your personal view and then give me a one pager on a council viewpoint. And sometimes those two might vary. (Elected member)

Both staff and elected members discussed how elected members could sometimes involve themselves in operational matters. A range of reasons why were identified, most predominantly because they:

- do not always know how to ask governance-level questions and default to asking about operational detail
- are particularly interested in an area of operations
- mistrust staff's ability to deliver, and attempt to micro-manage them to ensure projects are completed
- face pressure from the community to involve themselves in operational issues.

Crossing that line between governance and management is an internal challenge. There's lots of spaces where things bleed into the grey area. (Staff member)

We found that when elected members and staff both understood and respected the governance model, they could do their job well and build good relationships with each other. Learning and development in relation to the governance model and a fostering healthy culture of respect for it was important for both staff and elected members.

From our investigations, the Auckland Council induction provided to all staff touches only very briefly on the governance model and the staff role within it. Similarly, it provides a low-level of

detail on Our Charter (foundation principles and standards for council group staff behaviours) and the council's four behaviours (achieve, serve, collaborate, develop). While this may be sufficient for general staff who have little or no interactions with elected members, what we heard during our research suggests that advisory and support staff require a much greater level of knowledge.

The Governance Fundamentals programme is being relaunched in late 2021. It uses blended learning to help staff understand both the wider local government context and the unique governance model in which we work. Other detailed training, such as the Verbal Advice to Elected Members course, offers further support to staff. However, these types of training are not mandatory and many staff we spoke to either did not know about them or felt they did not need them.

One staff member described how their team had developed their own approach to inducting and training their staff to navigate the governance model, with a focus on coaching and mentoring.

I think a lot of our [training] comes from shadowing [and] watching the more experienced people. (Staff member)

Many staff participants highlighted how people leaders support and enable staff to operate within the governance model, and the need for people leaders to be better trained to support their staff in this way. They noted that people leaders play an important role in their development by:

- providing ongoing support through coaching and debriefing
- prioritising staff learning and development
- role modelling expected behaviours when engaging with elected members.

We tend to have an attitude that 'a good player makes a good coach'; not necessarily. Also, there's an attitude that people shouldn't have to develop themselves as managers, they should just intrinsically know how to do it and not ask for help. (Staff member)

Most staff perceived that when their people leader helped to prepare and support them as they interacted with elected members and created a culture of respect for the governance model, they were better able to perform their role and have their wellbeing protected.

Elected members receive induction and ongoing training through the Kura Kāwana programme, which is outlined in more detail in Section 6.3.

Key insights
<p>Good governance practices are supported when:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• both staff and elected members understand and respect the governance model• staff are skilled in navigating the political environment and can operate within the grey areas of governance and operations, formality and friendliness• staff are impartial in their advice• elected members know how to ask the right questions• people leaders provide coaching and debriefing support, prioritise learning and development, and role model expected behaviours to help their staff to build good advisory skills.

5.2 Advice and support provided by staff

Both staff and elected members highlighted to us the importance of staff advice and support in enabling elected members to do their job well. Different types of advice and support that we identified included:

- the quality of written and verbal advice
- advice that links to broader strategy, plans and priorities
- the ability to bring elected members along on the journey; and
- other support provided by staff.

5.2.1 Quality of written and verbal advice

Staff and elected members alike highlighted the importance of high-quality written and verbal advice to enable good decision-making. The council's quality advice standards describe what good advice looks like in practice: it focuses on the decision-maker, includes credible options and analysis, and is simple and concise.

Annual assessments of Auckland Council reports by the New Zealand Institute of Economic Research (NZIER) shows that the quality of advice has improved over the past few years. This can be attributed to the leadership of the Quality Advice programme, departments that consistently and deliberately put in the effort to improve their advice, and departmental resourcing dedicated to supporting quality advice. The recent elected members headline survey showed that these efforts have made a difference, with 82 per cent of all elected members satisfied with the written and verbal advice they receive from staff. Many elected members discussed with us how quality advice enables them to do their job well.

I would expect a high standard of report writing - balanced writing, putting things down fairly reasonably and easily with no sense of swaying you to one point of view or other... [Authors] write something that leads you to a conclusion. I look for: have they grounded their recommendation? How well have they grounded it? What are the advantages, disadvantage[s], the pros and the cons? So you see the risks, you see it all laid out, one can't help but go to that conclusion, because it's logically set out. (Elected member)

The value of the organisation's continued focus on quality advice was clear to us. However, both staff and elected members discussed gaps in how written and verbal advice is provided. Most felt that analytical skills could be improved. Some staff said they had difficulty making a judgement call on the extent of options analysis to include within advice because they felt the need to balance political appetite with viable options. Clearer guidance was sought on how to balance those needs.

We also heard from many staff how their ability to analyse and assess options was often affected by other factors, such as their ability to engage with Māori and the community well. For example, staff felt they lacked the necessary skills and support to engage with Māori, which affected their ability to draw on engagement in analysis. They described difficulties navigating the complex and diverse Māori political landscape in Tāmaki Makaurau and a feeling of not knowing where to start with engagement.

Like Māori engagement, staff felt that the capability to engage well with communities went hand in hand with the ability to consider community views in their analysis and assessment of options. This aspect of advice was important to elected members as they are required to consider community views and preferences when making decisions. They said while they often have extensive personal knowledge of the community, they rely on staff to reflect broader community views, including the needs of current and future generations, in advice to balance decision-making.

Some staff and elected members felt that without diversity of staff in the right roles, planning for engagement was often done through a 'western lens', which made it harder to understand the sentiment of under-represented communities. Both staff and elected members also felt that the council could better communicate its responsibilities, so the community was more informed and motivated to engage. One staff member described how they thought most feedback was not representative of broader community attitudes. They said there could be a risk of decisions being made that do not benefit the wider community, if feedback received through voluntary public consultation was the only source of community views informing advice.

We tend only to listen to the loud voices. It disproportionately represents the views of certain communities. For one thing those who have the time to contemplate it, who aren't at work doing two jobs. So, our response rate through traditional channels is appallingly bad amongst youth, minority communities, Māori, Pacific, and so on. (Staff member)

One suggestion was made to make greater use of research methods in engagement; for example, surveying a representative sample of residents to obtain broader community views.

We can do more quantitative, sound research, and we can balance out views by managing the sampling so it's demographically weighted. We can go more deeply into a dialogue with the community. For some of those communities, it can't be one-off because it's inherently relationship based... We've fundamentally got to change the relationship with a whole group in the community, so that they feel part of a wider system. (Staff member)

Alongside written advice, we also heard about the importance of verbal advice. Experienced staff who we spoke to noted that there are often no second chances when delivering verbal advice to elected members, and that the message must be correct, clear and interpretable. Some staff described how their teams use internal processes to plan and prepare so that complex information is clearly communicated to elected members.

Our team, before each stage [of our work programme], gets in a room for half a day, and just brainstorms some of the ways that we're going to communicate and engage with the elected members. Then we do what we call a pre-mortem: we go through the process first in our heads and then say, 'what are all of the things that could go wrong?' and 'what can we do to front-foot that and solve it before we even get to the elected members?' Then we have a round-table and get people to ask questions as if they were elected members. [That] throws out things that you might not have thought of as the presenter. So, we anticipate what the questions might be up front [and] can answer them before they even become a question. (Staff member)

Many staff also spoke about how people leaders support the delivery of good verbal advice through coaching and debriefing practices. They felt that coaching gave them the opportunity to practise delivering advice and to receive feedback, which contributed to their self-confidence and performance. They felt that debriefing gave them the opportunity to reflect on their experience, identify areas for improvement and any next steps. We found that honest, constructive conversations in these settings helped staff develop the skills they needed to perform their role to a high standard. However, the availability of such support for staff varied, and we heard how some people leaders themselves are likely to need better support to learn how to help their teams engage with elected members.

Key insights
Good governance practices are supported when: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• written and verbal advice meets the quality advice standards• advice draws on Māori and community views in options assessment and analysis• engagement mechanisms are easy to implement and enable diversity in engagement participation• verbal advice is correct, clear and interpretable.

5.2.2 Advice that links to broader strategy, plans and priorities

Most staff and elected members placed particular importance on the strategic links within advice. Elected members described needing to consider and hold a broad strategic view that considers future implications. Advice from staff that explicitly links to the Auckland Plan 2050, local board plans and the organisation's strategic objectives enabled elected members to make more future-focused decisions. When the advice clearly linked to strategy, staff also felt they could better prioritise their work.

We heard that elected members wanted stronger strategic advice, and that they felt advice sometimes did not adequately account for existing plans and policies. For example, some elected members said that advice did not consider the issue of climate change enough and reports often lacked connection to Te Tāruke-ā-Tāwhiri: Auckland's Climate Action Framework. One elected member described how they were continually having to point out and 'catch' these inconsistencies.

We've had some really terrible climate impact statements, but should that be for us [elected members] to constantly have to raise it and say, 'this climate statement doesn't make sense'? (Elected member)

Local board members also felt that when staff understood the local community and their aspirations, advice was more robust and helped them to be more strategic in their decision-making.

Several staff also noted the importance of making clear links between advice and previous decision-making, and that it particularly helped to enable a smoother decision-making process.

I don't think we should be providing advice in a vacuum; it needs to take into account wider issues. (Staff member)

Key insights

Good governance practices are supported when:

- advice demonstrates how it meaningfully contributes to broader strategy, plans and priorities, including both regional and local
- advice makes clear links to previous decision-making.

5.2.3 Ability to 'bring elected members on the journey'

In addition to the quality of advice, we heard about the importance of the way staff engage with elected members to help them fully understand issues and options.

We need to get better at taking elected members on the journey and not just expecting to get a decision as a tick-box process. (Staff member)

Some staff described the tendency for colleagues to assume that elected members have the same level of understanding of the background, underlying issues and rationale for change as them. They highlighted how decision-makers need all the required information to maximise their full understanding.

Sometimes when we get in front of elected members, we forget that they haven't been along the journey with us in terms of our research and analysis and our advice and our thinking etc. We don't take the time to think about how to bridge the gap and tell the story in a way that connects the governors to the question that you're putting in front of them. (Staff member)

Many staff and elected members said that simply providing a report with recommendations is often not enough to enable elected members to fully engage with an issue and make an informed decision. Staff said that they can better prepare elected members by meeting with them throughout the project to build the knowledge required to make informed decisions. We found that this theme closely linked to understanding and respect for the governance model, as described in Section 5.1.

You're talking to people who haven't walked the same path as you have. More often than not you only have a short window to be in front of them [elected members], to help them make these decisions. So how can you make it as real as you can for them, so they get to a level of understanding in such a small time that [has] taken you months? (Staff member)

Many elected members also discussed how they felt better assisted when staff were innovative in their approach to keeping them updated and connected to projects. We heard how staff achieved this even in simple ways, such as through newsletters.

Some departments send regular updates about projects [in] newsletter formats [with] photos and graphs. But quite often these are really big-ticket items budget-wise, and you can understand why they put the time and effort and to provide those updates... [for an area] where you've got huge amounts of work that is happening, which is a lot smaller level, but it's actually really important to people, we just don't have the resource to do it properly. (Staff member)

Some staff saw the potential for technology to enhance how they connected with elected members. We heard how the COVID-19 pandemic, for example, has moved workshops to occur virtually over Microsoft Teams. One staff member described it as a positive shift by enabling elected members to use the chat function to articulate their questions and comments more clearly, and they were encouraged to consider what other technology could be used.

[For] workshops I think we could get so much better than PowerPoint. It is just the current mode because PowerPoint exists. Why can't it be Miro? Or whatever the next thing is? (Staff member)

However, while innovation was identified by both staff and elected members as important, many who we spoke to felt the organisation was too risk averse to do it consistently well. There was a perception that the organisation prioritised procedure over outcomes, which we found inhibited the willingness of staff to be innovative in their approach. Most staff and elected members felt that staff could only be enabled to be innovative if it came from the top down, fostered by people leaders and senior leadership.

When you're time poor, resource short, you just do what we've always done because there's risk associated with doing something different, it might fail and that could be bad for council's reputation. So being able to innovate in small ways to see if things might work and then build from that [is needed]. (Staff member)

Key insights
Good governance practices are supported when: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• staff engage with elected members at the right times in the right ways• staff use innovative mechanisms to keep elected members connected to and updated on projects• people leaders and senior leaders support staff to be innovative.

5.2.4 Other support provided by staff

We also heard how other informal support provided by advisory and support staff enables elected members to do their job well. Elected members described how they had good relationships with those staff who were open-minded towards understanding their needs and finding solutions.

There's never [from staff], 'no, you can't do that, walk away'; it's always, 'look, leave it with me, I'll get onto it, I'll copy you in, we will follow this through'. Nothing is stupid, which I really appreciate, because I'm sure I've raised stupid things in the past. But they're [staff] really enabling and they take my line of inquiry very seriously. (Elected member)

The successful staff that develop quick relationships are the ones that appear [as though] they are working for the board. They can say 'no' and when they say 'no' they have options for the board to take. I think those staff very quickly develop a trusted relationship... (Elected member)

Support staff in the Local Board Services and Democracy and Engagement departments were identified by most elected members as an important resource. We heard how these staff help elected members to navigate the organisation, facilitate action within the organisation on their behalf, and generally help members be more effective in their governance role. This finding aligns with the high satisfaction rates for dedicated governance support, expressed in the recent headline survey.¹¹

However, some councillors we spoke to felt that unless they were a committee chair or deputy chair then they did not have enough staff support to do their role. They said this caused them to seek out their own advice, which some staff we spoke to perceived as ‘shopping around’ for advice.

Both staff and elected members discussed with us how support staff can assist elected members to focus on governance matters by triaging ad-hoc requests. We heard that a well-functioning triage process allows requests, often related to operational matters, to be appropriately prioritised and delegated within the organisation, which also helps to manage staff workloads. However, we found that these matters are often triaged inconsistently and some staff who received requests directly from elected members could feel pressured to respond. While all staff we spoke to said it was important for requests to be addressed, they wanted clarity on timeliness and process so that they could be responsive without derailing other priorities. The need for more proactive, timely and responsive staff communication was also identified as a priority for elected members in the recent headline survey.¹²

Some support staff we spoke to felt they were an under-used resource for the organisation and that their roles weren’t well understood. For example, they felt they could help advisory staff better navigate the political environment by providing insights on issues important to elected members in preparation for a workshop item. However, we also heard from advisory staff that it was important for support staff to understand the work of the wider organisation and maintain good internal relationships. Support staff who did this were considered to be well respected and advisory staff were more willing to provide them timely information when needed.

Advisory staff also told us how collaborating well was important for them to operate effectively and efficiently in their roles. They discussed how they relied on a strong network of colleagues across the council group to keep abreast of projects and decisions, and to gather input into a project or guidance from colleagues. We heard that these collegial networks enabled them to better convey connections between projects, strategies, plans and formal decisions to elected members within their advice. However, many said a lack of structured coordination meant collaboration was often ad-hoc. They described how it could take a lot of time to find the right person to consult on an issue, if such networks were not proactively created and maintained. For all staff, the scale of the organisation and their capacity could make it difficult to foster these relationships and collaborate well across the organisation.

¹¹See pages 15-18: <https://www.aucklandcouncil.govt.nz/about-auckland-council/how-auckland-council-works/elected-members-remuneration-declarations-interest/docselectedmembersurveys/elected-members-headline-measures-survey-2021.pdf>

¹² See page 18: *ibid.*

[An ideal staff member] will understand who's best placed to give the strongest perspective on an issue and not be precious about it. They will have an existing network of relationships that they can leverage. (Staff member)

Key insights
Good governance practices are supported when: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• staff are open-minded towards understanding elected members' needs and finding solutions• there are effective processes and procedures in place to triage elected members' requests for information and advice• staff communication meets standards of responsiveness and timeliness• staff have good working relationships with each other and collaborate well.

5.3 Relationships between staff and elected members

Staff and elected members highlighted the need for good working relationships. From our interviews, we identified several benefits to positive working relationships, including:

- staff and elected members are better able to do their jobs
- free and frank advice is more easily given and received
- interactions are more productive and efficient
- everyone tends to be happier and more satisfied with their work.

Poor relationships on the other hand have the opposite effect. We heard about the importance of mutual trust and respect, as well as maintaining professionalism and formality during interactions. Issues relating to poor behaviour were also discussed.

5.3.1 Mutual trust and respect

Many elected members and staff highlighted how mutual trust and respect are foundational to a good relationship.

Respect was described as involving a mutual acknowledgement of each other's roles and expertise, interacting with one another in a polite and civil manner, and addressing critique toward issues, not individuals.¹³

It's one thing to be passionate, [but] it's a fine line... you [need to] play the ball and not the person. (Elected member)

In addition to acting respectfully, participants described how trust is built over time. Key factors identified for staff included following through on their word; being open and transparent about what they do and don't know, the timeframes associated with advice or action, and what is possible to achieve; and being responsive and timely in their communication.

¹³ This definition overlaps significantly with the principle of respect contained in the Auckland Council Elected Members Code of Conduct 2021.

In addition, we heard that confidence was an important trait for staff. Both staff and elected members acknowledged that delivering advice at meetings and workshops can be an intimidating experience, and that staff who are able to do so confidently gain the respect of elected members. Some elected members described the need to engage with 'senior' staff members. However, while the term 'senior' was used, we found that in practice this meant staff of any level in the hierarchy who were confident and competent in their role. We found that confidence often related to staff being able to respond to questions from elected members when the answer was not known or immediately apparent. An experienced staff member described the importance of this.

... Being able to reiterate the advice, and to also call out when there's no answer to the question is a very useful thing to do, because it assists or improves the credibility that you have as an advisor. (Staff member)

The reality of working in a political environment was also raised by both staff and elected members. We heard that, at the very least, staff should expect to have their advice challenged and they need to be resilient enough to handle this pressure.

We also identified that a culture of respect for elected members is a strong contributor towards staff building good relationships with them. Some discussed how the attitude of people leaders – positive or negative – influences staff behaviour, as described by the following staff member.

If you had a general manager saying, 'this is really important and this is how we work' and then you had good advice and guidance that would make a difference. I think it generally comes down to leadership. (Staff member)

We found that elected members can build trust by being respectful in their behaviour toward staff; following appropriate procedures (e.g. triaging processes); and maintaining an open-mind when receiving formal advice and hearing the views of other elected members.

We also heard from both staff and elected members how developing productive relationships is not always easy. From our interviews, we identified several challenges to doing this successfully, including:

- an employer-employee attitude held by some elected members, that staff are there to work 'for' them rather than 'with' them. This reinforced to us the importance of understanding the governance model and the need to work in partnership to get things done
- formal and unfamiliar environments in which interaction typically occurs, such as workshops and meetings, which can be intimidating for staff. Many staff described instances where they or their colleagues had challenging interactions with elected members in these forums
- a general inability to put themselves in the other's shoes and understand individual pressures
- to a lesser degree, the expectations of staff who have worked in overseas contexts, where high degrees of deference to leaders is the default, which could inhibit them from providing free and frank advice.

Other realities of the organisation, for example high workloads and resourcing as described in Section 6.1, contribute to these challenges.

Key insights

Good governance practices are supported when:

- relationships between staff and elected members are underpinned by mutual trust and respect
- staff deliver free and frank advice and can state what is known or unknown, including timeframes and what's realistically achievable
- staff can confidently navigate formal environments, such as workshops and meetings
- staff and elected members work in partnership to get things done and can see things from one another's view.

5.3.2 Maintaining formal boundaries

Both elected members and staff agreed on the benefits of spending time getting to know one another. However, we heard how it can be a challenge for some staff to maintain appropriate boundaries, such as consistent use of titles in meetings (e.g. councillor, member), discussing issues from an impartial perspective rather than personal opinion, and keeping interactions with elected members professional in all instances.

Human nature is to develop relationships by being friendly, sharing personal information and letting your guard down. With little organisational guidance on how to form appropriate relationships with one another, we found that staff and elected members could default to an informal approach. Some elected members described a preference for developing relationships with staff through informal ways, for instance via having a meal or a drink, but appeared to have little consideration for the position it placed staff members in. We heard that staff who were politically savvy could navigate these boundaries well and maintain good professional relationships, but it often came down to their skill and experience.

Some staff discussed how colleagues could be put in a compromising position when they did not have this political nous. It was acknowledged that politicking by elected members is a reality of a system where their roles are contested every three years, and some felt that staff could sometimes be used to further elected members' political position and ambitions. For example, information shared during friendly interactions could subsequently be used by elected members to the detriment of those staff. We heard that when staff could operate within these grey areas, by being able to be friendly while maintaining formality, they were better able to build appropriate advisory and support relationships.

What I like to see in a staff member [is that] they're professional and no matter what the circumstance they hold their professional status. They're not blokey-blokey and their mates-mates, because elected members are not your mates. (Staff member)

We also found that when relationships were too friendly it contributed to a perception amongst elected members that some staff had 'favourites' and were more responsive or aligned to those members they were friendly with.

Staff who had high levels of experience working with elected members described needing to always be conscious of maintaining professional boundaries, even during contexts where informality might usually be the norm.

You have these different interactions [with elected members] in different fora. You have the formal meeting, and then the workshops, which are different, a bit more relaxed, and a bit more free and frank discussion. And then you've got those run throughs, or offline meetings, the supporting one-on-ones ... Often those are really relaxed and there will be joking around and stuff. And it's how to make sure that you stay professional, even when there's the temptation not to. (Staff member)

There was no evidence of informal relationships having any professional benefits over more formal relationships. Additionally, it appeared to us that staff who maintained professional boundaries tended to be held in higher regard by elected members and staff alike.

Key insights
Good governance practices are supported when: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• both staff and elected members maintain formal boundaries with one another• staff are professional toward elected members in all circumstances.

5.3.3 Poor behaviour and managing relationships

The hauora / wellbeing review was conducted within Auckland Council in early 2021. The review is part of an ongoing process by the council to consider and strengthen how it provides hauora support for employees.

The review found that for most employees the experience of working at Auckland Council is a positive one. However, this is not the case for some, with varied reasons including: workload, ongoing structural change, dealing with unacceptable behaviour, and the capacity and capability of people leaders to deal with hauora issues within their team.

This section looks in more detail at two key issues identified in the hauora / wellbeing review. The first is unacceptable behaviour, and the second the capability and capacity of people leaders to deal with hauora issues. This section also discusses other contextual factors, such as pressure from the media and community, that influence elected members' behaviour and relationships with others.

Unacceptable behaviour

Poor elected member behaviour was identified as an issue by both elected members and staff participating in this research. Poor behaviour described included aggression, general rudeness and dismissiveness toward staff. Although it is difficult to quantify exactly the extent of behavioural issues, from participants' descriptions it appears that most elected members usually behave well, while a minority behave poorly toward staff frequently, and a separate minority behave poorly only occasionally. However, it was clear to us that where it occurred, it impacted staff morale and willingness to engage with elected members, as well as elected members' ability to work well

together and make robust decisions. Several participants in this research described witnessing mistreatment of staff by elected members in meetings.

There are no clear guidelines for staff to be empowered to walk away from elected members... They just had to sit there and continue to take, take, take poor negative behaviour. (Elected member)

Some staff felt that elected members may be unaware of how their behaviour came across and the negative impact it had. They considered that because many elected members have been in governance for a long time, they may have never had their behaviour addressed when they could have been open to having that conversation. Where the behaviour was seen as more deliberate, staff felt there was a lack of mechanisms to hold elected members to account.

As staff we're subjected to a whole bunch of things, including our employment contract, Our Charter, both professional expectations and personal expectations of our peers. We're judged on a day-to-day basis on a lot of things... [In contrast, for elected members] the Code of Conduct isn't as good as it could be. (Staff member)

Importance of people leader support

Some staff described feeling like they and their people leaders were ill-equipped to handle challenging interactions with elected members. Several perceived being in a position of vulnerability relative to elected members and having no meaningful training or support to handle these types of interactions. They suggested the organisation set clearer boundaries for treatment of staff by elected members.

It's about calling the behaviour if you need to, making it quite clear that this is not the way they're supposed to behave. It is a very uncomfortable space, not many people are willing to do that directly. You need to be really, really strong, you need to rely on good relationships around you and you also need to rely on the fact that the organisation is going to back you. (Staff member)

People leaders were seen to be important in empowering staff to extricate themselves from uncomfortable situations. From our interviews, we identified that people leaders could support their staff by way of:

- providing practical strategies for how to handle difficult situations in the moment
- providing wellbeing support as staff navigate such experiences
- modelling how to remove oneself from unsafe situations.

The way elected members conduct themselves was also seen to be influenced by contextual factors.

Importance of the chair

The leadership of the chair was perceived by both elected members and staff as pivotal for keeping behaviour in check and fostering good relationships. We heard how chairing meetings well enables fair discussion and debate, while helping to keep interactions with staff respectful and

objective. Chairs also represent the views of their boards and are involved in the business to a greater degree than other members. Elected members said that when chairs take a no-surprises approach and keep them abreast of their engagement activities and important matters, they can foster a sense of trust and goodwill amongst elected members.

Having the right chair [who] chairs in a respectful, inclusive, consensus way. [This] makes quite a huge difference, because I've actually seen it where a chair didn't do that people feel aggrieved, never feel well listened to, and that's when the bad behaviour starts coming in. (Staff member)

Establishing culture in the post-election period

Elected members we spoke to also acknowledged that the elections period can be fraught. They described how it could be hard for them to work well together if there was tension between candidates from opposing tickets. Some elected members felt that if the culture of the board or committee was not established up front, then it could affect their effectiveness and bad behaviours could begin to creep into interactions with advisory staff. Several elected members said that team building during the induction period would help mitigate this and should be prioritised.

We as a board have never had good relationships with one another. That also impacts on the relationships with staff... I can imagine, it's difficult for staff to support members who are constantly, you know, in an adversarial mode. (Elected member)

Managing diversity and intercultural relationships

From a diversity, equity and inclusion lens, a small number of elected members we spoke to said their individual background or culture could inform how they interacted with others. For example, one described a tendency to refrain from fully participating in aspects of the role during situations with older peers or those of a different gender. We found that it was not necessarily because of their own ability, but rather that elected members of minority ethnic groups could find the euro-centric governance system counter-cultural and it appeared that there was a lack of awareness of this.

... I don't know how to tell you that in my culture the relationship and the connection isn't just between elected members. That I'm also wary of people who are older than me, people who are women, and married and have children. All of that impacts the way I can interact with them. And so if someone comes out and says [something offensive] to me, I can't retaliate, because the sacredness of a woman who's older than me and married is such that for me to break that is like really counter-cultural for me. (Elected member)

Several elected members also described challenges with building relationships with Māori. Some found it hard to develop meaningful, long-term relationships with mana whenua due to the three-year electoral cycle, which disrupted the continuity of relationships. In some cases, local board members described how mana whenua refused to work with them due to past poor experiences

with other elected members on the board. In the recent headline survey, local board chairs identified the need for greater tikanga and Māori responsiveness guidance, advice and support.¹⁴

... [A]s an elected member, it's really difficult to actually build that relationship because you're not guaranteed a position next election. (Elected member)

In our local board area, we're not going to get to mana whenua communicating with us because of the relationships that we have with mana whenua which date back to some of those members who have very badly damaged our reputation. (Elected member)

Pressure from the media and community

Finally, we found that the pressure from the media and community could play a part in behaviour and conduct. A few staff and elected members described how elected members could feel held to account for everything that goes wrong at council, whether big or small, and regardless of whether it is their responsibility or not. They felt that pressure from community and the media could cause elected members to lack pride for the work of the organisation. We heard how, when held to account by the media, elected members often slated the organisation and, unknowingly, staff by default. Staff we spoke to had empathy for the position elected members were in and felt they could play a role in helping to lift elected members out of focussing on these challenges.

People across the city will always be protesting on something that we're doing. That's just democracy. But we should just have a process to deal with that. But the real work is to nudge the dial on these things that are important. (Staff member)

Key insights

Good governance practices are supported when:

- staff are equipped with the tools and support to manage challenging interactions with elected members
- staff are given hauora / wellbeing support
- chairing enables fair discussion and debate
- chairs keep their members abreast of engagement activities and important matters
- elected members set agreed ways of working together at the beginning of the term
- both elected members and staff are culturally competent
- staff support elected members to build relationships with Māori.

¹⁴<https://www.aucklandcouncil.govt.nz/about-auckland-council/how-auckland-council-works/elected-members-remuneration-declarations-interest/docselectedmembersurveys/elected-members-headline-measures-survey-2021.pdf>

6.0 Other barriers to supporting effective governance

We identified other barriers to staff and elected members doing their respective jobs well, which were outside the scope of this project but important to acknowledge here. These are outlined in detail below and include:

- staff workload and resourcing
- elected member role expectations and requirements
- elected member skills and development needs.

6.1 Staff workload and resourcing

Many staff highlighted a lack of resourcing and high workloads as barriers to doing their job well. We heard how staff turnover, long recruitment timeframes and regular change processes affected resourcing and could cause some staff to consistently feel stretched to capacity. This issue was perceived to be further compounded by:

- insufficient project handover processes, alongside a lack of mechanisms to retain institutional knowledge
- short timeframes and elaborate reporting processes
- supporting multiple local boards.

Staff discussed with us how those joining or moving positions within the organisation could often inherit projects without enough documented project information. They felt it created inefficiencies by duplicating work that had already been completed by their predecessor (e.g. consulting colleagues or reviewing documents), to obtain the required information. Some staff we spoke to wanted knowledge to be better documented, in a way that was comprehensive and accessible to others.

Our institutional knowledge quite often we lose a lot of that... We just don't hold that [information] well. At a project level, it sits with a person. We don't have good databases or records. (Staff member)

Several staff we spoke to also felt that the resource and working hours involved in developing some reports outweighed the amount of relative value attributed to them by elected members. They described how timeframes for reporting on project updates tend to be short between a project phase ending (e.g. the end of the financial quarter) and the due date for performance reporting. In this period, they need to collate the required information, write the report and have it reviewed through the appropriate process before it can be presented to elected members. We heard how staff could feel frustrated by a short amount of meeting time (e.g. 15 minutes) spent on a report that took a lot of effort to develop.

The staff we spoke to who supported multiple local boards also described challenges with fully engaging in the unique contexts of different local boards. Some local board members also discussed being unsatisfied with the levels of service provided. We heard that sometimes relationships between staff and elected members could be damaged when elected members felt insufficiently prioritised.

There are some areas where [staff] work over three, five, in some cases, seven boards. I have to say the incremental drop off in performance is absolutely noticeable. You can't handle seven different environments and seven different scenarios and do a good job. (Elected member)

Some staff said that high workloads, compounded by the factors described, could lead to them and their colleagues making trade-offs. There was a perception that professional development to improve capabilities in underperforming areas was not suitably prioritised over ongoing project work. Collaboration across the organisation, which staff already felt challenged to do well, was also often described as the first to be traded-off against other priorities.

Sometimes it feels like being able to collaborate with other departments was a luxury and not necessarily something that we should do. But when we have to do it [collaborate], I found it a really positive experience. (Staff member)

Many staff and elected members also described feeling frustrated at the rate of staff turnover (from both restructures and staff attrition). They felt that restructures occur at a frequency that inhibits the ability of staff and elected members to build relationships and does not allow change to become established.

Key insights
Good governance practices are supported when: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• there are adequate record keeping mechanisms and project handover processes• reporting processes and allocated meeting times are proportionate to the subject• staff are supported to manage their workloads against other priorities• there is adequate staff resourcing and staff turnover is infrequent.

6.2 Elected member role expectations and requirements

Both elected members and staff acknowledged that the variety and complexity of what elected members need to understand is immense. We heard about the time it took for elected members to fully understand their role and how the council works. Many elected members we spoke to did not have a clear understanding of the expectations and requirements of the role until they were well into it. From our interviews, we identified the following areas where elected members' expectations are not always being met:

- length of time for change to happen
- decision-making responsibilities
- workload.

We heard that frustration or overwhelm due to unmet expectations could cause some elected members (most often local board members) to disengage from their role. A few elected members we spoke to said they would have reconsidered standing if they had truly understood the nature of the role.

The governance role is a very important one and very strategic one. It needs to be clearly articulated what the expectations are of a governance person in this leadership role. (Elected member)

We heard how elected members often wanted to make an impact straight away, but some matters were not within their remit or could take a long time to come to fruition (particularly major projects). One participant also pointed out how council's budget cycle meant the ability to make meaningful change was further toward the end of the term, when the 10-year budget is reset. They found that by this time, some elected members had disengaged from the role for the remainder of their term and, in some cases, decided not to re-stand.

People come to the local board with aspirations on changing the world, some of them come quite naively with a whole lot of issues that the community have loaded on them. They think that they're going to achieve things overnight. (Elected member)

Many elected members also said that the breadth of everything they need to know and do, as well as the responsibility for some of the decisions they make, could be overwhelming and another cause for disengagement. Some of those in full-time roles (councillors and local board chairs) reported they took a pay cut to do the role, yet it takes more of a mental and emotional toll than their previous jobs, and at times impacts on their families. Both elected members and staff considered the part-time roles of local board members unrealistic.

It's 20 hours if you want to just do it as a standard: 'I'm just going to read everything and I'm not going to engage much with the community'. But the role is to represent your community. So, if you don't get out and meet your people, and find out what's going on and attend the evening sessions or go to the weekend events and talk to people, you aren't really going to know what your community thinks. (Elected member)

Elected members described needing to manage their time well and be able to process vast quantities of information over diverse topics. Many elected members we spoke to found it challenging to manage their workload without any clear direction on priorities, or skills such as speed reading. They said support staff and professional development could help them to be as effective and efficient as possible. Quality advice that was concise and engaging also enabled them to make the most of their limited time.

Councillors also described the challenge of being elected locally but having a role to represent the region. Often, they could be pulled into local matters which caused tension with the local board, affecting their ability to build good relationships with them and to create good community outcomes.

When the Governing Body members and the local board members work as a team...you tend to see more quote-unquote "results" or things getting done. (Elected member)

Key insights

Good governance practices are supported when:

- elected members understand the role expectations and requirements
- elected members are equipped with the right skills and tools to manage the daily requirements of the role
- elected members are given hauora / wellbeing support.

6.3 Elected member skills and development needs

We heard how elected members come from different backgrounds and have a range of expertise. However, not all of them may be equipped with the skills and knowledge required to fulfil their governance role. We identified that learning and development played an important part in ensuring all members were able to function well in their role.

You need people who can navigate across all levels, but not forgetting where their key responsibility is, at the governance decision-making level. And that requires experience, skills and expertise to be able to function effectively and efficiently. (Elected member)

Kura Kāwana offers a comprehensive, three-year learning and development programme for all elected members. However, the 2019 to 2022 programme has been affected by COVID-19 alert levels, with several planned events and trainings having to be cancelled or delayed.

The recent headline survey asked elected members about their satisfaction with their professional development support. While around two-thirds were satisfied overall, a slight increase compared to 2019, there was still approximately one-quarter who were neutral. Governing Body members were also significantly less satisfied than local board members, with around a third satisfied, a third neutral and a third dissatisfied.

Because of the diversity in background and skills, learning and development was seen as an important factor in enabling elected members to perform their roles well. Technical knowledge, such as understanding financials, the council's legislative context and its Te Tiriti / Treaty obligations, was identified as important for making many significant decisions. Both staff and elected members also said that knowing how to ask the right questions could enable elected members to think and act from a governance perspective.

Technical skills, such as understanding how and when to use and apply standing orders, were identified as important for being able to partake in the democratic process. The ability and leadership of chairs was also seen by most staff and elected members as having a significant influence on the effectiveness of a local board or committee.

From our interviews we identified the following reasons why training opportunities might not be widely taken up:

- lack of a culture amongst elected members that supported development
- training and pace not tailored for new versus returning members
- difficulty knowing which training was mandatory or core and which was optional.

Several elected members felt there was an absence of a broader culture for continuous development. Without strong expectations, and in the context of general high workloads, some elected members did not feel it important to engage with the training opportunities offered.

*The expectation and culture is very low when it comes to role development and training [for elected members]. Is there a culture or requirement or an expectation that you're engaging in professional development? I'd say no, there is not.
(Elected member)*

Multi-term and first-term elected members had different views on how training should be delivered. Several multi-term members felt that Kura Kāwana training was for new or inexperienced members only, which put them off. They felt that a more tailored approach should be taken to cater for the different experience levels. For newer elected members, we heard how it took time for them to get their head around everything they needed, and they often felt induction was overwhelming. Newer members preferred a paced approach to learning.

I've been to some of the Kura Kāwana things as an old elected member, someone who's been around for a while, and you do feel like it's just you and the new elected members. And you're like, 'Should I be here? Is this for me?' (Elected member)

In addition, many elected members described finding it difficult to know which training courses they really needed to go on and suggested that there should be clearer direction on what was important to attend.

Unless someone's saying to you specifically, 'you absolutely need to learn about this'; I don't take that opportunity because I don't know it's important... I need a little bit more hand holding around what should be non-negotiable in terms of Kura Kāwana online trainings and those sorts of discussions. (Elected member)

Key insights
Good governance practices are supported when: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• elected members have the right skills and knowledge to fulfil their governance role• there is a culture amongst elected members for continuous development• training and pace is tailored for first-term versus multi-term members• elected members are given clear direction on which training is core versus optional.

7.0 Critical components of staff performance

One aim of this research was to contribute to the development of a performance indicator framework for staff, which better reflects how staff (either individually or collectively) support effective and accountable governance.

From our key insights we have identified the following important areas of staff performance, which should be considered as shared indicators of success for the council group. Note that subsequent work will be undertaken to prioritise these and develop simple and effective indicators of performance for measurement purposes.

Domain	Staff functions and behaviours to measure
Professionalism	We understand and apply expected behavioural standards set out in Our Charter
	We maintain appropriate formalities in all our interactions with elected members
	We are respectful toward elected members
	We have the skills and support to manage professional boundaries with elected members
Enabling the governance model	We understand the governance model and the roles and responsibilities of those within it
	We work in partnership with elected members to get things done
	We provide the right development opportunities for elected members
	We prioritise professional development opportunities relevant to the work we do
	We are open-minded to understanding decision-makers' needs and helping to find solutions
	We manage elected member requests for information and advice and respond to those requests in a timely, clear and compelling way
	We support elected members to navigate the organisation, including CCOs
	We provide timely opportunities for elected members to influence and provide input into strategies, policies and plans
	We use appropriate mechanisms to keep elected members updated and connected to our work
	We deliver efficient and effective administration and democracy support
Quality advice (written and verbal)	We provide impartial, free and frank advice
	We deliver advice that meets the quality advice standards
	We show critical thinking in our advice that enables elected members to balance current and future needs
	We understand and align advice to the council's current priorities, as outlined in regional and local policies, plans and strategies
	We show coherent links in our advice to other council group initiatives where relevant
	We understand and link advice to previous decision-making

Domain	Staff functions and behaviours to measure
	<p>We have the analytical skills to identify and explain all the impacts of decisions</p> <p>We demonstrate how we have assessed and considered Māori views</p> <p>We demonstrate how we have assessed and considered community views</p> <p>We identify and explain the risks of decisions and demonstrate how we intend to mitigate them</p> <p>We identify and explain the financial implications of decisions</p> <p>We report on performance and risks in a clear and timely way</p>
Communications and engagement	<p>We engage with Māori appropriately and effectively, in accordance with our statutory obligations</p> <p>We support elected members to build good relationships with Māori</p> <p>We engage with the community appropriately and effectively</p> <p>We close the loop with everyone we have engaged with in a timely way, and demonstrate how their views have been considered in decision-making and any next steps</p> <p>We develop and deliver accessible forms of public communication that tell our story well</p>
The way we work	<p>We work collaboratively and integrate our work across the council group</p> <p>We look for opportunities to be innovative in our work</p> <p>We use our strategy to guide how we prioritise our work and we have the right resourcing for the work we do</p>

8.0 Key ingredients for effective relationships

Through the research, we identified the key ingredients for effective relationships between staff and elected members. These are set out in the table below, alongside what each of them looks like in action.

Key ingredient	What this looks like
Mutual respect	Maintaining courteous interactions and personal awareness of behaviour.
	Understanding each other's roles within the governance model and staying within your respective lanes.
	Having pride in the work of the organisation.
	Elected members not personalising their criticism of staff advice.
	Staff respecting decisions made by the different governance arms.
Trust	Staff doing what they say they will do.
	Staff being open and transparent about what they do and don't know, and what's possible to achieve, and providing realistic timeframes for action and advice.
	Taking time to get to know each other's backgrounds and drivers.
	Taking a no-surprises approach: staff with elected members, and chairs with their boards or committees.
	Maintaining a shared perspective of working towards a common goal.
Formality	Maintaining boundaries and not being too informal with one another.
	Staff having the training and skills to set respectful boundaries with elected members.
	Staff being appropriately timely in their communications, and equally responsive to all elected members.
	Staff having the ability to navigate political forums (e.g. being familiar with the formalities of business or committee meetings).
	Chairing that upholds expected behaviours and ways of working.
Empathy	Being able to see things from other's perspectives.
	Understanding the associated pressures of each other's roles and operating in good faith.
	Demonstrating cultural competence.
Support	Having the right staff in the right roles, who are able to get things done.
	Providing sufficient staff time and resourcing to do the work and build relationships.
	People leaders coaching and debriefing staff throughout the advisory process.
	Having effective mechanisms and guidance to resolve behavioural or relationship issues.
Openness	Elected members having an open mind toward staff advice, community views and the opinions of other elected members.
	Staff being open to understanding elected members' needs.

9.0 Discussion and next steps

This research has identified the ways that staff functions and behaviours support effective and accountable governance.

Staff play an important role in supporting good governance outcomes, primarily through the provision of advice and other support, and by implementing elected members' decisions. Strong shared understanding of and respect for the governance model enables staff and elected members to work more effectively together. Both can work more efficiently and effectively when relationships are underpinned by mutual trust, respect and appropriate boundaries.

The research also identified barriers to good governance outcomes, including some misunderstanding of roles, instances of poor behaviour, development needs for both staff and elected members, and staff workload and resourcing pressures.

This research has identified critical components of staff performance which will help to build a new performance measurement framework that reflects how staff support effective and accountable governance at Auckland Council.

In 2022, the Governance Capability team will begin work on phase two of the Elected Members Research project. This will involve:

- establishing appropriate methods and frequency for measuring each of the indicators
- implementing measurement of the performance indicator framework for the first time
- working closely with relevant teams across the organisation to consider the key themes and insights identified in this report
- supporting relevant teams to identify and develop any necessary actions and response as a result of these insights.

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