



Waikato RATA (Regional Asset Technical Accord) – Submission to Productivity Commission – February 2019

Introduction

The Waikato Mayoral Forum (RATA Mayoral Reference Group members) have requested that RATA provide a submission to the Commission regarding the local government funding and financing inquiry. The reference for this was the presentation provided in the Waikato on 11 February 2019. It was considered that the Commission may be interested in a richer understanding of the regional benefits achieved through the RATA collaboration in the Waikato. Following is a summary of work completed by RATA as part of a strategic review completed in late 2017. However the Commission is invited to contact RATA (or the Waikato RATA Mayoral Reference Group members) to discuss this further.

A case study of the RATA collaboration was prepared by REG (the Road Efficiency Group) in 2015, and this is available here: <https://www.nzta.govt.nz/assets/Road-Efficiency-Group-2/docs/rata-collaboration-case-study.pdf>

In accordance with the terms of the Multi-Party Funding Agreement for RATA, between Waikato Local Authority Shared Services (WCLASS) and ten participating councils, the RATA Advisory Group and the WCLASS Board required a strategic review of RATA be completed prior to the three-year renewal being approved. The review was required to investigate progress to date, understand the benefits gained from the existing services provided by RATA, and investigate services that could (or should) be provided for the three years (from 1 July 2018).

The current RATA vision and purpose statements are:

Vision: By 2020, RATA will evolve from its current focus on data and evidence for asset management, to a local government trusted partner to deliver roading asset management services to the Waikato region.

Purpose: RATA will enable and facilitate effective, strategic roading investment decision-making for the Waikato region.

Discussion

Initially the WCLASS Board directed that the strategic review commence with developing terms of reference to enable a structured process for the review. To develop the terms of reference, it was agreed that all infrastructure/service delivery/group managers and roading managers would be interviewed to establish the current view of RATA's services, and to understand the gaps and opportunities which may be present.

This background work was completed, and the findings are summarised in this report. The overwhelming conclusion, supported by the WCLASS Board at their meeting on 1 December 2017, was that RATA is doing well and simply needs to continue to strive towards achieving its current vision, subject to a record being made of the background work completed.

Summary of Interview Findings

An interview with the region's infrastructure and roading managers was conducted in August and September 2017. Each interview followed a pre-set series of questions to endeavour to understand where RATA was being effective (or not), and where future opportunities may be apparent. Taupo District staff were also interviewed, as they have indicated that they may wish to join RATA in the future. The NZTA's Regional Relationships Central North Island Director was also interviewed for her regional perspective on RATA. The findings from these interviews are summarised below.

a) The most useful outputs from RATA were identified as being:

Asset Managers' Forum – the sharing of knowledge and experience, networking and facilitating discussion has been invaluable

Asset Information Engineer role – where this is being used (by five councils), it has proven to be of significant benefit, although there are mixed expectations from the role (e.g. where data entry backlogs need to be addressed prior to data process improvements)

Data Collection Contracts – ease of procurement of services, knowledge that this is now being done consistently across the region to give confidence in benchmarking results

Stakeholder Survey – valuable insights into customers' levels of satisfaction with transport/roading noted by several (one council feels that the results are overly influenced by state highway perspectives rather than local roads)

Bridge Inspection Contracts – moving to a consistent, best practice asset management approach is considered important (although an increase in the cost of service was also noted)

dTIMS Modelling – seen as a key tool for assessing future network investment against required levels of service, and doing it collectively has improved understanding of the tool significantly.

b) Identified gaps in RATA's services

No gaps in RATA's services (from those expected or documented in the RATA business plan) were identified.

c) Identified current resource gaps

Most councils raised concerns about their ability to resource their own contract management and project management functions. It was noted that in a number of cases they are relying on contractors, who are also struggling to secure experienced staff. Having experienced staff (or consultants) to oversee the work being delivered is essential and the lack of experienced staff is presenting risks of substandard outcomes where client resources are stretched (for renewal, maintenance and capital works, as well as development engineering/vested asset delivery).

d) Suggestions for where future RATA efforts should be focused.

RATA communications should be more visible, possibly with more face-to-face meetings to share information with roading managers and infrastructure managers.

A RATA website was noted as an accessible way to share information rather than using email or the Collaboration Portal. An example was the question “if I miss the Asset Managers’ Forum, how do I still stay informed?”. This has raised the question as to whether the Asset Managers’ Forum should be renamed, so that it is more accessible to staff who do not consider themselves to be asset managers.

Running the RAMM Treatment Selection Algorithm (a tool for developing forward works plans for the next year or two) for councils (and possibly providing dTIMS modelling in-house) were noted as areas where RATA could provide further support.

Coaching/mentoring in asset management and contract management was noted as a desirable collaborative opportunity.

Field validation of forward works programmes (or facilitating this between councils) was raised as an opportunity that councils would appreciate gaining greater confidence in.

Consistent use of a RAMM contractor was noted by a few councils who felt that they didn’t have the appropriate resources in-house to manage this tool to its fullest potential.

Supporting cadet programmes or facilitating access to existing programmes (such as Waikato District’s) was also seen as an area for future focus.

Other items identified were: providing support with reviewing procurement strategies (raised by two councils); sharing AMP improvement plans to form future RATA work plans; and policy development, such as paper road management and stormwater quality management.

A governance/elected member/Mayoral Forum/RTC newsletter produced periodically by RATA was suggested to ensure that there is an appropriate level of visibility of the collaboration.

Forward works programme tours are considered useful in most councils, but maybe in future years a focus on safety programming and delivery could also be included.

Developing consistent maintenance contract specifications across the region was raised by three councils as something that would be expected to bring efficiencies to the sector and greater consistency of delivery.

RATA needs to celebrate its success to date and therefore should be actively involved in awards applications to ensure that its work is recognised.

Planned Way Forward

As part of the background work there was a need identified to focus on activity management plans in the short and medium term, as the region is not currently indicating that they will all be able to consistently meet the requirements set by the NZTA for funding for the 2018-2021 NLTP period. The RATA Advisory Group noted that this is a concern, and that RATA should focus on this for the coming three year period, rather than making significant changes to its scope or delivery. While there is a clear need for further work to achieve RATA’s current vision, agreed steps are required for this (such as consideration of how a consistent activity management plan for the region may be achieved).

RATA will review its annual plan prior to 30 June 2018 for approval by the RATA Advisory Group (on behalf of the WLASS Board) to reflect this work and ensure it is appropriately addressed in the coming three-year period.

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RATA was a finalist in the LGNZ Excellence Awards in 2018. A copy of the submission for those Awards can be provided also. Please contact the submitter for this if required.
