

BY MAXINE DAY WITH NEIL ERICKSEN, JAN CRAWFORD, MICHAEL BACKHURST AND SARAH CHAPMAN

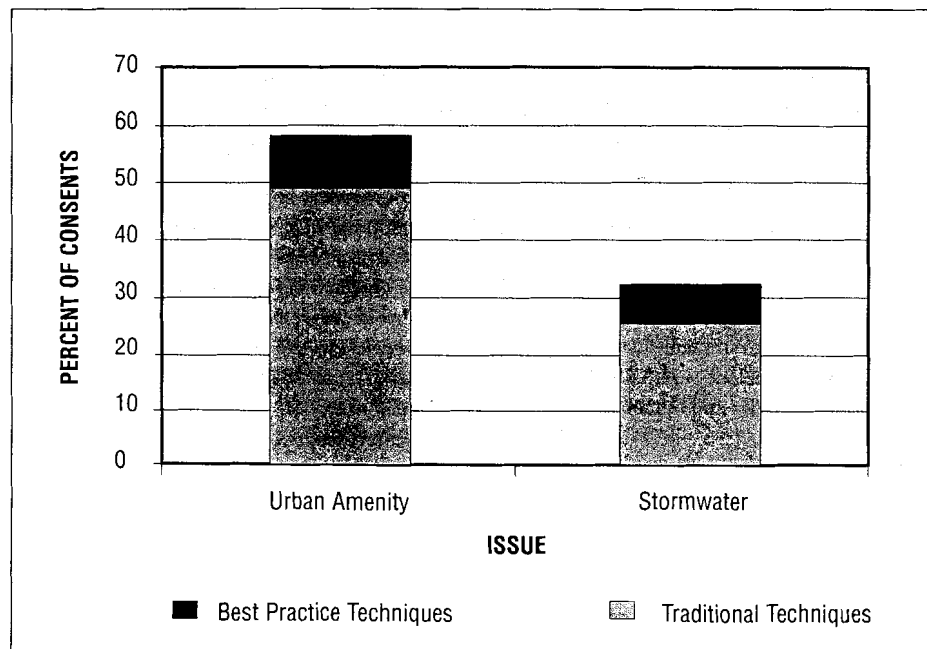
NEW YEAR'S RESOLUTIONS FOR BEST PRACTICE

RESEARCH TEAM
EVALUATES TRADITIONAL
AND BEST PRACTICE
DISTRICT PLAN POLICIES
IN SIX COUNCILS
THROUGHOUT NEW
ZEALAND.

At the stroke of midnight, resolutions for the New Year may not have been to 'implement best-practice in the workplace', but upon reflection, perhaps ought to have been. Unlike those resolutions for giving up smoking or getting fit, best practice in planning requires more than just personal motivation. Implementing local government policies and strategies using environmental best practice is dependent not only on having the methods, but also the means.

In order to understand what best practice is and the factors influencing its implementation, our research team evaluated the implementation of both traditional and best practice district plan policies in six councils throughout New Zealand. While the research focussed on the two topics of residential urban amenity management and the management of development's effects on stormwater, the results suggest the issues facing implementation of best practice are generic to many issues.

Below: Use of Environmental Management Techniques in Resource Consents.



WHAT IS BEST PRACTICE?

In its most simple manifestation, best practice refers to those practices that aim for and achieve best results. Arguably, environmental best practices are those proven techniques, processes, technologies or innovations that move us ever closer to the goal of environmental sustainability.

Despite best practice being a value-laden concept, many 'best practices' can be widely agreed upon. Consultation and literature reviews have shown that best practice relating to stormwater tends to converge on low-impact or ecologically-based management techniques, while urban amenity best practice techniques focus on new-urbanist principles and landscape integration. References to and options for best practice abound, but how often and how well is it applied?

IS BEST PRACTICE BEING IMPLEMENTED?

The recent report from the Parliamentary Commissioner for the Environment on 'Creating our Future' observed that New Zealand's progress towards sustainable development has not been overly momentous. This observation is disappointing given that the Resource Management Act (1991) is more than a decade old. This outcome is significant insofar as the RMA sets the framework for environmental management. If national progress towards sustainability has not been significant, is there hope for progress at the local level?

The PUCM research showed that while district plans in particular readily adopted the new principles of the Act into their objectives and policies, the implementation of these policies through best practice techniques was minimal.

In general, the results from an evaluation of six district plans 453 randomly and non-randomly selected resource consent showed a substantial gap between both the best practice and traditional techniques for environmental management techniques advocated in district plans and those being applied in resource consents. In daily practice, consents tend to

rely on only a small range of traditional techniques for environmental management. Therefore, despite council intentions to apply best practice, its occurrence is infrequent.

Overall, the findings from the urban amenity consent sample indicated that only two councils perceived best practice to be occurring through the resource consent process. However, even within these councils, the number and range of best practice management techniques applied for managing urban amenity did not greatly differ from traditional practices.

The largest increases in urban amenity best practice occurred in relation to techniques for "retaining natural features" - such as integrating buildings with natural landforms, and retaining native and significant vegetation - and "safety and accessibility" - which included such things as encouraging cycle-friendly designs, providing for inter-connected pedestrian through-fares, ensuring living areas face the street and so on.

The stormwater sample was more encouraging insofar as all six councils were applying best practice, yet the results showed less average increase in the number of consents using best practice than for urban amenity management. Despite this, nearly all councils increased their use of best practice techniques to "retain natural features or use ecological solutions" in the management of stormwater. Techniques for retaining natural features includes such things as protecting or retaining wetlands, riparian margins or native vegetation, while ecological solutions may include development of wetlands, grassed flow-paths and use of open watercourses etc. Significant increases for "stormwater treatment" techniques, like sediment ponds, filters and screens were also seen in two of the six councils, with marginal increases in several others.

HOW CAN WE IMPROVE THE IMPLEMENTATION OF BEST PRACTICE?

The findings from the research raise questions about the predominance of traditional techniques over best practice. In particular, what factors affect council's ability to implement best practice? And, what mechanisms exist for achieving environmental quality in New Zealand?

Our extensive investigations revealed a

number of factors that influence the implementation of best practice including; council and applicant capacity, council and applicant commitment, and plan quality. Of these factors, the capacity of councils to implement their plans and quality of the plan were the two most significant.

Capacity refers to such things as the resources available to the implement the plan, including funding, and the availability of time and expertise. It can also include access to best-practice resources and training. We found that where capacity increases the quality of implementation is better.

Higher quality plans were also found to lead to better implementation. Of the six plans studied, the higher quality plans tended to have more clearly articulated policies and greater consistency between policies and rules. In contrast, the poor quality plans with weak links between policies and rules demonstrated difficulties in applying best practice techniques that could have upheld environmental standards to the levels advocated in policies.

These results imply that in low to medium capacity councils, where plan quality also tends to be poor, the range of environmental management techniques being applied to manage the effects of development is unlikely to have significantly changed since the Town and Country Planning Act (1977). Consequently, these results reinforce the observations of the PCfE insofar as they indicate that under the current planning regime it is improbable that environmental quality has substantially progressed towards the goal of a sustainable environment. Possible explanations for this slow progress include such things as a notable lack of central government guidance to local councils through such measures as national standards (excluding the New Zealand Coastal Policy Statement), and an organisational culture in central and local government that is focussed on process (i.e. efficiency) rather than substantive environmental outcomes (i.e. effectiveness).

Any new year's resolution to improve the uptake of best practice in local government needs to concentrate on: improving the capacity of councils to develop and implement district plans; integrating policy and regulatory units in councils to better implement policies and methods through the

resource consent process; setting national standards to raise the level of environmental quality, particularly for those areas where plan quality is poor; and, improving the internal consistency of plans.

FOOTNOTES

1. The Planning Under a Cooperative Mandate team for Phase 2 is funded by FRST and is comprised of professional planning practitioners, university researchers (Waitako, Auckland, and North Carolina (USA), and specialised Maori consultants.

2. The six district councils were Horowhenua, Hurunui, Kaipara, Papakura, Tauranga and Waitakere. Selection was based on plan quality and council capacity results from PUCM Phase 1 (Ericksen et al. 2001).

3. Details of the sample and the Plan Implementation Evaluation (PIE) method are in Laurian and Day et al. (in press).

4. Based on Ericksen et al. (2001).

REFERENCES CITED

- Ericksen, N., Crawford, J., Berke, P., and Dixon, J. (2001) *Plan Quality and Governance*. The University of Waikato, International Global Change Institute.
- Parliamentary Commissioner for the Environment (2002) *Creating our Future - sustainable development for New Zealand*. Office of the Parliamentary Commissioner for the Environment, Wellington.
- Resource Management Act (1991)
- Town and Country Planning Act (1977)
- The Planning Under a Co-operative Mandate research programme began in LATE 1995 with a 3-year nation-wide study of plan quality. Original team members were Neil Ericksen (IGCI, University of Waikato), Jennifer Dixon (then at Massey University), Philip Berke (University of North Carolina) and Jan Crawford (Planning Consultants Ltd).*
- As work progressed into Phase 2 on plan implementation, Dr Tom Fookes (University of Auckland) replaced Dr Dixon and the team expanded to include Michael Backhurst, Maxine Day, Sarah Chapman (Lawrence Cross Chapman Ltd), Dr Lucie Laurian (University of Arizona), and Richard Jefferies and Tricia Warren (Kokomuka Consultancy Ltd)*
- In accordance with academic convention, the first author took the lead in writing the paper and the remaining names reflect contributions made by others to the paper.*