

Greater Christchurch Urban Development Strategy

Report To:	UDS Implementation Committee (UDSIC)
Subject:	Central Government Engagement - 2009
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Reference to UDS:	Governance and Implementation (Appendix V) Lead Agency – CEAG

1. PURPOSE OF REPORT

This report discusses engagement with central government¹ on behalf of the UDS for 2009.

2. BACKGROUND

Section 6.29.4.3 of the Strategy and Action Plan (p. 127) calls on the Implementation Manager and Independent Chair to “Develop and implement an annual briefing and engagement programme for central government including key Ministers and advisers.”

Section 6.293.4.4 (p. 127) calls on the Implementation Manager to “Brief Greater Christchurch MPs on implementation progress and issues of relevance.”

Other actions under the strategy also contain significant elements of engagement with central government – most notably negotiating a transport funding package between the region, local authorities and central government (6.26.4.10)

The UDS Implementation Budget contains provision for central government engagement.

3. Government Engagement – Principles

There are two-threads to successful engagement – raising and maintaining a positive profile and then gaining a specific end (often in the context of a specific programme or funding request). The former is often overlooked or poorly appreciated, particularly in the heat of the latter. However investment in, and attention to, raising the profile of the sub-region, and the UDS, ultimately reduces the costs of engagement on specific projects and helps ensure a positive hearing when such specific engagement is sought.

¹ For the purposes of this paper ‘Central Government’ means all three groups based in Wellington: Politicians and their staff who comprise the Executive within Parliament; the Opposition and their staff; and the Public Service.

Regardless of feeling in the community, or of partners on a particular issue, a 'rights-based' approach to gaining government's attention rarely works and should be discouraged. Christchurch and Canterbury may have received less funding in a particular area than other parts of the country – but engagement based on the principle of 'Give us our fair share' serves to reinforce a negative image of Christchurch in Wellington, and in the long-run will not help us ultimately get that fair share.

Arguments from Canterbury must be strongly evidence-based, and we must endeavour to speak with one voice – as Canterbury Inc. A reasoned, and united case for how and why government should do what we ask based on what government can achieve in our area is far more likely to succeed on its own merits. This also serves to strengthen the overall image of the UDS as a move away from 'business as usual'.

Despite their relative lack of power to effect immediate change, particularly when it comes to government spending, local MPs of all parties are important – their views will be sought by their superiors and if we have a poor reputation amongst the local MPs our attempt to build a strong reputation at higher levels will be hamstrung. We should meet them regularly in a concerted effort to build strong and binding relationships.

Finally, we must build on our successes and not dwell on our failures. Having been successful in a mature engagement with central government regarding transport funding, we may have a better reception (especially among senior officials) when it comes to consideration of Housing issues. This has certainly been shown to be the case in the Bay of Plenty.

4. Engagement with Central Government in 2009

During 2009 the government will be focussed on implementing it's agenda outlined during the election campaign. While at first glance there may seem to be little direct opportunity for Greater Christchurch in this agenda, there are some areas that bear close watching. Furthermore, engagement at this time in the electoral cycle is most likely to yield enduring relationships and offers the highest potential for gains for Greater Christchurch in terms of policy commitments in the long term.

Engagement by the Independent Chair and the Implementation Manager will be broken up into four distinct approaches: Local-MPs, Ministers, Spokespeople, Officials. With all four groups there is a need to pitch engagement at a level designed to protect and enhance existing relationships. However, specific desired outcomes will vary as will the methods and timing of engagement.

Our key message should continue to be a variation on the theme: "Greater Christchurch has a plan for a more sustainable city and sub-region, and we're working together to get on and implement it." Any specific request for policy change or funding should simply be a more specific refinement of this message, in the sense of an additional message "Here's how Government can help us help ourselves."

Local MPs

Local MPs are the key to successfully demonstrating that we are truly working together – they are the local experts who will be quizzed by their colleagues on local issues and capabilities. If they write us off, then we are unlikely to make much progress.

Local MPs must hear common messages from the UDS partners, and actively buy in to a Canterbury Inc. approach to problem solving, rather than the old ways of institutional in-fighting, otherwise they will undermine our efforts to present a united front in Wellington. Positive advocacy from local MPs is a very effective tool in removing small blockages within the Wellington bureaucracy, and very important in terms of long term policy formation.

The Implementation Manager will engage with local MPs on a regular basis.

Ministers

Ministers are clearly the ones with their hands on the policy levers – the need to engage with them should be self-evident. However, with so many things on their plate, we must engage with Ministers in a smart, coordinated fashion.

The risks of agreements coming unstuck because an organisation wasn't willing to coordinate engagement in a whole of UDS approach is very high, and must be avoided at all costs. The recent flurry around reported remarks from Hon. Stephen Joyce's visit to Christchurch serve as a salutary example in this regard.

The Independent Chair and the Implementation Manager will endeavour to engage with Ministers as required, and at a minimum brief them on UDS issues as they relate to their portfolio responsibilities.

Spokespeople

Although it seems a relatively low priority, engaging with the new opposition is an easy way to 'bank' good-will. Few people are interested in talking to the losers and yet in terms of protecting our interests this is a perfect time to influence their views of Christchurch, the UDS and their policy approach to it. After-all, they are a future government in waiting even immediately following an election defeat. Also their response to government policy initiatives can determine in part their scope and success – responses that implicitly understand and protect the interests of the UDS are obviously to our advantage.

The Independent Chair and the Implementation Manager will engage with Opposition spokespeople as required, and at a minimum provide a basis for a sound understanding of local issues within a UDS context as it might relate to the government's agenda and future policy formation.

Officials

Finally engagement focussed at specific officials across the public sector is essential to making progress on fine detail, or presenting an appropriately framed case to Ministers. This government in particular seems to be leaning heavily on officials for 'things to do'. If we can influence officials, we have a greater chance of influencing Ministers.

Officials act as gatekeepers on a number of crucial subjects, in terms of access to Ministers, or policy levers. If we can entrench a view of Christchurch that is framed in terms of the UDS we are a long way to progress as specific issues emerge.

The Independent Chair and the Implementation Manager will engage with Officials at appropriate levels of government to ensure that they understand the UDS, and are able to discharge their duties in a manner that complements the implementation of the UDS.

5. Visiting Politicians and Officials

No form of engagement works better than local engagement. Significant opportunity to influence central government continues to be afforded by senior politicians and officials visiting Christchurch.

Visits by central government members, along with a related heightened media interest can be turned to our advantage, but it can also be anything from ignored to extremely damaging if handled in an ad-hoc basis. Consideration will be given to how best to stage events, briefings or tours for such people that reinforce our aims. The technique of taking Ministers and senior officials on flights over the UDS area should not be underestimated.

All partners should be encouraged to pass on knowledge of visiting senior members of central government (officials and politicians) so that coordination can occur to the benefit of the UDS as a whole.

6. Current Political Issues

Transport remains the number one priority for specific, high-level engagement. It also conforms well to the government's desire to invest in infrastructure. Resource management reform will certainly have an impact on our endeavours to embed the UDS within an RMA framework, although the exact impact of the reform agenda on this is uncertain at this time. Broadband and water issues are also likely to be raised by government in these spaces.

Other points of engagement should involve the areas of urban design, sustainable urban development, and the overall position and performance of Christchurch and Canterbury within the New Zealand economic context.

7. RECOMMENDATION

That the report be received.

James Caygill
Implementation Manager