



Sustainability and LOCAL GOVERNMENT

by Alan Hallett

IMAGINE A COMPANY which spends more than ICI each year, which employs more people than Postbank and whose assets are greater than Air New Zealand's – then consider the effect that a company like that would have on the economy of a single region. Imagine the influence that this company could have in promoting sustainability, if it chose to do so, just on these economic grounds. Now add to this economic weight the statutory powers of a local or regional government ...

The 'company' we have been talking about is the Wellington City Council, which by itself and through its 'subsidiaries' spends about \$330 million per year, employs 3,000 people and owns assets worth \$1.5 billion. If it was a company, these figures would put it as one of the top 50 in New Zealand. Admittedly it is one of the country's largest councils but nevertheless this demonstrates the role that all councils can play in working towards sustainability. The 86 local authorities created by

the recent local government reorganisation will all have considerable economic and statutory powers and they could, if they wish, have a considerable effect.

The last few years have also seen their statutory powers being significantly strengthened. The present government believes very strongly that regional and local authorities should play a larger role than before and they have been given or are about to be given, several major new powers and responsibilities as a result. The most important of these as far as sustainability is concerned is the reform of the resource management laws.

Large Role for Councils

The upshot of this will be a new law by the middle of the year which gives regional and local councils a dominant role in the management of resources. Regional councils will be responsible for management of water, soil and geothermal resources, natural hazards, pollution control and the control of haz-

ardous substances and will be concerned with coastal management. Local councils, meanwhile, will continue with land use management through the District Scheme (or whatever replaces it), noise control and hazards mitigation and they will also be responsible for hazardous substances and air pollution control at a local level, where this is appropriate. On this basis, councils are certainly going to have a large role to play.

Since one of the key issues for sustainability is the question of resources and the way in which they are used, we could expect that the new law will address it – and so it proves.

Sustainability is the basic and overriding principle, but the problem is that it is likely that it will remain as just that – a principle – unless local authorities accept the responsibility to put it into effect... and most councils are under great pressures which don't allow them to.

The demands on them to promote economic growth and resource exploitation within their areas are enormous. Competition with other regions for investment employment opportunities and so on puts great pressure on them and most of them therefore feel that the first council to start down the sustainable path will therefore be at a severe disadvantage compared with the rest – so they don't. Furthermore, the people who tend to get onto councils also tend to be the people who are least likely to promote sustainability and who think nothing wrong of resource exploitation. Fortunately the recent local body elections have seen a scattering of new councillors elected who could help steer councils into new directions.

In these circumstances, it is highly probable that councils will not adopt sustainability issues seriously – and if they don't, central government will do very little to correct them. From what we know about RMLR at the moment, there will be no requirement for councils to be judged on their performance nor will there be adequate mechanisms to ensure that councils do address sustainability. In the absence of these, what will be important, as always, is the political will of the people on the councils. If it isn't there – and it seems that it might not be – our efforts to achieve sustainability are going to be hampered.

Through planning controls, local government can ensure attractive, historic buildings are retained. Public Trust Building, Wellington. Photo: Alan Hallett

