



Council Workshop Briefing Session

Notes of a workshop briefing session of the Tararua District Council held in the Council Chamber, 156 High Street, Dannevirke on Wednesday 18 February 2026 commencing at 1:30 pm.

1. Present

Mayor – Mr S M Gilmore, Crs S M Wards (Deputy Mayor), A J Amboy, C L Corlett, P A Johns, E F Kennedy, P M Naylor (online), E L Peeti-Webber, and S A Wallace

In Attendance

Mr M Alexander - Chief Executive
Mrs K Tani - Group Manager – Strategy and Information
Ms S Lowe - Group Manager – People, Capability and Customer Engagement
Mr H Featonby - Group Manager – Operations
Ms T McDonald - Chief Financial Officer
Ms J Smith - Legal Counsel and Procurement Manager
Mrs B Kawana - Corporate Planning and Reporting Advisor
Mr K van der Oord - Communications Team Manager
Ms K Stevens - Community Engagement and Social Media Lead
Ms S Fountaine - Community Engagement Officer
Mrs S Anthony - Democracy Support Officer

2. Apologies

Cr Keshaan Te Waaka entered an apology as was unable to attend the workshop due to other commitments.

3. Briefing Papers

3.1 Significance and Engagement Policy

The Legal Counsel and Procurement Manager presented the key policy, outlining why it is important, why we have it, and what it does. Explaining its purpose —

giving Council greater flexibility to engage with our community.

She highlighted the distinction between “*significant*” and “*significance*”, and why this matters for decision-making. The policy sets out the framework and provides clarity on how decisions should be assessed.

Examples and Criteria

Examples were given under the *strategic* section, explaining where differences may appear when applying the criteria.

Key factors in the current policy include:

- The degree to which an issue affects the district.
- Whether a proposal represents a significant departure from the Long-Term Plan (LTP) or an asset, etc.

There is also helpful guidance in the policy on when *not* to engage. If two or more criteria suggesting low significance are met, engagement is less likely to be required.

Some decisions require statutory consultation, and in other cases Council may choose to consult only with a specific geographic area. Targeted engagement should be based on the assessed impact on the community, using appropriate tools (as shown in the engagement chart). There will always be a subjective element, and members were reminded that ultimately, the decision is still theirs if they believe a departure from “reasonable” has occurred.

Examples:

- Selling sports grounds for housing = *significant*.
- Increasing hireage fees = *not significant*.
- Holding reserves is a strategic asset, so selling all reserves is significant; making changes to one or a few requires less consultation.

Strategic Alignment

It was outlined the criteria and rules Council applies for strategic alignment. The policy sets clear expectations for how Council engages with the community.

Review Cycle

The policy is reviewed every three years after the election, during the LTP process. It is good practice to review it as it will be relied on heavily during the LTP development.

The decision tree in the appendix of the policy provides a robust tool for officers, and members are encouraged to use it when assessing whether criteria are met.

It was emphasised that the Significance & Engagement Policy is more important than ever, given upcoming changes such as the Three Waters asset transfer. Councils nationwide are reviewing their policies as part of the LTP, especially with proposed reforms such as *Simplifying Local Government* and potential territorial authority mergers. The policy will be instrumental in navigating these changes.

Adoption Timeline

- Adoption planned for end of March.
- Legislative changes will not yet be known, but the policy can be reviewed at any time if required.
- Council should adopt what it wants now, ensure a correct review process, and present this to central government as needed.
- Amending the LTP has a very prescriptive process requiring consultation, audit, and significant cost.

It was recommended that an internal review be conducted once new legislation is released. Community engagement will be undertaken for this policy.

Future Considerations

- A refresh may be needed within 12–18 months.
- Asset transfer for waters expected in 2027 and its impact.
- A review is recommended once *Simplifying Local Government* legislation is finalised.

Member Feedback reflected that the current policy is fit for purpose.

3.2 Strategic Framework

The discussion followed on from the recent Tararua District Council Strategic Retreat, where content was structured around key strategic priorities and pillars.

The purpose of this session was to follow up on the retreat, confirm any further discussion needed, and outline next steps. Direction is required for the District Strategy review. Members' views were acknowledged, including their focus areas and passion. The key question discussed was: What vision should we adopt?

The vision needs to be simple, easy to understand, and clearly reflect what Council stands for.

Vision Discussion: “Can-do” – context and meaning. The “can-do” concept was highlighted for discussion.

It was raised that “can” does not automatically imply action or follow-through.

The vision refers not only to Council but also the wider community. And it was suggested it should represent who Council is and what it stands for — that Council backs its community. “No. 8 wire” mentality was mentioned.

The use of inverted commas around “can-do” was suggested.

Some members felt this phrase is over-used.

The Deputy Mayor proposed: “A future-focussed community backed by a trusted ‘can-do’ council,” emphasising retaining the word “council.”

Cr Peeti-Webber supported retaining resilience as a theme.

Cr Corlett noted the importance of Council being supportive.

The CE liked “can-do” as an attitude that drives action and builds trust with the community — a word that evokes emotion.

Cr Naylor favoured finding a proactive alternative to “can-do.”

The Mayor described the aspiration as a “make it happen” attitude. Although regulatory requirements are increasing, this vision reflects what the community wants now — an organisation that gets things done and helps the district grow.

Cr Johns added that there is a risk of staff developing negative attitudes due to regulatory pressures, so Council must help turn this around and back staff accordingly.

Members expressed thanks to Kawtar, Sandy, and Jess for their work on the strategic framework and noted good alignment with Council’s values.

Councillors were generally happy with the strategic framework and supportive of the vision concept in principle, however, further discussion with councillors will occur.

It was noted that the final vision statement must be something everyone can own and feel excited by, and reflect the concept of “Walk the walk and talk the talk.”

Members were asked to consider the Goals and Community Outcomes alongside the proposed vision.

3.3 LTP Communications and Engagement Planning

The session focused on how to approach and shape communications and engagement, and to seek councillor feedback. This work builds on outcomes from the strategic hui, recent discussions on significance and engagement, and insights from the 2025 survey.

Council values have been refreshed; they align strongly with community engagement needs and remain highly relevant. With a new strategic direction (growth and resilience), strong communications and engagement will be key to achieving outcomes.

Four focus groups have been formed:

- Rural
- Communications & Engagement
- Kōhanga Reo & Kura Kaupapa
- Youth

The focus groups are evolving and should remain part of the framework. They are not decision-making bodies; they are advisory groups. Councillors with relevant portfolio interests can help generate ideas and assist comms planning. It was suggested that these groups can help front engagement and act as a resource for the Communications Teams.

It was raised that Rural communities can be difficult to reach. Emergency Response meetings were successful because they were held on residents' terms. Trust has been eroded in the past; people don't use Facebook and are often away from communications during the day. In-person outreach is important.

What the Communications Team needs from Councillors:

- Help brainstorming ideas and check whether they will resonate with communities/portfolios.
- Input on imagery and messaging based on portfolio areas.
- Collaboration across portfolios during LTP consultation.
- Shared use of networks and channels to strengthen outreach.

Partnerships with Sport Tararua were agreed as a strong opportunity. Building relationships with schools will be especially valuable for LTP engagement.

Communications & Consultations portfolio lead Cr Naylor requested more upfront consultation, not just presenting options late in the process. It was suggested that portfolio members brainstorm with the Communications Team. Members showed strong support for earlier engagement — involving the community before solutions are formed. A concern was raised that some in the community believe Council decides everything before consultation. Important to address this misconception.

The most crucial element is closing the loop: "You asked, we listened, here's what

we changed.” Closing the transparency loop has been a weak spot historically.

Iwi Engagement:

- Operational input is essential.
- The Mayor noted legislative obligations and partnership agreements.
- Both iwi partners have been invited into the LTP process and have agreed to participate.
- Their voices must be present and respected throughout.

Community Views

Sarah Fountaine presented on key themes for Community Views, noting the views and feedback provide clear direction and highlight opportunities for improvement, and reflect what matters to them. Reflecting on the strategic hui, staff brainstorming, and the current sentiment. Some organisational strengths should be celebrated to build reputation..

It was noted that consultation can feel tokenistic when people are presented with a complex paper rather than a blank page to offer ideas.

It was acknowledged that negative views of councils exist nationally, but emphasised staff passion and commitment. Much good work goes unseen; once inside Council, staff passion is obvious. Rural trust issues stem from perceived lack of delivery.

The Mayor noted that the Staff demonstrated exceptional commitment during the recent EOC response —elected members and leadership were encouraged to champion this publicly.

It was suggested to use consultations to share good news, e.g. Tararua Alliance is a strong asset. Drive to make people in the community take notice, care and feel connected. Community committees show strong passion that can be promoted and supported to build up.

Value is essential alongside affordability — people must see the work of dedicated staff and elected members. Communications must ensure that groups currently missing from engagement lists are included.

A balanced approach to communications was presented and feedback was sought from members on preferred approaches, e.g. Digital and online, Print, In-person and verbal, or Extraordinary (innovative) methods

Councillor Feedback included:

- Rural communities value in-person engagement; perception: “not hearing = not communicating.”
- Digital channels essential for youth; open to extraordinary ideas.
- Asking open-ended questions may invite unrealistic ideas, but it is difficult to know whose views are represented.

- We must find out what the community wants — targeted options help. Diversity of voices important.
- During the election, many people expressed trust in councillors to make decisions. Pre-consultation is now even more relevant. Use multiple channels respectfully.
- Don't underestimate print; different demographics follow different mediums. In-person engagement must be done smartly — markets were less effective than events. Suggests after-hours town-based meetings with councillors.
- Videos and informal content were effective during the election. Take consultation documents to community groups and sports clubs.
- Many people fall outside regular communication channels — in-person contact helps capture them.
- Use all channels. Local radio remains effective. Antenno messages must be clear and personalised.
- Suggested an email marketing list for LTP updates; Kimberley noted privacy considerations but multiple databases do exist.
- Antenno is valuable — but overuse risks users turning off notifications.
- The recent Eketāhuna Our Town Committee brainstorm was successful; community groups can help gather ideas.
- Community boards are already assigned portfolios and have networks that can support communications.

Members reviewed a matrix of tone/visual approaches:

Preferences

- Eye-catching but not gimmicky
- Clear and simple
- Distinctive, not overly corporate
- Not bureaucratic or flashy
- Strong design but uncomplicated (e.g., colour used strategically, some black-and-white)

Key messaging will be discussed separately.

Next Steps

- Draft an early engagement plan.
- Work with portfolio members to test and refine.
- Mayor to review the draft.

The workshop briefing session closed at 4:07pm.