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Auckland Council: How it deals with building consents



Office of the Auditor-General
PO Box 3928, Wellington 6140

Telephone: (04) 917 1500
Facsimile: (04) 917 1549

Email: reports@oag.govt.nz
Website: www.oag.govt.nz

Auckland Council: How it deals with building consents

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Auditor-General's overview

The Local Government (Auckland Council) Act 2009 requires me to periodically audit how well Auckland Council and each of its council-controlled organisations provide services. My second such audit focused on how well Auckland Council provides services through its Building Control department. I chose this because it is an important aspect of the housing challenges that Auckland faces.

Auckland Council is the largest accredited building consent authority in New Zealand. Building Control has about 550 staff. It processes more than 17,000 building consent applications and carries out about 148,000 inspections a year. It is also responsible for issuing building warrants of fitness and managing building weathertightness claims.

Building Control's work is of vital importance to Auckland's social and economic fabric. Buying or building a house is the biggest investment that many people will make in their lifetime.

Customers' experiences

Although Building Control has various ways of communicating and interacting with its customers, I am concerned that communication is not as good as it should be. Surveys show that customers are not satisfied with how Building Control communicates. The fact that 70% of consent applications lodged go "on hold" pending further information suggests that there is a large gap between what Building Control expects and what customers believe is expected of them. Architectural and building firms told us that Building Control does not always communicate well or in a consistent way. Auckland Council recently commissioned a large audit focused on customers, which found that communication is one of the areas where improvements can be made.

Auckland Council is technically meeting the statutory deadline for processing most building applications, complying with statutory time frames 98.5% of the time in 2013/14. The average time to process applications is 9-10 working days, much less than the statutory time limit of 20 working days. But the statutory time frame allows all territorial authorities to exclude the days that the application is put on hold.

When the total elapsed time from lodging the application to issuing the consent is considered, Auckland Council processes 80% of applications within 40 working days. However, in exceptional circumstances, some applications can take more than 100 days to process. This includes the time it takes customers to provide the additional material requested.

Auckland Council needs to reduce the average time it takes to process applications, including reducing the amount of work it places on hold. In my view, there should be more emphasis on measuring and reporting the actual time taken to process applications. I consider that Auckland Council should publish full time frame performance measures as well as report how well it meets statutory deadlines. I also consider that Auckland Council should continue to seek to improve customers' experiences and gradually introduce more demanding targets.

Otherwise effective management

In my view, Auckland Council is performing its responsibilities as a building consent authority reasonably well. Building Control's internal quality assurance procedures are sound, with systems and technical audits carried out routinely. It also has a good standard of internal reporting of workflows and how well it meets targets.

Building Control is focused on ensuring that it has the capacity and capability to meet the expected increased demand for services. It is recruiting new graduates to address challenges it faces because of an ageing workforce. Building Control is introducing new training initiatives. Measures are being put in place to ensure that all technical staff have the requisite qualifications in time to meet new regulatory requirements.

Building Control is carrying out "risk-based consenting" initiatives to reduce the processing times for minor work, for standardised housing consent applications, and for building firms that enter into specific agreements with Auckland Council. These good steps are in the early stages of development.

International Accreditation New Zealand has recently re-confirmed Auckland Council, through the work of Building Control, as an accredited consenting authority. In a recent audit report, it complimented Auckland Council on the quality of its work, and issued no "Corrective Action Requests".

Improvements that Auckland Council is working on

The process of approving consent applications is largely paper-based. Relatively straightforward consent applications require a lot of paper. This is inefficient and costly for Auckland Council and applicants. Auckland Council is planning to introduce electronic lodgement of consent applications, and the forecast efficiency gains seem compelling. In my view, the electronic system should be introduced sooner than planned.

The introduction of tablets to record inspections is expected to increase productivity in inspections.

Auckland Council has had to merge the separate building control operations of Auckland's former local authorities into a cohesive unit. Differences in the way work is done in different locations are progressively being addressed.

Where improvements should be focused

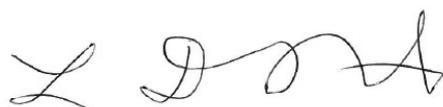
The forecasting model used to predict future demand for services is continually being refined. The assumptions and predictions used in modelling by the Housing Project Office and Building Control differ. The number of building consents resulting from the Auckland Housing Accord and Special Housing Areas has been much less than Building Control expected. The model will need to be adjusted to take account of the different bases of measurement between Building Control and the Housing Project Office.

I consider that the model should also be improved by including projections to at least the next long-term plan horizon (2025). It should also explicitly link the timing and productivity benefits of transformation projects to the resources needed.

My staff compared Auckland Council's consent charges to those of other large local authorities. Because of differences in how buildings are grouped and building value thresholds, it was difficult to draw any firm conclusions. However, I noted that the average cost of a sample of actual consent fees in Auckland was significantly higher than the fees shown on Auckland Council's website. This suggests that more time was needed to process the consent applications than was expected. The differences from other local authorities provide an opportunity for Auckland Council, and all local authorities, to discuss how to get costs into line or to make comparisons easier.

Auckland Council is achieving a reasonable standard in its Building Control department. Although there are significant customer service aspects to improve, the particular strengths in quality and general reporting are heartening.

I thank Auckland Council staff, builders, and architects who my staff interviewed for their help.



Lyn Provost
Controller and Auditor-General

22 April 2015

Our recommendations

1. We recommend that Auckland Council bring forward the introduction of an electronic lodgement system for building consent applications.
2. We recommend that Auckland Council reduce the average time it takes to process building consent applications by:
 - accelerating its initiatives with risk-based consenting;
 - reducing the work in progress pipeline and the 70% “on hold” rate; and
 - setting progressively more stringent performance targets for the percentage of building consents it issues within 40 working days.
3. We recommend that Auckland Council improve how it communicates with building consent customers by:
 - providing better guidance material to help in advancing the consenting process;
 - making its website easier to navigate;
 - encouraging telephone calls to supplement and better explain formal communications;
 - increasing the target for customer satisfaction;
 - more proactively addressing the underlying problems that lead to common customer complaints;
 - ensuring that staff have training that puts them “in the shoes” of the customer, so they are better able to respond proactively and with empathy; and
 - extending and refining the web-based consents tracking system, so that customers can see at any time the progress of their consent application.

1

Introduction

- 1.1 In this Part, we set out:
- why we carried out our audit;
 - what Auckland Council’s Building Control department does;
 - the scope of our audit;
 - what we did not look at; and
 - the structure of this report.

Why we carried out our audit

- 1.2 The Local Government (Auckland Council) Act 2009 requires that:
- The Auditor-General must, from time to time, review the service performance of the Council and each of its council-controlled organisations.*¹
- 1.3 The specific legislative requirement to audit service performance is unique to the governing legislation for Auckland Council.
- 1.4 Our audit was consistent with the *Service delivery* theme in our 2013/14 work programme. Our performance audits and other work for 2013/14 focused on the question of how quality, effective, and efficient service delivery can best provide for more diverse service supply and access to meet people’s different needs.
- 1.5 The amalgamation, on 1 November 2010, of Auckland’s seven territorial local authorities and one regional council into a single Auckland Council brought together seven building consenting services. Auckland Council became a registered building consent authority in October 2011.
- 1.6 Ensuring that building consents comply with legislation and can be relied on is vital in modern society. For most people, investing in a residential property is the biggest single investment they will make in their lifetime. In the commercial world, property forms a large part of the investment mix. Property owners, tenants, banks, and financiers all want building work to be safe and durable, as do those who buy and use the property in the future.
- 1.7 The responsibilities placed on consenting authorities are onerous and exacting. A building that may later prove to be unsafe or unsound can lead to financial claims against the consenting authority.
- 1.8 Because of the importance of building consents in addressing the significant housing challenges of Auckland, New Zealand’s most populous region, and the change to having one authority issuing building consents in Auckland, we considered that it was appropriate to audit the main aspects of Auckland Council’s building consenting service.

- 1.9 This is the second audit of service performance that we have carried out under section 104 of the Local Government (Auckland Council) Act. In May 2014, we published a report on aspects of Watercare Services Limited customer service. Later in 2015, we will look at governance and accountability arrangements for the Auckland-Manukau Eastern Transport Initiative.

Auckland Council's building control services

- 1.10 A building consent is the formal recognition by a building consent authority that certain proposed works meet the requirements of the Building Act 2004 (the Act), the Building (Accreditation of Building Consent Authorities) Regulations 2006, and the Building Code. A building consent is required before works can begin. The Act requires any council carrying out building consent and approval work to be accredited by a building consent accreditation body. In New Zealand, the relevant body is International Accreditation New Zealand (IANZ).
- 1.11 Building Control at Auckland Council includes the Building Control department, with 550 staff, and Manukau Building Consultants, a standalone business unit. Building Control receives building consent applications at 10 offices throughout Auckland. These offices are in Orewa, Takapuna, Henderson, central Auckland (Graham Street), Waiheke, Great Barrier, Manukau, Manukau Building Consultants, Papakura, and Pukekohe.
- 1.12 Building Control's work includes:
- receiving and processing building consent applications;
 - inspections, including building consent inspections, building warrant of fitness assessments, and swimming pool inspections;
 - certifying code compliance;
 - managing claims, including weathertightness and inspections of recladding work;
 - quality assurance; and
 - customer and information services.

The scope of our audit

- 1.13 We looked at how Auckland Council carries out its main building consent procedures – receiving and processing building consent applications, inspections, code compliance certification, and management reporting.
- 1.14 We also looked at:
- information used to assess future demand;
 - resources to meet present and future demand;
 - financial performance and comparative building consent costs;

- communication and interaction with customers and stakeholders;
- initiatives to improve performance; and
- quality assurance procedures.

What we did not look at

- 1.15 Auckland Council's Building Control department provides a wide range of services. Although we audited major aspects of Building Control's work, it was not possible to look at everything that Building Control does.
- 1.16 We did not look at:
- information technology (IT) systems, such as NewCore, which is a major IT project being developed;
 - costing methodology and billing arrangements;
 - claims activity, including weathertightness matters;
 - swimming pool inspections; and
 - building warrant of fitness assessments.

Structure of this report

- 1.17 In Part 2, we consider how Auckland Council accepts and processes building consent applications, carries out inspections, and issues code compliance certificates. We also look at the internal management reporting of performance information.
- 1.18 In Part 3, we compare Auckland Council's building consent fee structure with those of selected other large local authorities and look at Building Control's financial performance.
- 1.19 In Part 4, we look at Auckland Council's work to assess the future demand for building control services.
- 1.20 In Part 5, we look at how Building Control is organised, its resources, and what it is doing to ensure that resources are available to meet future demand.
- 1.21 In Part 6, we discuss how Auckland Council manages relationships and communication with its building consent customers and stakeholders.
- 1.22 In Part 7, we consider Auckland Council's internal and external quality assurance procedures to ensure that building control activities comply with legislation and meet internal standards.
- 1.23 In Part 8, we outline some of Auckland Council's main initiatives to improve building control services.

Processing and reporting

- 2.1 In this Part, we describe Auckland Council's building consent work and how Auckland Council reports on it. We discuss:
- what happens when Auckland Council receives building consent applications;
 - how consent applications are processed;
 - building inspections;
 - the process of issuing code compliance certificates; and
 - management reporting on Building Control's performance.

Receiving building consent applications

Receiving applications

- 2.2 Building consent applications are primarily lodged in hard copy, with a small number received electronically for the Takapuna area and Special Housing Areas.² About 70% of applications are received by post. Auckland Council has "lodgement officers" who check applications to ensure that they contain all the required information. This check is not a quality check. An application can be rejected if it lacks required information. All accepted applications must be entered into the Pathway system within 24 hours (or, if this task is transferred from another Auckland Council office, 48 hours) of being received. When the application is accepted, the "statutory clock" for processing applications within 20 working days starts.
- 2.3 After lodgement, the application is scanned electronically in the central and Takapuna offices. The application documents can be extensive. On a typical day, staff at the central office scan 12,000 pages (including resource consent applications and building consent applications).

Number of building consent applications received

- 2.4 In the year to June 2013, Auckland Council received about 18,000 building consent applications. In the year to June 2014, Auckland Council received about 19,000 building consent applications. Of these, 89% were residential building consent applications and 11% were commercial building consent applications. The flow of applications tends to be relatively consistent from July to November, falling noticeably during the summer holiday period before recovering.
- 2.5 In the 12 months to March 2014, the number of consent applications lodged increased by 5.4% (the number of residential applications increased by 7.5% but the number of commercial applications decreased by 3.6%).

2 Special Housing Areas are areas where fast-track development of affordable housing can take place. Special Housing Areas are a tool provided for in Auckland Council's agreement with the Government, the Auckland Housing Accord, and accompanying Housing Accords and Special Housing Areas legislation, aimed at boosting Auckland's housing supply.

Quality assurance audits of applications

- 2.6 Quality assurance audits of consent applications are carried out each month. Seventy-eight audits of applications were carried out between February and April 2014. Analysis shows that, for the 24 potential specific audit tests for each application, results fell below 90% compliance for three audit tests. The main reasons that lodged applications failed to comply with regulations were:
- not all checkboxes were ticked;
 - some plans had no stamp; and
 - no engineer had signed the supplied plans or drawings.

Our observations about lodgement of applications

- 2.7 Auckland Council receives many applications by post. In May 2014, the Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment (MBIE) published a survey of 48 building consent authorities that showed that, nationally, 68% of applications were lodged in person, 23% by post, and 7% online.³ The MBIE survey also noted that one-third of authorities electronically scan the application documents before making technical assessments, and that the average scanning time for an application is 19 minutes. If we apply this average to Auckland Council, scanning takes more than 6000 hours a year.
- 2.8 Auckland Council receives many applications at the various receiving offices – about 1600 a month. Two copies of each application are required. This means extensive physical handling – Auckland Council’s central office resembles a postal sorting centre.
- 2.9 We spoke to four architectural firms about the requirement for hard copies. Although staff at one firm were comfortable with the existing arrangements, staff at the other firms were keen for Auckland Council to move to an online application system. Staff at one firm estimated that they used two kilometres of A1-size paper a month, much of it for building consent applications.
- 2.10 The architectural firms told us that, on a few occasions, applications were not entered into Auckland Council’s Pathway system until after the 24/48-hour time deadline. However, Auckland Council’s internal audits and the IANZ reports found no recurring problem. Auckland Council is finalising a new checklist and process to help reduce the average time it takes to assess applications.

Recommendation 1

We recommend that Auckland Council bring forward the introduction of an electronic lodgement system for building consent applications.

Processing building consent applications

Processing workflow

- 2.11 After an application is lodged, a team leader allocates the building consent application to a processing officer based on:
- the assessed risk and complexity of the consent; and
 - the workload of each processing officer.
- 2.12 Auckland Council requires that the relevant fees and charges be paid before the application is accepted, unless the customer is an account customer. Account customers are those who have met credit and transaction level eligibility requirements.
- 2.13 As Figure 1 shows, building consent applications are grouped into six categories, based on how much risk they pose. Less experienced processing officers are allocated more Residential 1 category applications and experienced officers are allocated Residential 3 category and commercial building consent applications.

Figure 1

Auckland Council's risk categories for building consent applications

| | Category |
|-----------------------------|---------------|
| Greatest complexity or risk | Commercial 3 |
| | Commercial 2 |
| | Commercial 1 |
| Least complexity or risk | Residential 3 |
| | Residential 2 |
| | Residential 1 |

- 2.14 The processing officer becomes the contact person during the consent process.
- 2.15 The consent application might be passed to specialist staff (such as drainage engineers) for technical advice. Because two hard copies of the application are received, some processing work can be carried out in parallel.

- 2.16 About 70% of consent applications need further information before they can be fully processed. This is because of problems with the quality of information lodged. This is known as a Request for Further Information (RFI). RFIs are sent either by post, by email, or by a telephone conversation, and are followed up periodically. The statutory clock is stopped until the information is supplied (see Figure 2).

Figure 2
The statutory clock and how the Request for Further Information process works

The Building Act 2004 says that local authorities must process applications for building consents within 20 working days.

If there is a Request for Further Information during consent processing, the statutory clock is stopped. It is not restarted until all the requested information has been received and checked. RFIs must clearly outline the problems and, where possible, refer the matters to the relevant section of the Building Code. Auckland Council does not accept information that is provided piecemeal.

Applicants have 20 working days to respond to a Request for Further Information. Auckland Council's internal policy is to give two reminders during a three-month period, with a telephone call preceding the second reminder. If the information is not provided within 60 working days, the application is refused.

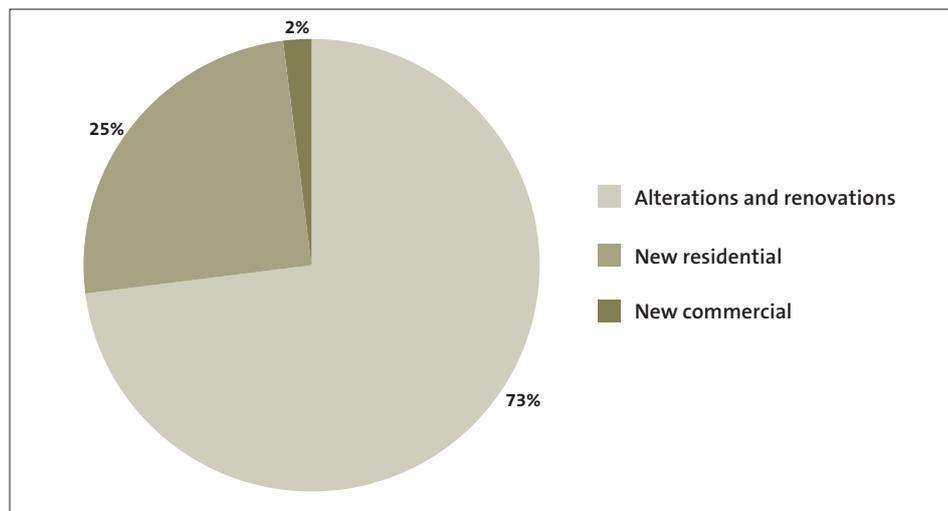
- 2.17 Some customers can check the status of their consent application on Auckland Council's website.⁴

Number of consents issued and in progress

- 2.18 In 2013/14, Auckland Council issued 17,300 consents, up from 16,700 in 2012/13.
- 2.19 As Figure 3 shows, building alterations and renovations make up 73% of consents granted, new residences 25%, and new commercial buildings 2%.

⁴ The former Auckland City Council and North Shore City Council had tracking systems, which are still used by some receiving offices. The other former local authorities did not.

Figure 3
Type of building consents issued by Auckland Council, 2013/14



- 2.20 Auckland Council describes consent applications being processed and those “on hold” as being “work in progress”. At any time, many lodged consent applications are work in progress. At the end of June 2014, 2200 consent applications were work in progress, of which 1500 were on hold. Earlier in 2014, the number of applications that were work in progress reached nearly 3000. The equivalent figure in late 2012/early 2013 was nearer 3500.

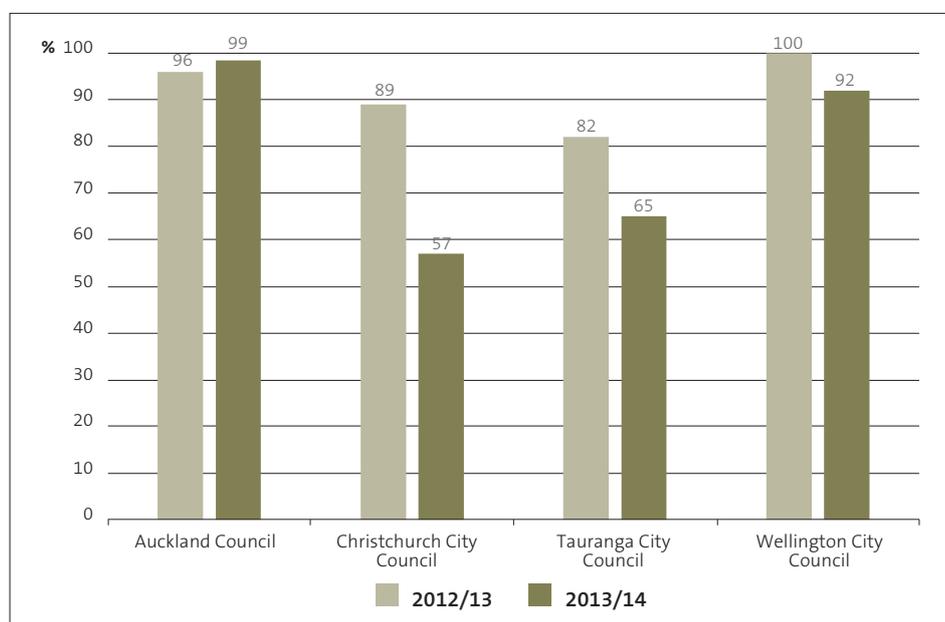
Timeliness

- 2.21 Under section 48 of the Act, a building consent authority must, within the time limit, either grant or reject the consent application. The time limit is 20 working days after receipt of the application (10 working days where there has been a national multiple use approval).⁵
- 2.22 During 2013/14, Auckland Council processed 98.5% of consent applications within the statutory time limit, slightly better than in 2012/13. Auckland Council’s “target line” is 95%. The average processing time was 9-10 working days.

⁵ Section 30A of the Act states that: “A national multiple-use approval establishes that the plans and specifications to which it relates comply with the building code.” A national multiple-use approval does not confer the right to carry out building work that requires a building consent.

2.23 We compared how well Auckland Council and some other urban local authorities met the statutory time limit (see Figure 4).

Figure 4
Percentage of building consent applications processed by selected local authorities within the time required by statute, 2012/13 and 2013/14



Source: The councils' annual reports.

2.24 Auckland Council uses a more compelling measure internally – consents granted within 40 working days of lodgement. This measures the total elapsed time, including the time to receive further information – that is, the true time elapsed. Using this measure, about 80% of consents are issued within 40 working days.

Consent processing productivity

2.25 At the time of our audit, Building Control had 84 building consent processing officers and a further 13 vacancies. Processing officers process an average of 0.85 building consent applications (of all types) a day.

2.26 Auckland Council monitors the productivity of each receiving office and each staff member.

Quality assurance audits

- 2.27 Every month, quality assurance audits are carried out in each office. The results of the audits are analysed three times a year. The analysis for the four months from January to April 2014 shows that, for the 19 potential specific audit tests for each audit sample, results fell below 90% compliance standard for only two audit tests. The shortcomings in those two tests were about potential non-compliance not being identified.
- 2.28 All tests showed that the statutory clock was stopped appropriately when needed.
- 2.29 Recently, Auckland Council carried out an internal audit looking at the reasons for delays in granting consents. Common reasons were:
- “on hold” process not followed, such as the clock not being stopped when it should have been, so the processing time appeared to be longer;
 - staffing problems (in only one office); and
 - filing or system errors.
- 2.30 A more significant finding was that only 38% of the consent applications that went over time had reasons for the time overrun recorded.

Our observations about the processing of building consent applications

Timeliness

- 2.31 In 2013/14, Auckland Council improved how often it met the statutory time frame for issuing consents and was above its 95% target. It is difficult for a building consent authority to comply completely with the 20-working day time limit for any prolonged period. This is especially so when there are large and complex commercial developments. When we consider that Auckland Council issued 17,000 consents in 2013/14, a factor of 1% over time amounts to about 170 consents a year.
- 2.32 It appears that Auckland Council better met statutory time frames for granting consents in 2014 than did other large local authorities.
- 2.33 However, we recommend that Auckland Council’s target be raised to at least 98%, with graduated increases in future years.⁶ Specific targets should also be set for residential and commercial consent time frames.
- 2.34 We consider that the measure of consents granted within 40 working days is most appropriate. The architectural firms we spoke to work on the assumption of a six-week to eight-week turnaround. Although Auckland Council has recorded that, on average, 80% of consents are granted within 40 days, this appears not to be a

⁶ Auckland Council is currently achieving 98%. It would be inappropriate to allow standards to fall from current achievements.

target. We consider a target should be set and that more exacting targets should be set for future years. Auckland Council's intended projects to improve efficiency can then be measured against these targets.

Processing workflow

2.35 We observed that relying heavily on paper-based processing limits how efficiently Auckland Council can process consent applications. Processing consent applications online would:

- increase the speed of lodging applications;
- bring savings to the applicant in time and cost (such as printing and posting costs);
- bring savings to Auckland Council by not having to scan application documents;
- offer the possibility of doing more processing tasks in parallel; and
- reduce clutter and storage requirements.

Requests for Information

2.36 Staff at the architectural firms we spoke to criticised the RFI process and said that, more often than not, the clock was stopped towards the end of the statutory period. They suggested that a late RFI, with the statutory time limit looming, gave Auckland Council more breathing space. We asked Auckland Council whether it had any data that showed the relative distribution of RFIs during the 20-day period. Unfortunately, there appears to be none. Auckland Council staff told us that they believe that RFIs were usually sent out soon after the start of the statutory period.

2.37 We also noted that Building Control staff have said that, to speed up the RFI process, staff should use email more, including copying in owners when sending emails (rather than just the builder or architect). Auckland Council's internal policy encourages processing staff to telephone the applicant to explain any problems. We consider that telephone calls supported by email messages sent to all involved could result in more timely responses from applicants.

Processing productivity

2.38 In 2014, an MBIE survey of 48 building consent authorities found that 79% of authorities spend five hours or less assessing a simple residential consent. Four in five authorities take 11 hours or longer to assess a complex commercial consent application. Auckland Council's performance looks to be in line with this, but it is difficult to accurately compare because the MBIE survey categorised consents into four types, and Auckland Council has six types of consents.

- 2.39 Overall, we recommend that Auckland Council find ways to reduce the time it takes to process building consent applications.

Recommendation 2

We recommend that Auckland Council reduce the average time it takes to process building consent applications by:

- accelerating its initiatives with risk-based consenting;
 - reducing the work in progress pipeline and the 70% “on hold” rate; and
 - setting progressively more stringent performance targets for the percentage of building consents it issues within 40 working days.
-

Building inspections

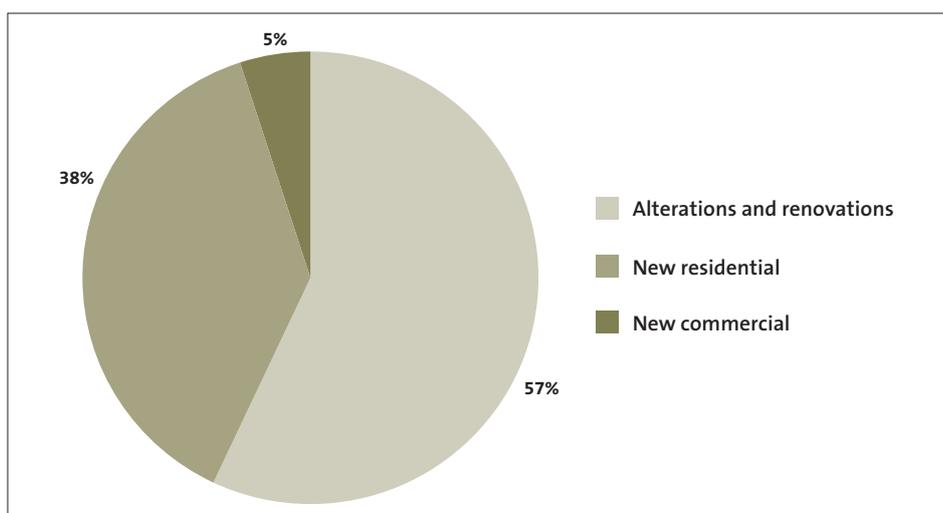
Inspection workflow

- 2.40 At various stages during construction, builders need to arrange inspections to ensure that their work complies with the conditions of the building consent. Demand drives inspections, with builders telephoning Auckland Council to book inspections. There is a mid-afternoon cut-off each day for booking. Most inspections are done the next day, although final inspections need three days’ advance booking.
- 2.41 Each afternoon, after the telephone booking cut-off, Auckland Council allocates all the inspections required for the next day to individual inspectors.
- 2.42 Each morning, inspectors go to their base offices to get their assigned inspections. When necessary, inspectors in one area may be assigned to work in other areas where there is high demand.
- 2.43 Auckland Council’s website outlines and describes the types of inspections that might be necessary.
- 2.44 Until late 2014, inspection documents were in hard copy. In 2015, Auckland Council introduced electronic tablets for recording inspections.

Number of inspections

- 2.45 In 2013/14, about 148,000 inspections were carried out on building work. This compares with 137,000 inspections in 2012/13, an increase of 8%. More than half of the inspections were of building alterations and renovations. Most of the remainder were of new residential buildings (see Figure 5).

Figure 5
Inspection types as percentage of total number of inspections, 2013/14



Inspection productivity

- 2.46 Each new residential building consent application leads to an average of 12 inspections. Each new commercial building consent application leads to an average of 14 inspections. There is an average of 5.7 inspections for each alteration or renovation.
- 2.47 The 2014 MBIE national survey stated that the average number of local authority inspections was eight for a simple residential consent and 11.5 for a complex residential consent. The MBIE survey did not have an “alterations and renovations” category, so this cannot be directly compared.
- 2.48 At the time of our audit, there were 88 inspectors in Auckland, with job vacancies for a further 12 inspectors. Until recently, Auckland Council has assumed that inspectors would do an average of 6.7 inspections a day. Auckland Council also monitors productivity by office and staff member.

Inspection quality assurance audits

- 2.49 Every month, inspection quality assurance audits are carried out – 87 audits were carried out in the four months from January to April 2014. Auckland Council’s analysis of this period shows that, for the seven specific audit tests for each audit sample, all results were above the 90% compliance threshold.

Our observations about building inspections

Number of inspections

- 2.50 The number of inspections carried out each month increased steadily in 2012/13 and 2013/14. The projected inspection numbers are forecast to increase further from July 2014 because of inspections arising from Special Housing Area building consenting and construction.

Inspection workflow

- 2.51 At first glance, Auckland Council's ways of booking, allocating, and recording building consent inspections appear to be outdated. Building Control relies on builders to telephone in. There is a compressed time in which to allocate inspections and paper recording of inspections. However, the MBIE survey shows that, nationwide, 97% of inspections are booked by telephone. Also, booking by telephone remains the most practical way for builders on the job to let Auckland Council know when they want an inspection. Recently, Auckland Council has set up a "builder app" for booking inspections.
- 2.52 Auckland Council is introducing a major improvement to recording inspections. Inspectors will use electronic tablets to record inspections. This will instantly update the building consent file. The tablets were due to be introduced in June 2014 and fully in use by December 2014 but, because of IT problems, the introduction was delayed until January 2015.

Productivity of inspectors

- 2.53 Auckland Council expects, and we agree, that introducing the electronic tablets for inspectors to record inspections will allow officers to carry out a further three inspections each a week. This will take the daily average from 6.7 inspections to 7.3 inspections for each officer. Much of the productivity gain will be that inspectors no longer have to start each day at their base office. If the next-day allocations are emailed to the inspectors, they can go directly to inspection sites. This will save time and reduce vehicle running costs.
- 2.54 Auckland Council also has initiatives to reduce the number of inspections for some types of residential buildings (see Part 8).

Quality assurance

- 2.55 Staff at the architectural and building firms were generally complimentary of the inspection regime and felt that the inspectors were helpful and practical in their approach. However, they noted:
- instances where inspectors were not familiar with new building products;
 - that the booking of inspections for either a morning or afternoon inspection window was too broad – they said that the slots should be narrowed to 1-2 hours so that builders – especially those responsible for many sites – could use time more efficiently; and
 - that the number of inspections needed, especially for simple residential dwellings, was expected to reduce.

Code compliance certificates

Applications for code compliance certificates

- 2.56 Under section 92 of the Act, an owner must apply to a building consent authority for a code compliance certificate after all building work to be carried out under a building consent granted to that owner is completed. The application must be lodged as soon as practicable after the building work is completed and in the prescribed form.
- 2.57 Under section 93 of the Act, a building consent authority must decide whether to issue a code compliance certificate for building work within 20 working days of the date of application or, if no application is made, the expiry of two years after the date on which the building consent for the building work was granted. There is provision in the Act for a further period if this is mutually agreed.
- 2.58 Auckland Council has a dedicated team at its central office to process code compliance certificate applications.

Number of code compliance certificates

- 2.59 In the year to June 2014, 15,700 code compliance certificates were issued. The number of code compliance certificates issued varies markedly from month to month, because it is driven by demand. Often, people apply for a code compliance certificate only when they sell a property.

Meeting the statutory time limits

- 2.60 Auckland Council processed 98.5% of code compliance certificates in 2013/14 within 20 working days. Its “target line” is 95%.

- 2.61 The 2014 MBIE survey of local authorities shows that 80% of “residential simple” code compliance certificates are issued within 10 working days, and 90% are issued within 20 working days.

Quality assurance audits of code compliance certificates

- 2.62 Every month, quality assurance audits are carried out on code compliance certificates issued. Seventy-six of these audits were carried out on work completed between February and April 2014. The results show that Auckland Council’s compliance with the correct procedure for requesting RFIs and the recording of information identifying the “Licensed Building Practitioner” fell below the 90% threshold.
- 2.63 Recently, Auckland Council carried out an internal audit of the reasons for delays in issuing code compliance certificates. Common reasons for the delays included not following the correct process for “on hold” applications and file or system errors. A more significant finding was that only 31% of the certificate processing that took longer than the designated time had reasons recorded for the overrun.

Our observations about the processing of code compliance certificate applications

- 2.64 Although processing applications for code compliance certificates can be done at any time, it is more straightforward if done immediately after the final inspection. The greatest push for code compliance certificates comes from lending institutions and insurers. Banks will not approve mortgages and insurers will not insure a building until they have seen the code compliance certificate.
- 2.65 The architectural and building firms we spoke to queried the extent of paperwork required for a code compliance certificate to be issued. At one building firm, a staff member worked almost full time preparing and submitting documents for code compliance certificate applications. Staff at firms criticised inconsistent interpreting requirements – particularly the extent of “producer statements” needed.
- 2.66 There appears to be scope for electronic scanning and lodgement of code compliance certificate information, which would make the process more efficient.
- 2.67 Most building consent applications result in a timely code compliance certificate. Where no code compliance certificate has been issued 24 months after the issue of the building consent, Auckland Council then decides whether or not to issue the code compliance certificate. This decision is made even if the applicant has not applied for the certificate. The longer the time elapsed between a consent

being issued and an application for a certificate, the more difficult it is for Auckland Council to progress an application. To enable better estimation of future resource requirements, Auckland Council should monitor the number of consents that are more than two-years old where no code compliance certificate has been issued.

Management reporting on Building Control's performance

- 2.68 Here, we outline the main features of internal reporting of “frontline” performance to Building Control managers.
- 2.69 We focused on how Building Control reported on application lodgements, the processing of building consent applications, inspections, and code compliance certificates. However, we noted that Building Control's reporting included all the work that it is responsible for.
- 2.70 Our audit focused on the nature of the output reports. We did not seek to verify the accuracy of underlying information or the systems used to collate data.

Gathering data

- 2.71 Building Control keeps comprehensive statistics for each of its work streams. Data is collected daily and covers:
- the number and value of consent applications lodged and rejected;
 - the number of consent “pre-application” meetings;
 - the number of consent applications processed:
 - within and over the statutory 20 days;
 - within 40 working days;
 - “on hold” and work in progress;
 - the estimated building value of issued and invoiced consents;
 - the number of inspections and site visits; and
 - the number of code compliance certificates lodged and completed within and over the 20-working-day limit.
- 2.72 Building Control gathers data from each area office as well as the in-house business unit, Manukau Building Consultants.
- 2.73 The data is also analysed, where relevant, in residential and commercial building categories.

Management reports

- 2.74 Several regular reports are produced using the data, including:
- weekly performance reports on consent applications (lodged, processed, and on hold), inspections, and code compliance certificates – these are analysed by area office;
 - a monthly performance report – this also includes Land Information memorandums, swimming pool inspections, request for services, and certificates of acceptance; and
 - monthly “dashboard” reporting – this is an A3 page summarising financial results, “customer outcomes” (throughput numbers), “processes and activities”, and “highlights and challenges”.
- 2.75 A “live” risk register is also kept. It records main risks for each item, key mitigation strategies, and the residual risk.

Timeliness of reports

- 2.76 The monthly reports are available three working days after the end of the calendar month.

Audience for the reports

- 2.77 The monthly reports are sent to the Chief Operating Officer, the General Manager – Building Control, and the functional managers reporting to the General Manager – Building Control.
- 2.78 Fortnightly meetings of the Building Control management team discuss the weekly and monthly reports. The meetings also discuss:
- updates to policies and procedures;
 - the outcome of technical, compliance, and competency assessment audits;
 - risks;
 - health and safety;
 - human resource matters; and
 - updates on new initiatives.

Our observations about management reports

- 2.79 The management reports are succinct, easy to read, and make extensive use of graphs, colour, and trend indicators. The reports are made available in a timely fashion.
- 2.80 The monthly performance dashboard includes a lot of information on an A3 page but remains easy to read. The information is presented in quadrants. One quadrant is termed “highlights and challenges”. This gives succinct updates of the month’s highlights and challenges and the status of transformation initiatives and efficiency-saving initiatives.
- 2.81 It appears that the management reporting informs Building Control managers of activity, performance against targets, and aspects requiring attention.
- 2.82 Despite our positive view of how management reports are presented, we consider that Auckland Council could make improvements, including:
- distinguishing better between reporting information about “throughput” or processing numbers compared to reporting information measuring performance;
 - introducing more stringent targets to progressively reduce the average time taken to process building consent applications;
 - introducing more stringent targets to progressively increase the percentage of building consent applications completed within 40 working days;
 - introducing a target to reduce the work in progress “pipeline” – consents on hold or being processed;
 - providing information about waiting times for inspections, such as what percentage of inspection requests meet the target of next-day inspections; and
 - monitoring the number of consents that are more than two years old so that future resource requirements can be estimated.

Relative fee structures and financial performance

- 3.1 In this Part, we look at:
- selected local authorities' building consent fee structures;
 - the costs of a sample of building consents; and
 - the annual cost and revenue performance of Auckland Council's Building Control services for 2012/13 and 2013/14.
- 3.2 We looked at the cost of getting a building consent for a residential and a commercial building in Christchurch, Wellington, Hamilton, and Auckland (see Figure 6). Comparative analysis is difficult because each local authority has different building value "thresholds" and building categories. Further inspections or processing work may be required, which adds to the cost.

Figure 6
What selected local authorities say they charge for building consents

| Type of consent/charge | Project value | GST-inclusive cost | Comments |
|---|-----------------------|--------------------|---------------------------|
| Auckland Council | | | |
| All building work | \$100,000-\$500,000 | \$3,752 | |
| All building work | \$500,000 and over | \$5,734 | |
| Code of compliance | \$100,000-\$500,000 | \$455 | |
| Technical officers' hourly charge-out rates | | \$135-\$177 | |
| Pre-application meeting fee | | \$265 | |
| Christchurch City Council | | | |
| Residential building | \$100,000-\$300,000 | \$3,310 | Assumes eight inspections |
| Commercial building | \$500,000-\$1 million | \$9,140 | Assumes 15 inspections |
| Code of compliance (residential) | | \$340 | |
| Technical officers' hourly charge-out rates | | \$165-\$280 | |
| Pre-application meeting fee | | Varies | First 30 minutes free |

| Type of consent/charge | Project value | GST-inclusive cost | Comments |
|---|-----------------------|--------------------|---------------------------|
| Hamilton City Council | | | |
| Residential – single storey | Not relevant | \$4,510 | |
| Commercial building – up to two storeys | Less than \$1 million | \$7,685 | |
| Code of compliance – urgent | | \$190 | |
| Technical officers' hourly charge-out rate (commercial) | | \$220 | |
| Pre-application meeting fee | | Not stated | |
| Wellington City Council | | | |
| Residential building | \$100,000-\$500,000 | \$2,324 | Assumes eight inspections |
| Commercial building | \$500,000-\$1 million | \$3,595-\$4,705 | Assumes 13 inspections |
| Code of compliance (residential) | | \$100 | |
| Pre-application meeting fee | | \$159 | If no more than two hours |

Note: This information is from local authorities' websites and from Auckland Council. The fees are applicable from 1 July 2014 and include GST.

- 3.3 To get a picture of the actual costs of getting a building consent in Auckland, Auckland Council supplied data from which the information in Figure 7 was extracted.

Figure 7
Auckland Council's average actual charges for building consents, July-December 2013

| Consent type | Project value | Average GST-inclusive cost | Comments |
|---|---------------------|----------------------------|------------------------------------|
| New residential | \$300,000-\$399,000 | \$6,251 | Based on a sample of 551 consents |
| Residential alterations and renovations | \$20,000-\$100,000 | \$3,318 | Based on a sample of 1102 consents |
| New commercial | \$400,000-\$500,000 | \$9,055 | Based on a sample of 12 consents |
| New commercial | More than \$500,000 | \$19,553 | Based on a sample of 109 consents |

- 3.4 Building Control revenue in 2013/14 was significantly more than 2012/13 actual revenue and 2013/14 budgeted revenue because of an increase in the number of consent applications (see Figure 8).

Figure 8
Financial performance of Auckland Council's Building Control department, 2012/13 and 2013/14

| | 2012/13 actual \$000 | 2013/14 actual \$000 | 2013/14 budget \$000 |
|-----------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|
| Revenue | 59,028 | 65,625 | 59,929 |
| Personnel costs | (34,360) | (36,732) | (34,384) |
| Professional services | (7,845) | (8,834) | (5,791) |
| Other direct costs | (2,256) | (2,544) | (2,008) |
| Surplus* | 14,567 | 17,515 | 17,746 |

* Before indirect costs and overhead allocations. The revenue figures include approximately \$9.8 million of Land Information Memorandum and other property information product revenue.

- 3.5 The increase in 2014 operating expenditure over budgeted expenditure is because of:
- additional costs in meeting accreditation requirements on qualifications; and
 - additional processing and inspection roles created to respond to the projected significant increase in building consent and inspection activity triggered by the Special Housing Areas.
- 3.6 The overall result for 2014 was marginally below budget.
- 3.7 In Auckland Council's *Annual Report 2013/14*, the total of indirect charges and overhead allocation for all regulatory activity (building consents, resource consents, and licensing and compliance) was \$55 million, which is 28% of total costs.

Our observations about consent fee structure

- 3.8 It is difficult to compare local authorities' building consent costs, because they use different project value thresholds and describe project types differently. They do not show the additional processing and inspection time that might be required. This additional time is charged at hourly rates. However, these figures provide an opportunity for Auckland Council to discuss differences and opportunities with

other local authorities. The range raises questions, particularly about charges for code compliance certificates.

- 3.9 In May 2014, MBIE published the results of a survey of building consent authorities, carried out in 2013. The survey revealed the average total cost to a customer of getting a building consent and code compliance certificate (see Figure 9).

Figure 9
Average total cost to a customer of a building consent and code compliance certificate, 2013

| Type | Average total cost |
|---------------------|--------------------|
| Residential simple | \$1,680 |
| Residential complex | \$2,870 |
| Commercial simple | \$2,380 |
| Commercial complex | \$4,967 |

Note: Based on responses from 48 building consent authorities.

- 3.10 It is difficult to meaningfully compare the costs that Auckland Council charges, because the MBIE survey categorises consent applications differently to Auckland Council.
- 3.11 However, as Figure 7 shows, it is apparent that the actual building consent costs in Auckland are considerably higher than the initial deposit costs listed in their schedule of charges as shown in Figure 6. This suggests that additional processing time and/or inspections are required. This needs further consideration and monitoring as the time required to process an application is greater when the application is seen as incomplete or of lower quality.

Assessing future demand for building control services

- 4.1 In this Part, we look at Auckland Council's forecasts of the future demand for building control services. This is important because Auckland Council needs to plan to ensure that its staff and information systems meet future demand. In Part 8, we look at what Auckland Council has done to better meet expected future demand for services.
- 4.2 Forecasting demand is complex and uncertain. Many external factors will influence future demand, including:
- the creation of Special Housing Areas, which will dramatically increase the land available for housing and the number of building consent applications;
 - the Auckland Housing Accord⁷ and the need for more housing in Auckland, including affordable housing;
 - the ability of property developers and the building industry as a whole to build housing in the quantity envisaged;
 - the state of the housing market and the financial imperatives for developers and buyers; and
 - the future extent of pre-fabricated, pre-built, and assembly-line construction techniques, and the consequent changes to building consenting and inspection processes to accommodate this.

Building Control forecasts

- 4.3 To help forecast future demand, Auckland Council:
- has a unit within the Building Control central office to model and predict future demand for services;
 - has a liaison resource within its Housing Project Office that provides a link between the streamlined building consenting process for Special Housing Areas to the expected effect on Building Control workflows; and
 - regularly meets builders and developers to better understand industry assessments about future building activity.

⁷ The Auckland Housing Accord is an agreement between Auckland Council and the government intended to increase housing supply and improve housing affordability in Auckland in the interim period until the Auckland Unitary Plan becomes operative. The Accord provides the basis for collaboration, including providing Auckland Council with additional powers to grant special approvals and consent new land. The Accord was signed on 3 October 2013 and remains in place until three years after the notification of the Unitary Plan unless either party withdraws from the Accord earlier.

Nature and extent of forecasts

- 4.4 Building Control has prepared multi-year forecasts of consent application processing and inspection volumes. The main features of the model, which is being continually refined, are:
- assuming annual growth of 7% in consent processing activity;
 - assumptions about the productivity of inspectors and processing of consent applications;
 - sensitivity parameters that allow for different settings of efficiency gains in processing consent applications and inspections, and the subsequent effect on required resources; and
 - assuming that the proportion of new residential consents will increase as a proportion of total consents and that the proportion of commercial consents and alterations and renovations consents will decrease.
- 4.5 The model takes into account the views of builders and developers about capacity and capability.
- 4.6 The model shows that:
- The number of building consents is forecast to rise from about 22,000 (including Special Housing Area estimates) in 2015 to about 28,000 in 2019.
 - There will be 11,900 houses built arising from the existing Special Housing Areas.
 - The number of inspections is forecast to rise from about 175,000 (including Special Housing Area estimates) in 2015 to about 210,000 in 2019. This compares to 148,000 inspections in 2013/14.

Comparing Housing Project Office and Building Control assumptions

- 4.7 In May 2014, Auckland Council's Housing Project Office estimated that the 63 existing Special Housing Areas will supply 10,000 new dwellings to Auckland during the three-year Housing Accord period. The Special Housing Areas were expected to supply:
- 1605 dwellings in 2014;
 - 4107 dwellings in 2015; and
 - 4365 dwellings in 2016.
- 4.8 By comparison, Building Control consent modelling estimated that there would be about 6000 Special Housing Area-sourced consents from 2014 to 2016.

- 4.9 At the time of our audit, there were 274 consent applications that could be specifically identified as coming from Special Housing Areas. Auckland Council told us that building consent applications are received at several receiving offices, and it was not possible to readily identify if they were linked to Special Housing Areas. Also, a single consent may cover multiple houses. It should be noted that there is not a one-to-one correlation between consent numbers and resulting dwelling numbers as a consent can result in two or more dwellings.

Our observations about assessing future demand

What the forecasting model tells us

- 4.10 Building Control's forecast model is a solid start, but it could be enhanced.
- 4.11 The forecasting model suggests that significantly more resources will be needed for consent application processing and inspections from as early as April 2015. Auckland Council is addressing the resourcing challenge in a number of ways.
- 4.12 Auckland Council has arrangements with other local authorities to deal with work overflows. Workflows are uneven, with 55% of the work in the first half of the year and 45% in the second half. Auckland Council does not want to increase its permanent workforce to deal with a workflow peak. Links with other local authorities are being used to help with workflows peaks (see Part 5).
- 4.13 Auckland Council has a graduate employment initiative. In 2014 and 2015, Building Control employed five graduates in each year.
- 4.14 There are training programmes to ensure that technical staff meet the qualification requirements of the Building (Accreditation of Building Consent Authorities) Regulations 2006 and initiatives to improve productivity. We explain these requirements further in Part 8, but they include:
- introducing electronic tablets for building inspections;
 - moving to digital processing of consent applications; and
 - streamlined processes for granting consents for simple building projects and for partnership-building firms.
- 4.15 Ideally, the model should forecast as far ahead as Auckland Council's next long-term plan – to 2025. That might be difficult. Auckland Council told us of uncertainty forecasting what will happen in the building industry beyond a two-year horizon. However, we consider that there should be reasonably specific forecasts of activity for the next five years and more general forecasts for the period from then to 2025. Assumptions have been made for the long-term plan that could be used to extend the forecast in the model.

- 4.16 For all transformation initiatives, a robust analysis of productivity efficiencies should be included in the model from the dates that the benefits are expected to take place.
- 4.17 There appears to be a wide gap between the assumptions and predictions that the Housing Project Office and Building Control use. This may be because of:
- timing problems – with the Housing Project Office seeing early results not yet translated into building consent applications;
 - fundamental differences in views about the capability of the building industry to meet the high Special Housing Area targets; or
 - the number of building consents compared to dwelling numbers (such as one building consent for terraced housing defined as multiple dwellings in Special Housing Area assumptions).

Management structure, resourcing, and planning to meet demand

- 5.1 In this Part, we look at how Auckland Council manages Building Control resources and planning to meet future demand.
- 5.2 As with other Auckland Council departments, Building Control is refining its organisational structure to move from the former Auckland local authorities' policies and structures to a "one council" approach.
- 5.3 Building Control has 10 receiving offices and a specialist standalone business unit, Manukau Building Consultants.

A changed management structure

- 5.4 In May 2014, Building Control changed its location-oriented management structure to a functional structure to better cater to its activities (see Figure 10). Until May 2014, the structure reflected the former local authorities' "location silo", which did not encourage a consistent approach.

Figure 10
Management structure of Auckland Council's Building Control department



Source: Auckland Council.

5.5 Figure 11 sets out the individual responsibilities of the functional Building Control managers.

Figure 11
Responsibilities of Auckland Council's Building Control managers

| Functional manager | Responsibilities |
|--------------------------------------|--|
| Manager Processing | Lodgements, building consent processing, technical advisors, fire engineering |
| Manager Inspections | Building inspections, swimming pool inspections, building warrants of fitness, code compliance certificate assessors |
| Manager Claims | Weathertightness and other claims, reclad processing and inspections |
| Manager Policy | Training, quality assurance, resolutions advisor, seismic performance |
| Manager Building Support | Customer services, data stewards, information line, administrative support |
| Manager Manukau Building Consultants | Specialist service provider (stand-alone business unit) |
| Manager Business Development | Finance, business analysis, service improvement advisors |

5.6 Our audit focused on processing, inspections, quality assurance, and business development. We did not audit claims or cost recovery.

Having staff available for processing applications and inspections

5.7 As at May 2014, Building Control had:

- 84 building consent processors and 13 vacancies; and
- 88 inspectors and 12 vacancies.

5.8 In early 2015, the total number of staff was 550. In the previous 12 months, about 30-40 staff were recruited. Responses to vacancies are variable, but Auckland Council has had some success in recruiting qualified people in their 30s.

5.9 Auckland Council has set up a graduate training programme. Five graduates started in 2014 and another five started in early 2015. Graduates receive cross-functional exposure and a "buddy" to help them to learn on the job quickly. Auckland Council had planned a cadet programme, but this is being reconsidered because of the major investment needed to ensure that "raw" recruits gain the knowledge required.

Age profile of staff

- 5.10 Building Control's strategic audit report of October 2013 noted that at least 60% of staff were aged 50 or older and 20% were 60 or older.
- 5.11 A concern for Auckland Council is that older staff will retire rather than study to gain the formal qualifications that are becoming compulsory for technical staff.
- 5.12 A new regulation – regulation 18 – was added to the Building (Accreditation of Building Consent Authorities) Regulations in December 2013. It introduces a requirement of technical qualifications for Building Control officers.
- 5.13 Auckland Council has responded to the new regulation by splitting staff into three groups based on skill level, expertise, and time experience. The groups will work progressively towards qualification. All officers with technical responsibilities will have to complete qualifications by June 2016. All employees performing technical functions have received a competency assessment to work out their technical competence. Where employees work outside their known competence, their work must be supervised.
- 5.14 In the year to July 2014, 13 staff completed dual qualifications and were recognised workplace assessors. A further 36 staff have completed the assessment of previous learning to gain a required qualification. During 2014/15 and 2015/16, at least another 130 Building Control officers will carry out the assessment process.
- 5.15 Training programmes have been put in place to meet the new demand. Early reports show that more employees than first thought have taken part in the training. In February 2015, a training school was launched where new staff will spend 6-8 weeks in an intensive training environment to learn quickly and efficiently while not unduly affecting business.

Co-operating with other building consent authorities

- 5.16 Auckland Council has helped Christchurch City Council to process building consent applications, particularly when there have been many or complex applications.
- 5.17 Auckland Council's size means that it has specialist staff who can advise other authorities on technical matters that do not often arise in smaller authorities.
- 5.18 Auckland Council is working with other local authorities to help process applications during workflow peaks.

Forecasting the need for resources

- 5.19 Auckland Council's forecasting model considers the number of building consent applications expected to arise from the Special Housing Areas. The model shows that Auckland Council will need:
- 105 building consent processing staff in 2015 and 109 in 2016; and
 - 118 building inspectors in 2015 and 123 in 2016.
- 5.20 This will be up about 8%-12% on early 2014 numbers for processing staff, and 18%-23% for inspection staff numbers. Auckland Council's strategy is to accommodate this requirement primarily through process and productivity improvements rather than by increasing staff numbers.

Our observations about changes to management structure, recruitment, and training

- 5.21 We believe that the move to a management structure based on functions has been well received. Although the structure had been in place for a short time when we carried out our audit, it has brought more consistent procedures. Some managers, particularly those who manage processing and inspections, have to visit or liaise with area offices more often but this helps to break down silos and embed a "one council" approach.
- 5.22 Auckland Council has taken positive steps to recruit more people and to offer training for new staff and older staff to obtain qualifications. This is to meet the mandatory requirements for qualification. Recruitment is a continuing challenge because engineering and planning graduates are in demand from the building industry and consultancy firms. It will take time for new processing staff to become fully productive.

Managing relationships with customers and stakeholders

- 6.1 In this Part, we look how Auckland Council interacts with its customers and stakeholders and whether the way it interacts is seen to be effective.
- 6.2 Builders, designers, owners, prospective buyers of buildings, banks, and financiers are all customers for Building Control’s services. Also, there can be “long-term” or “delayed” customers – those who buy properties from the initial owner but who look to Auckland Council for certainty that those properties are fit for purpose and comply with the Building Code.
- 6.3 Auckland Council, like all building consent authorities, finds itself caught between the exacting requirements of the Building Code and the financial and time pressures that customers place on it.
- 6.4 We looked at the ways that Auckland Council communicates with customers and stakeholder organisations.
- 6.5 We also interviewed four architectural firms and four building firms to get feedback on their perceptions of the standard of service from Auckland Council.

Communicating with customers and stakeholders

Auckland Council’s website on building control matters

- 6.6 We found Auckland Council’s extensive website for building control matters difficult to navigate. However, it does include a glossary, PDFs of all relevant forms, and a “what’s new” section.
- 6.7 In 2013, a survey showed that 77% of users were satisfied with how easy it was to navigate the website. This compares to 65% of users being satisfied in 2012.

Building Bulletin

- 6.8 Auckland Council has published three *Building Bulletins*, the last of which was published in May 2014. They contain useful information, such as:
- why building consent applications fail at the final inspection;
 - the top 10 reasons a code compliance certificate is refused; and
 - the top 10 reasons for delays in processing building consent applications.
- 6.9 The *Building Bulletins* are available on Auckland Council’s website.

Managing relationships with customers

Surveys of customer experience

- 6.10 Auckland Council carried out customer experience surveys in 2011/12 and 2012/13. In 2012/13, 64% of customers were satisfied with Building Control services, exceeding the target of 61%. In 2011/12, 57% of customers were satisfied.
- 6.11 However, we note that satisfaction with the code compliance certificate process fell from 47% in 2011/12 to 36% in 2012/13.
- 6.12 In August 2014, Auckland Council commissioned a wide-ranging audit entitled *Customer-Centric Regulatory Audit*. The scope was to look at business processes from a customer perspective. One of the objectives of the audit was to provide input into the NewCore initiative. A range of external customers were asked:
- What were the satisfaction points?
 - What were the pain points?
 - What would make the process better?
- 6.13 In October 2014, Auckland Council received the results of the audit. Common “pain points” were inconsistencies in advice or lack of advice, “surprises”, time delays, the amount of paperwork, and expense.
- 6.14 Interviewees said that consistent advice, more timely delivery, online consent processing, and Auckland Council appreciating the holding costs that customers face would make the process better.
- 6.15 As part of our audit, we interviewed four architectural firms and four building firms. We asked questions about consent application processing and inspections, including:
- What is your experience with Council timeliness?
 - Do you perceive Council staff to have sufficient technical knowledge?
 - How do you perceive Council work practices?
 - What is the communication like?

Customer enquiries

- 6.16 Auckland Council records the number and nature of enquiries from customers. These enquiries can be verbal, electronic, or on paper. The number of enquiries ranges from 500 to 1000 a month. Most of the enquiries fit into one of four themes:
- the building consent application process;
 - when a consent is required;

- whether properties are in “wind zones”;⁸ and
 - Auckland Council’s fees and charges.
- 6.17 The information is analysed periodically and recommendations are made on how to better use resources to respond to enquiries.

Customer complaints

- 6.18 Customer complaints are also logged into Auckland Council’s Customer Relationship System. The relatively few (104) complaints in 2013 centred mainly on:
- bad driving;
 - service level time frames;
 - the attitude of inspectors; and
 - fees and charges.
- 6.19 Each complaint is recorded in a “Complaints Improvement Opportunities Form”. This might lead to a “Continuous Improvement Form”, which describes a need to change a policy, a form, or website wording. These needs are relayed to the Building Control management team.

Recommendation 3

We recommend that Auckland Council improve how it communicates with building consent customers by:

- providing better guidance material to help in advancing the consenting process;
 - making its website easier to navigate;
 - encouraging telephone calls to supplement and better explain formal communications;
 - increasing the target for customer satisfaction;
 - more proactively addressing the underlying problems that lead to common customer complaints;
 - ensuring that staff have training that puts them “in the shoes” of the customer, so they are better able to respond proactively and with empathy; and
 - extending and refining the web-based consents tracking system, so that customers can see at any time the progress of their consent application.
-

8 “Wind zone” is a complex term defined in the applicable district plan and also described in the publication, *Proposed Auckland Unitary Plan*.

Managing relationships with stakeholders

- 6.20 Occasionally, Auckland Council meets its Customer Advisory Group, which includes major customers and stakeholders. The meetings are about Auckland Council's initiatives and important matters are discussed.
- 6.21 Building Control staff contribute to industry group meetings and events. These include:
- the Building Officers Institute of New Zealand;
 - the Institution of Professional Engineers New Zealand;
 - the New Zealand Institute of Architects;
 - MBIE working parties and advisory groups;
 - the Property Council; and
 - various trade associations.

Our observations about Auckland Council's relationships with customers and stakeholders

- 6.22 Auckland Council has many channels to provide information, receive feedback, and communicate with stakeholders and customers on building control matters.
- 6.23 We consider that Auckland Council has a sound approach to communication, but that that communication could be more effective.
- 6.24 The overriding message in our discussions with the architectural and building firms was that Auckland Council's communication and consistency need to be improved.
- 6.25 The firms told us that they felt Auckland Council's processes and interactions were overly bureaucratic. Some saw the approach of Building Control staff, especially less experienced staff, as excessively bound by rules and unable to see a wider picture. Firms told us that some Building Control staff were reluctant to speak to them.
- 6.26 On the other hand, firms saw Auckland Council's commercial consent application processors as pragmatic and empathetic. The quality of staff at Manukau Building Consultants was seen as being generally better than other staff. Auckland Council's inspectors were generally seen as practical in their approach, although at times not always familiar with new building products.
- 6.27 Staff at building firms, who were generally more satisfied than those at architectural firms about Auckland Council's services, praised initiatives to simplify and speed up processes.

- 6.28 Some of the negative comments must be seen as part of the “cut and thrust” of Auckland Council ensuring that any consent complies with the building code and designers wanting to speed up the process and not have matters to resolve.
- 6.29 However, some communication weaknesses are evident. We suggest that the target of 61% for overall customer satisfaction, which seems relatively low, be increased to encourage improved communication.
- 6.30 Although customers make few formal complaints, the same types of complaints recur. It is not clear what actions have been taken to address the underlying problems. The process and accountability to address recurring problems need to be improved.
- 6.31 Also, the specific common problems that are evident from the *Customer-Centric Regulatory Audit* and our audit need to be addressed.
- 6.32 Auckland Council recognises that the target and actual results do not show high satisfaction. Surveys are carried out monthly and reported every quarter to better uncover underlying problems. Surveys now include email responses, rather than telephone-only responses, so more information is available to assess problems.
- 6.33 It is important that customers can find out the status of their consent application at any point in the process. Customers’ comments suggest that they prefer to use the telephone than search the website, but often they do not receive an immediate response. One solution might be to introduce a web-based tracking system similar to what courier firms use, so that customers can see the progress of their application at any time.
- 6.34 Auckland Council can draw from other work that shows the importance of complaints in helping to improve services. Our August 2014 reports *Accident Compensation Corporation: How it deals with complaints* and *Ministry of Social Development: How it deals with complaints* contain relevant information.

7

Quality assurance

- 7.1 In this Part, we look at the main quality assurance processes that Auckland Council uses to ensure that work is of a high standard, meets internal policies, and, most importantly, complies with statutory requirements.

Why quality assurance is so important

- 7.2 New buildings or alterations to buildings, whether residential or commercial, represent a huge investment. For the ordinary person, it is probably the biggest single investment they will make in their lifetime. As owners of a new building, or subsequent purchasers, they want to be assured that the building meets the requirements of the Act and is fit for purpose. Likewise, designers and builders want to be assured that their work will meet requirements and avoid costly rework.
- 7.3 As an accredited building consent authority, Auckland Council has the responsibility for assessing building consent applications in Auckland. The assessment is carried out under specific regulations designed to ensure that all building consent applications are managed properly and that all consents granted meet the provisions of the Act and the Building Code. The consequences for the building consent authority of wrongly issuing a consent can be high and could lead to financial claims. The risk is high in absolute financial terms and in the time that the authority is exposed to the risk.
- 7.4 Therefore, Auckland Council has a range of quality assurance procedures to ensure that building consent applications, inspections, and code compliance certificates are dealt with properly to minimise the risk of a building not meeting the legislative requirements.

Internal quality assurance

- 7.5 Auckland Council has two main internal quality assurance processes: system audits and technical audits. Also, it has a set of policies and procedures, which are available on its intranet. We looked at the two main internal quality assurance processes to gain an understanding of the depth and strength of the processes.

System audits

Basis of the system audits

- 7.6 System audits are performed in keeping with each specific regulation of the Building (Accreditation of Building Consent Authorities) Regulations 2006 (the Regulations). The Regulations may appear straightforward but are exacting in their requirements.

- 7.7 Regulation 17 specifies that a consenting authority must have a system for assuring the quality of performance of its building control functions, and specifies in detail the breadth of requirements. Regulation 17(2)(h) specifies procedures for ensuring that an internal audit of every building control function takes place yearly. Regulation 18, as amended in 2013, requires those performing technical jobs to have an appropriate qualification or be working towards getting an appropriate qualification.

Systems audit work

- 7.8 We audited internal documents and discussed with staff the number and nature of the systems audits that were carried out.
- 7.9 An audit schedule control sheet records, for each of the last three years, all 18 regulations that require an audit. An audit's status is entered against each of the regulations. Audit reports are prepared for every audit.

Our observations about system audits

- 7.10 We observed that, in 2012 and 2013, audits were shown as completed for all relevant regulations. In 2014, at the time of our fieldwork, most scheduled audits had been completed in the planned time. Several audits were behind schedule, due to limited resources during a period of high application numbers. In January 2015, a dedicated centralised audit delivery team was formed to ensure that adequate resources are available for these audits.

Technical audits

Basis of the technical audits

- 7.11 The technical audits have to comply with regulation 7 of the Regulations. Regulation 7 specifies that a building consent authority must have policies and procedures for performing functions as detailed in that regulation. The purpose of the technical audits is to find out how well Auckland Council is putting approved procedures and policies into practice.

Technical audit work

- 7.12 Every month, each of the area offices and contractors carries out technical audits of the main building control functions (consent application lodgements, processing, inspections, and code compliance certificates). A total of 220 audits are planned each month – 55 for every function.

- 7.13 The audits (with the exception of inspection audits) are paperless. Each audit is made up of a series of questions that are set out in an electronic system. All of the questions are explained to ensure that the person completing the audit understands each question and its purpose. All questions must be answered because the system does not allow the audit to be recorded as complete if there are any unanswered questions.
- 7.14 The audits are carried out by peer staff at each office and then compiled and analysed three times a year by quality assurance staff located at the central office. A report is prepared for each four-month period for each of the main functions.

Our observations about technical audits

- 7.15 We reviewed several of the four-month reports and discussed the results with quality assurance staff.
- 7.16 The reports are prepared in a standard template and describe:
- the number of instances, for each office, where the audit has identified non-compliances at each procedural step;
 - graphs of the performance of each office audited and for Auckland as a whole;
 - improvements or regressions since the previous audit; and
 - actions to address audit report recommendations.
- 7.17 The reports include a conclusion on whether the policies and procedures have been effectively put into practice throughout Auckland.
- 7.18 In our view, the reports are compiled well and present audit results informatively.
- 7.19 One aspect that we felt could be improved is the differentiation between significant and minor non-compliances. Auckland Council defines substantial compliance as generally being greater than 90%, based on the total number of procedural steps that comply. There is scope to better delineate between procedures where non-compliance could have a significant effect and those procedures where non-compliance might have little effect, such as whether a document has been stamped.
- 7.20 Another aspect that Auckland Council is trying to improve is the feedback that peer auditors give to the officer who carries out a particular role. A quality assurance system is effective only when omissions and errors are discussed, acknowledged as lessons learned, and acted on in subsequent work. During the second half of 2013, Auckland Council made it compulsory for auditors to give feedback, but it appears that this feedback is not always received.

- 7.21 Lastly, the paperless audits for most building control functions appear to work efficiently but they do not yet extend to building inspection audits.

External quality assurance

- 7.22 IANZ routinely assesses building consent authorities to check whether they are complying with the Regulations. IANZ prepares reports for each authority, with a copy supplied to MBIE's Building and Housing Division. One of the important features of IANZ reports is the inclusion, where necessary, of "Corrective Action Requests". These are formal matters to be addressed by an authority. If they are sufficiently serious and not addressed in a reasonable time, they might threaten accreditation. Also, IANZ makes recommendations that are intended to help maintain an effective quality management system, but are not conditions for accreditation.
- 7.23 IANZ audited Auckland Council in September 2012 and in September 2014. These were routine scheduled audits.
- 7.24 In the 2012 audit report, IANZ made five Corrective Action Requests and 18 recommendations. IANZ stated that Auckland Council:
- had made significant progress in merging seven building consent authorities into one coherent organisation; and
 - continued to maintain a positive approach to its work and accreditation in general.
- 7.25 Other specific findings from the 2012 audit were that:
- policies and procedures were, for the most part, recorded appropriately;
 - procedural variations in different locations had reduced considerably;
 - application receipt processes and completeness checking were appropriate;
 - on several occasions, the statutory clock was applied wrongly;
 - in general, inspection planning, management, and performance had been satisfactory; and
 - for the most part, code compliance certificates were issued appropriately.
- 7.26 All five Corrective Action Requests were acted on and cleared.
- 7.27 The 2014 audit report stated that:
- [Auckland Council] is to be congratulated. At this assessment there were no Corrective Action Requests determined. It is noted that [Auckland Council] had much improved processes, systems and record keeping. A number of strong recommendations and recommendations were made and these will hopefully reinforce the excellent progress in the refinement of procedures and their implementation.*

- 7.28 The 2014 report contained 31 recommendations for improvement, including eight “strong recommendations”. Strong recommendations relate to matters that, if not addressed, could be raised as Corrective Action Requests during a later audit.

Annual strategic audit of quality assurance

- 7.29 Each year, Auckland Council summarises the findings from its quality assurance system in a formal report to its Chief Operating Officer. The report outlines:
- quality policy objectives, their current status, and whether the objectives have been met;
 - results of external body audits;
 - results of systems audits and technical audits;
 - risk register outputs;
 - financial performance; and
 - recommendations for the year ahead.
- 7.30 The latest report covers the year to 30 September 2014. The report noted that:
- Six of the seven objectives on quality had been met, with one partially met. The partially met objective was the website not being user friendly.
 - There were no corrective action requests raised arising from the 2014 IANZ audit, which was seen as positive and unusual for such a large consenting authority.
 - The graduate recruitment programme was continuing.
 - Auckland Council had representation on working parties associated with the introduction of the Building Amendment Bill (No. 4), which proposes four new types of building consent and aimed at reducing processing time for low-risk applications.
 - The transition to the new organisation structure went smoothly, with significant staff and union engagement.
 - Higher risks in Building Control include the potential significant increase in consent activity and the resources required to meet demand as a result of the Special Housing Areas and to ensure that the NewCore initiative was put into effect.
- 7.31 The report identified the improvements to be made during 2015. They include:
- resolving problems with poor IT performance, which has slipped recently;
 - introducing digital devices for inspectors to improve service delivery and reduce the cost of inspection activities;

- introducing a tactical online consent application and processing solution to deliver better customer experience and process efficiencies;
- working to provide a more integrated consenting experience for customers through the Customer Centric Regulatory Audit Programme; and
- improving the guidance material and advice available to customers to help guide them through the consenting process.

Our observations about quality assurance

- 7.32 Auckland Council has rigorously approached and carried out its responsibilities for assuring the quality of building control functions.
- 7.33 In our view, the strengths of the current approach include:
- ensuring that all aspects of the building control functions are covered;
 - comprehensive recording of quality assurance work;
 - using peer staff as technical auditors;
 - striking a good balance between operational staff carrying out audits and dedicated quality assurance staff in the central office;
 - analysing non-conformance and raising non-conformance matters with the appropriate staff; and
 - promptly attending to matters raised in the 2012 IANZ report.
- 7.34 The congratulatory remarks in IANZ's 2014 report suggest that Auckland Council's systems and processes are sound.

Aspects to improvement

- 7.35 We saw the need for Auckland Council to address several technical audit matters, including:
- having a more nuanced categorisation of what might be deemed significant non-conformance compared to less significant non-conformance; and
 - ensuring that there is feedback from the peer auditor to those being audited in every instance of an identified non-conformance.
- 7.36 Moving to a paperless system for the audits of inspections would improve efficiency.

8

Improving service performance

- 8.1 In this Part, we look at what Auckland Council is doing and plans to do, to improve how Building Control does its job.
- 8.2 Improving how Building Control does its job can take on several dimensions, including:
- speeding up the processing of consent applications, using risk and the type of consent application as determinants;
 - using technology better;
 - forming better relationships with customers, including specific arrangements with large or targeted service users;
 - carrying out inspections more efficiently;
 - training technical staff better;
 - providing assurance about work quality; and
 - making the process easier for users.

What happens in the lead-up to a consent application

- 8.3 Pre-application meetings between prospective applicants and Building Control officers are designed to remove difficulties and better explain the consent application process, particularly for novice applicants or for complicated commercial and residential developments.
- 8.4 An intended benefit of the pre-application meetings is to avoid or pre-empt problems that would otherwise arise in the statutory processing period after an application has been formally lodged.

Risk-based consent

- 8.5 Auckland Council has four main risk-based consenting initiatives.

The Standard Dwelling Partnership programme

- 8.6 Auckland Council invites building companies to participate in a Standard Dwelling Partnership and to sign a memorandum of understanding. So far, eight companies have signed up. Under the programme, Building Control seeks to grant consents within five days for “standard” dwellings.

Terraced Housing initiative

- 8.7 The aim of the Terraced Housing initiative is to have no RFIs and to issue a consent within 10 days. This has recently been piloted.

Same-day consent service

- 8.8 The same-day consent service is for a few specific types of consent application, such as fireplaces and standalone garages.

Consent exemption process for major public works project

- 8.9 The consent exemption process for major public works is being trialled for the New Zealand Transport Agency's Waterview project.⁹ Because of the complexity of this project, Auckland Council entered into a charter agreement with the New Zealand Transport Agency. Under the agreement, Auckland Council, through an engaged engineer, audits work on Waterview project structures that have a public interface. Other core infrastructure work has a consent exemption provided for under the Act. The agreement outlines the respective roles of the parties. This approach avoids the numerous building consents that otherwise might be required, with potential delays to the project as a result.
- 8.10 The charter agreement is seen as a national precedent for other similar projects.

Electronic lodgement of consent applications

- 8.11 NewCore will incorporate electronic lodgement, but is not expected to be fully operational until 2017. In the meantime, Building Control is putting forward a business case for early electronic lodgement of consents and is looking at other local authorities that use or are about to use electronic lodgement. Three options are currently being looked at, with significant progress expected by mid-2015.

Inspection initiatives

- 8.12 Electronic mobile tablets are being progressively introduced for use by inspectors in the field. Auckland Council expects this to result in a boost to productivity.
- 8.13 Builders App is an application that has been developed to allow builders on-site to transmit requests for inspections.
- 8.14 Reducing the number of inspections is being trialled with several building companies. Auckland Council expects that a typical dwelling would have no more than four inspections.

Our observations about initiatives to improve service performance

Pre-application meetings

- 8.15 The number of pre-application meetings appears to be lower than we expected, considering the positive customer feedback from those who participated in them (68% satisfaction). In the 11 months to May 2014, only 259 pre-application meetings had been held, and most were at Auckland Council's central office.
- 8.16 Architectural firms told us that they appreciated the value of pre-application meetings but observed that, sometimes, the subsequent Building Control staff

⁹ The Waterview project is the country's largest roading project. The project will build a partially underground motorway to join State Highways 16 and 28.

they dealt with were not the same as the staff at the pre-application meeting. Also, different staff members answered their questions differently.

- 8.17 We consider that Auckland Council could do more to encourage pre-application meetings, perhaps by using website promotions, newsletters, and financial incentives.

Risk-based consenting

- 8.18 We consider that Auckland Council has good risk-based consenting initiatives. These initiatives are in their early stages but will become more important when fast-tracking for Special Housing Areas leads to construction. It is likely that major building developers will be heavily involved in Special Housing Areas and that the mix of housing will include terraced and/or low-cost standard housing.

- 8.19 These initiatives will need to be consolidated and spread throughout Building Control's work in the light of expected increases in consent numbers and more standardised, pre-fabricated, and pre-built housing.

Inspection initiatives

- 8.20 Recording inspections on an electronic tablet should improve efficiency. Over time, this could also have additional benefits, with details of inspections to be carried out the next day sent directly to inspectors' tablets. This would remove the need for inspectors to go into their base office every morning. It will also help to more efficiently allocate work to inspectors. It will also be possible to discuss work that is being inspected with other inspectors to resolve problems and queries in real time on Skype. In our view, it is unfortunate that the introduction of the tablets was delayed.

Electronic lodgement of consent applications

- 8.21 The business case for this proposed initiative appears to be compelling. Auckland Council estimates that it will save an average of one hour when processing a consent application and will avoid the need to scan hard copies. The typical officer charge-out rate is \$135-\$177 an hour, so saving time has significant cost implications. Putting the initiative into effect will also save on the costs of moving and storing large volumes of paper. Also, it will benefit applicants, who will not have to print additional copies. One estimate is that it will save \$3.5 million a year in printing costs for applicants.

Publications by the Auditor-General

Other publications issued by the Auditor-General recently have been:

- Draft annual plan 2015/16
- Auditor-General's findings about AgResearch's Future Footprint project
- Local government: Results of the 2013/14 audits
- Education for Māori: Relationships between schools and whānau
- Response of the New Zealand Police to the Commission of Inquiry into Police Conduct: Fourth monitoring report
- Ministry for Primary Industries: Managing the Primary Growth Partnership
- Central government: Results of the 2013/14 audits
- Government planning and support for housing on Māori land
- Ministry of Social Development: Using a case management approach to service delivery
- Water and roads: Funding and management challenges
- Making the most of audit committees in the public sector
- Accident Compensation Corporation: Using a case management approach to rehabilitation
- Challenges facing licensing trusts
- Annual Report 2013/14
- Ashburton District Council: Allegations of conflicts of interest affecting decisions on a second bridge
- New Zealand Transport Agency: Maintaining and renewing the state highway network – follow-up report
- From auditor to soldier – stories of the men who served
- Accident Compensation Corporation: How it deals with complaints

Website

All these reports, and many of our earlier reports, are available in HTML and PDF format on our website – www.oag.govt.nz. Most of them can also be obtained in hard copy on request – reports@oag.govt.nz.

Notification of new reports

We offer facilities on our website for people to be notified when new reports and public statements are added to the website. The home page has links to our RSS feed, Twitter account, Facebook page, and email subscribers service.

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