

# Making good decisions

*Balancing different needs and priorities is the crux of local government decision-making. Every day councillors tackle issues by weighing up the advice given by officials, the perceived benefits, the views and priorities of the community, and sometimes have to come to an unpopular decision for the well-being of the community as a whole.*

*At times councils also need to widen their defined role in order to be able to tackle an issue in a more holistic way, as Environment Canterbury has done in order to improve the air quality in the Canterbury region.*

## Case study: Environment Canterbury's Clean Heat

Environment Canterbury (ECan) needed to take a broader view on air quality when it began tackling Christchurch City's smog problem almost 10 years ago. Research showed that 80 per cent of particulates in the air were coming from houses, 10 per cent from industry and 10 per cent from vehicles.

The challenge was to shift perceptions from the popular view that the majority of pollution was caused by vehicles, to people accepting personal responsibility for the air pollution from their own wood and coal burners and ultimately doing something to improve air quality.

As a regional council ECan is tasked with protecting and improving air quality but it does not usually have a role inside the home. Therefore, there had to be a significant shift in thinking to tackle the problem and ultimately come up with the Clean Heat Project.

Ken Lawn, Director of Operations for ECan, says Christchurch has had an air quality problem for decades, but it also has had the problem of people trying to keep warm during the long cold winters.

"On a cold clear night people would burn their wood and coal and pump that into the air. It was a serious health issue and it had also become an aesthetic issue – we had become 'smog city'.



However, people were just trying to keep warm which is also a health issue."

He says that the first draft Air Plan in 1999 and other early consultative documents posed a big problem for councillors.

"The big challenge for councillors at this time was that they did not want to make decisions that would directly impact on what people did in their own homes i.e. they didn't want to be responsible for people getting cold because their fires had been taken away."

Mr Lawn says there were plenty of lobby groups involved – with organisations like the Clean Air Society and Community Energy Action on one side and people strongly opposed to any constraints on having open fires in homes on the other side, including Christchurch City Council, coal merchants, and wood burner manufacturers.

The air quality issue moved into a discussion phase with the community, with the lobby groups and the media becoming increasingly active.

Councillors took their first formal step, using provisions under the old Clean Air Act which had been brought into the Resource Management Act, to authorise particular clean burning wood burners and place limitations on the burning of wet wood.

Mr Lawn says the council also decided to ban the burning of coal, a move which was successfully overturned by a coal retailer who challenged the ban through the High Court.

Smog levels continued and home fires continued to be the major contributor to the city's high levels of suspended particulates.

The turning point came when two councillors and an independent chair were appointed to a panel to hear submissions on a consultative draft plan. This proved an excellent forum where members of the community and representative bodies got involved and made it clear there was a significant issue with old cold houses that had poor insulation and were hard to heat.

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“The community did not want people suffering from respiratory diseases because of the winter time smog, but it also did not want people getting cold because their fires had been taken away and they could not heat their homes.”

The late Cr Neil Cherry put considerable work into developing a policy to not only clean the air, but also have warm homes – this was a significant breakthrough, because councillors could see that if the measures developed included ensuring homes were warm then people would not suffer.

The council also carried out social marketing research which provided councillors with information about the views of the silent majority in the community. This sometimes challenged councillors’ own perceptions about what the community thought and provided information about what ‘real’ people thought.

The council asked staff to identify a programme which would clean up the city’s air and ensure people had warm homes. Because of the process the councillors had gone through to get to this point there were few reservations when it came to signing up for the 10-year, \$50 million Clean Heat Project which was about clean air and warm houses.

Mr Lawn says ECan realised it had to adopt a three pronged approach for the project to be successful. The council recognised the importance of educating people about air pollution and benefits of change, offering incentives and financial help to encourage people to make the change, and introducing regulations to help enforce the changes to those not wanting to comply.

## Education

Mr Lawn says many people accepted there was dirty air in Christchurch but they didn’t want to change their heating.

“Even now when we survey people who have changed their heating they cite reasons of needing to replace an old wood burner, being sick of chopping wood, wanting the ease of a heat pump and way down the list comes any mention of wanting to be responsible and improve the air quality.”

These reasons are important to understand. Mr Lawn says when you are trying to make fundamental changes you have got to find the triggers to get people to change their behaviour. The surveys showed that people believed that 50 per cent of the pollution was from motor vehicles and only 30 per cent from home heating.

A couple of years ago ECan ran a marketing campaign to shift people’s understanding of the problem. Mr Lawn says one of the big barriers was that people found it hard to associate home heating with smog – they see the cars and think that must be the source.

The campaign helped to alter people’s perceptions and make them more responsive to change.

## Incentives

Assessors go into the home and work with the owner to determine what kind of heating is appropriate and the insulation that will be needed to help retain the heat. Insulation includes bats and under floor foil and new sources of heat include heat pumps, pellet fires, gas fires, or low emission wood burners.

Incentives have been offered to help home owners make the change. “If they are community service card holders they get the whole lot for free. If they are a landlord we pay 40 per cent of the cost and they pay the rest. Everyone else receives a subsidy of up to 30 per cent or an interest free loan to be paid back over 10 years on their rates.”

## Regulation

In the Draft Air Plan ECan proposes a number of initiatives including that a wood burner can’t be put into a new house or into a house without one, banning the use of open fires from 1 January 2006, and banning the use of wood burners more than 15 years old from 1 January 2008. The wood burner has to be replaced with a more efficient wood burner or another form of heating.

The process of introducing these changes has been long and protracted and has still not been resolved. Mr Lawn says that ultimately there will be some rule changes and that these rules will be needed to enforce compliance with the 20 per cent of people who don’t voluntarily want to make heating changes.

## Funding

Funding for the project has been obtained through a targeted rate across the Christchurch urban area. The total cost is \$50 million over 10 years with \$5 million collected annually through the rates. The average rates increase was \$35 a year on top of existing rates.

So far ECan has converted over 10,000 homes with a budgeted target at the end of 10 years of 26,000 homes. “There were 3,600 conversions at the end of the last financial year. This approach has been adopted by other councils and there has also been central government support, with the introduction of National Environmental Standards for air, and more recently announcements of some more central government funding.”

