

Response to information request from STUFF

19 July 2023

Dear Rachael

Thank you for your email on 23 May 2023 clarifying an earlier request for information.

You request related to emails, reports, texts between 24 April and 22 May that made “mention of the relationship between the mayor and the CEO, any mention of the CEO having sought or seeking legal advice, any that mention a personal grievance, or any that indicate the CEO is/was stressed/upset/uncomfortable with his current employment”.

Please see attached relevant emails and documents that mention the relationship between the mayor and CEO.

Some information has been redacted in accordance with the Local Government Official Information and Meetings Act Section 7 (2)(a) to protect the privacy of individuals and Section 7(2)(g) to maintain legal professional privilege.

Any other documents/emails or texts that mention legal advice or the CEO’s mental wellbeing will not be released in accordance with the Local Government Official Information and Meetings Act Section 7 (2)(a) to protect the privacy of individuals and Section 7(2)(g) to maintain legal professional privilege.

Thank you for your patience in waiting for a response.

If you are unsatisfied with the response, you are entitled to lodge a complaint with the Office of the Ombudsmen. You can find more information on its website <http://www.ombudsman.parliament.nz>

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Sonia Gerken".

Sonia Gerken
GM Communications & Customer Support

Independent review terms of reference

It was agreed by a motion of the Gore District Council on [date here] that Dentons Kensington Swan partner Linda Clark will be appointed to conduct this independent review.

Background

The purpose of local government is to enable democratic local decision making by, and on behalf of, communities.¹

Since the local body election of September 2022, trust and confidence issues between the Mayor and elected councillors, the Mayor and the Chief Executive and the Chief Executive and others have become an issue of speculation and controversy. These issues, either real or perceived, impact on the Gore District Council's ability to perform its obligations under the Local Government Act 2002.

Purpose

The purpose of this review is to identify the cause/s of this erosion in trust and confidence between the various parties, to identify ways in which trust and confidence can be rebuilt and restored and to provide a roadmap to allow all parties to work constructively with each other in future in the interests of their local community.

Scope of review

The review will consider:

- the roles and responsibilities of all relevant parties, including governance and operations
- reasons why trust and confidence have been adversely affected
- whether the induction of the Mayor and elected councillors post-election 2022 was adequate to ensure all parties understood their roles and responsibilities, that all parties were fully introduced and new working relationships properly established
- ways in which communication between the parties can be improved
- ways in which working relationships between the parties can be improved
- whether any factors associated with culture, capacity and capability of the Council impacted on how all parties have been able to meet their obligations under the Local Government Act and to their local community.

The reviewer may consider any other matter that emerges from her inquiry that she considers relevant to ensuring that all parties can work more constructively together in future.

The review is expected to provide recommendations about how the Council might conduct itself in future, which may include recommendations to introduce processes and procedures to amend, stop or affirm current processes and procedures.

Framework for the review

The review will be completed by no later than mid-September 2023.

The reviewer will be provided with all appropriate documents, correspondence and other written materials she considers relevant.

She will conduct interviews with interested parties, including:

- Mayor Ben Bell
- Deputy Mayor Keith Hovell
- Elected Councillors
- Senior executive staff employed by the Council
- Members of the Mataura Community Board
- Representatives of the local rūnanga
- Any other person the reviewer considers relevant

Once completed the final report will be presented to the full Council and published.

¹ Local Government Act 2002, section 10

Response to Sunday journalist Kristin Hall

10 May 2023

Dear Kristin

Thank you for your email and list of questions. I admire your tenacity with regard to securing an interview with me. However, the reasons I gave on 28 April still stand. These were:

- My employer (the Council) advises against it
- I received legal advice advising against it

I have endeavoured to answer some of your questions without compromising either of the above.

Relationship with the mayor

- Several sources, including former mayor Tracy Hicks who has spoken on-the-record, have told us they believe there is a “connection” between Rebecca Tayler’s departure from council, and Ben Bell running for mayor – do you believe this, and can you explain why/why not? **No Response.**

- Tracy Hicks says he believes Ben has “targeted” you, because “the council appears to be pretty united. The only person that has a problem and appears to have a problem with Chief Executive, is the mayor”. Do you agree with this? **No Response**

- Do you feel personally targeted by Ben Bell? Why/why not? **No Response**

- It's been put to us that the Team Hokonui campaign was essentially engineered by Rebecca Tayler, and it was done in order to, quote, “get rid of the rot”. What is your reaction to this? **No Response**

- Do you believe Rebecca Tayler is influencing or pulling strings behind Ben’s mayoralty? Can you explain why you believe that? (You mentioned to us during our off-the-record conversations on the phone that you recognise the way she writes and believe she’s behind some of Ben’s emails to you). What is it specifically that gives you that impression? **No Response**

- Ben Bell says that after he was sworn in, he did receive a call from you, but not a voicemail, and he “would have expected an email or text” in the first few days of his mayoralty. Did you try to contact the mayor after he didn’t return your call?

Response: To clarify – is the mayor referring to after the swearing in ceremony, held on Wednesday 9 November, or immediately after the election results. The following chronology is offered to illustrate the numerous contacts made:

Sunday 9 October (the day after the election) - I rang and congratulated Ben on leading the mayoral election at that stage, with special votes yet to be counted.

Thursday 13 October – I left a voice message asking for 10 minutes of Ben’s time on the Friday to cover transitional matters, that being the change of date for the statutory meeting because of the delay in getting an election result. I also wanted to discuss my prearranged annual leave the following week.

Friday 11 November – there was an email exchange about the draft committee structure.

- Ben Bell says that he was initially told by you that “it would be fine” for him to have a personal assistant, but that you essentially went back on that statement when it was brought up formally with council. Did that happen?

Response: The GM Community Lifestyle Services and I met with the mayor on Tuesday 25 October, during which I stated if the mayor wanted his own PA it would require council approval and an amendment to the budget as the Council already employed an EA, who was shared by the mayor and Chief Executive. I gave him a process to follow, not support for the proposal.

- Ben Bell says that when he received an email from you and the senior management team on November 18th, he hadn’t even had the chance to meet two of the senior leaders yet. He says he was left heartbroken and bemused by the accusation that he had affected their mental health. Can you confirm whether or not Ben had met all of the senior leadership team at this point?

Response: No.

- Ben Bell also says if the issues raised in the email were as serious as alleged, then he would have expected you to raise them with him in person in the first instance, rather than in writing. He also says you were on official leave when the letter was sent. What is your response to this?

Response: I wasn’t given an opportunity to have my first sit down with the mayor, on a one-on-one basis, until 22 November. Whether I was on leave when the letter was sent is irrelevant – I was still contactable and agreed to being a signatory to the document.

- Ben Bell has been accused by staff and councillors of having a cold and legalistic tone in his communication. Do you agree with this? **No Response**

- During the extraordinary meeting on March 28th you described a meeting with an LGNZ mediator. You said the mediator “eventually exited the process saying he was now biased, the account had not been paid and the Mayor was not answering his calls”. Can you explain why the mediator believed they were biased?

Response: I have already responded to this question in an earlier email to Nadene

- Ben Bell says that during the extraordinary meeting on March 28th, he left without answering questions for his own mental protection. He says he was on the verge of a breakdown and didn’t want to “lose it” in front of his colleagues. Do you believe your communication and interactions with Ben up until March 28th contributed to this at all?

No Response

- In the March 28th meeting Ben was described as thinking he has “presidential powers”. He says that he strongly objects to this, and believes there is no evidence for that

claim. Do you believe there is evidence for that claim? If yes, what is that evidence? **No**

Response

- It was also claimed in the March 28th meeting by you that Ben has had to be woken up and picked up by staff in order to get to appointments on time. Ben denies this and says there is no evidence to back it up. Do you have evidence for this? If yes, what is that evidence? If not, why was it said?

Response: Yes, I have evidence he has been taken by staff to appointments to ensure he gets there in time

- A current councillor has told us that he has seen Ben “yelled at” and “abused” by council staff and that he’s not shown the respect he deserves. Have you ever witnessed or contributed to this treatment of the mayor?

Response: No.

Allegations from former council staff

We have spoken to multiple former council staff who allege a culture of bullying and forcing people out of their jobs at the Gore District Council. These former employees have worked at council at various periods between the early 2000s and now, meaning the allegations date from the early days of your leadership until recently.

The allegations are:

- That staff are targeted if they “know too much” about council operations or if they are considered to be high performers
- That the threshold for being removed from your job is “very low” and that you have a history of cataloguing minor infractions in order to justify getting rid of staff
- That you have openly bragged about getting rid of staff who don’t toe the line
- That you have acted in a threatening and intimidating manner towards staff you have issues with
- That you foster a “toxic” workplace culture and manipulate staff you do not like
- That your management style is one of “divide and rule”

Our questions are as follows:

- Do you and/or your senior management team target high performers, and/or those who have an intimate knowledge of confidential council matters?
- Do you have a history of pressuring or restructuring staff out of their jobs because of minor transgressions? -

- Have you ever bragged about the high turnover of staff, or warned staff that if they don't like your leadership style, they "know where to go?"
- Have you ever acted in a threatening or intimidating manner towards staff or former staff who you have an issue with?
- What is your response to being described as a manipulator or as a manager with a "divide and rule" style?
- Why do you think multiple former staff over a wide time frame have made these claims?

Response: I would refer you to a comment made by the GM Community Lifestyle Services Rex Capil, a man with an extensive local government career, to Councillors at the extraordinary meeting on 28 March. The minutes show he said:

".... had worked with SMTs in local government for the last 20 years and this was the most effective SMT he had worked in. The team saw itself as a team and it had to both for support for each other and to ensure it could continue to operate the organisation with the dysfunctionality in play since October last year."

Also, a recent staff survey returned the following:

- 75% agreed or strongly agreed with the statement 'My organisation has effective governance and leadership in health and safety'
- 73% agreed or strongly agreed with the statement 'Senior leaders create an environment of trust and fairness within the organisation'

The following comment was made by a survey participant:

The current senior leadership team is great. They are all really approachable and I know that if my GM is busy, any other would be happy to listen to a query and help me if I needed it, which is really genuine. A united and kind team at the top has great flow on effects for everyone underneath and makes the work environment enjoyable.

Mayor Ben Bell and all 10 Gore District Councillors entered into a discussion late Monday afternoon to see if they could put their differences to the side and refocus on the people of the Gore District before Tuesday's extraordinary meeting.

After in-depth, transparent, and honest conversation, elected members have reunited and apologised to each other and the community for the position they now found themselves in.

The conclusion of the conversation resulted in an indication that agenda items 4. *Vote of no confidence* and 6. *Request to remove Mayor from Committees, Sub-Committees and Joint-Committees* were no longer necessary.

The Mayor and Councillors have come to an understanding that they will all need to communicate more openly and effectively so that they do not have further misunderstandings that could lead to an irreparable breakdown in trust.

The issues of the relationship between the Mayor and the CEO are a separate issue and will be addressed via a mediation process and an independent review.

The Council has received the petition for "GDC CEO Steve Parry to Resign" at 2pm with 4,XXX signatures.

As per Gore District Council Standing Order 17, petitions "must be received by the Chief Executive at least 5 working days before the date of the meeting at which they will be presented." Given this, the petition will be considered at the next council meeting on Tuesday 13 June.

To protect the integrity of both the mediation process and the independent review the Council has resolved to undertake, the Council will be making no further comment on this topic until both these processes are complete.

From: [Sonia Gerken](#)
To: [Sonia Gerken](#)
Subject: FW: Fwd: Just FYI statement to go out from LGNZ & Taituara
Date: Monday, 17 July 2023 4:15:36 PM

From: Rex Capil <rcapil@goredc.govt.nz>
Sent: Tuesday, 16 May 2023 7:31 PM
To: .Councillors (with e-mail) <Councillors@goredc.govt.nz>; .Senior Management Team <SeniorManagementTeam@goredc.govt.nz>
Subject: Fwd: Just FYI statement to go out from LGNZ & Taituara

Hi all

FYI

Rex

Rex Capil
GM Community Lifestyle Services

From: Ranjani Ponnuchetty <ranjani.ponnuchetty@lgnz.co.nz>
Sent: Tuesday, May 16, 2023 6:42 PM
To: Keith Hovell <khovell@goredc.govt.nz>; Ben Bell <bbell@goredc.govt.nz>; Rex Capil <rcapil@goredc.govt.nz>
Subject: Just FYI statement to go out from LGNZ & Taituara

Gore District Council takes step in the right direction

Local Government New Zealand (LGNZ) and Taituarā commend Gore District Council for the movement today that sets them up on a positive path forward.

Councillors agreed to not go through with the symbolic vote of no confidence and two other unproductive recommendations, and instead work with LGNZ and Taituarā to ensure the Terms of Reference for the independent review is fit for purpose.

“We know the last few months have been tough for the Gore District Council, Chief Executive Steve Parry, Mayor Ben Bell and the Gore community,” LGNZ President Stuart Crosby said.

“The current situation at Gore District Council reflects poorly on everyone involved.

“Although it’s primarily this is keenly felt by the Gore community, it also does disservice to local democracy and local government generally.

“Communities have high expectations of their leaders and all parties have been

subject to intense public scrutiny in the past few months, something the Council isn't used to.

"We are very pleased that the Council has accepted that they need external support to get them through.

"LGNZ's National Council member, Mayor Campbell Barry, CE, Susan Freeman-Greene and Taituarā Vice President Jo Miller all spoke at the council meeting today to lend their support," Stuart Crosby said.

"As stewards of the sector, Taituarā and LGNZ are united in wanting the situation turned around," Taituarā's Vice President, Jo Miller said.

"It will require all parties concerned to shift. And it's incumbent on the entire Council, with our support, to deliver positive change for the future.

"Today's decision to work with us on, I hope, will go some way towards restoring the community's confidence in the council to seriously commit to working differently.

"In the short to medium term, we will offering Gore District Council regular and ongoing support," Jo Miller said.

"The issues the council faces are unique and complex," National Council member Campbell Barry said.

"However, where issues have arisen before in local government, the ones that successfully navigated their way through have had, and followed through on, outside support and advice," Campbell Barry said.

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From: [Sonia Gerken](#)
To: [Sonia Gerken](#)
Subject: FW: Fwd: Your council meeting tomorrow
Date: Tuesday, 18 July 2023 10:40:05 AM
Attachments: [image001.png](#)
[image002.png](#)
[Gore DC letter from LGNZ and Taituarā.pdf](#)

From: Rex Capil <rcapil@goredc.govt.nz>
Sent: Monday, 15 May 2023 7:22 PM
To: .Senior Management Team <SeniorManagementTeam@goredc.govt.nz>
Subject: Fwd: Your council meeting tomorrow

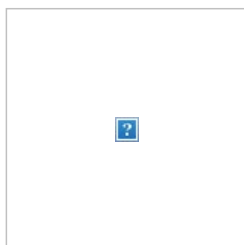
FYI

Rex Capil
GM Community Lifestyle Services

From: Susan Freeman-Greene <susan.freeman-greene@lgnz.co.nz>
Sent: Monday, May 15, 2023 5:29:22 PM
To: Ben Bell <bbell@goredc.govt.nz>; Keith Hovell <khovell@goredc.govt.nz>; John Gardyne <JGardyne@goredc.govt.nz>; Glenys Dickson <GDickson@goredc.govt.nz>; Neville Phillips <NPhillips@goredc.govt.nz>; Bronwyn Reid <BR Reid@goredc.govt.nz>; Joe Stringer <JStringer@goredc.govt.nz>; Paul McPhail <PMcPhail@goredc.govt.nz>; Stewart MacDonell <SMacDonell@goredc.govt.nz>; Richard McPhail <RMcPhail@goredc.govt.nz>; Robert McKenzie <RMcKenzie@goredc.govt.nz>; Bret Highsted <BHighsted@goredc.govt.nz>; Stephen Parry <SParry@goredc.govt.nz>; Rex Capil <rcapil@goredc.govt.nz>
Cc: Anthea Oliver <Anthea.Oliver@dia.govt.nz>; Warren Ulusele <Warren.Ulusele@dia.govt.nz> <Warren.Ulusele@dia.govt.nz>; Sanchia Jacobs <Sanchia.Jacobs@beca.com>; President <president@lgnz.co.nz>; Sam Broughton <sam.broughton@lgnz.co.nz>; jo.miller@huttcity.govt.nz <jo.miller@huttcity.govt.nz>; steve.ruru@trc.govt.nz <steve.ruru@trc.govt.nz>
Subject: Your council meeting tomorrow

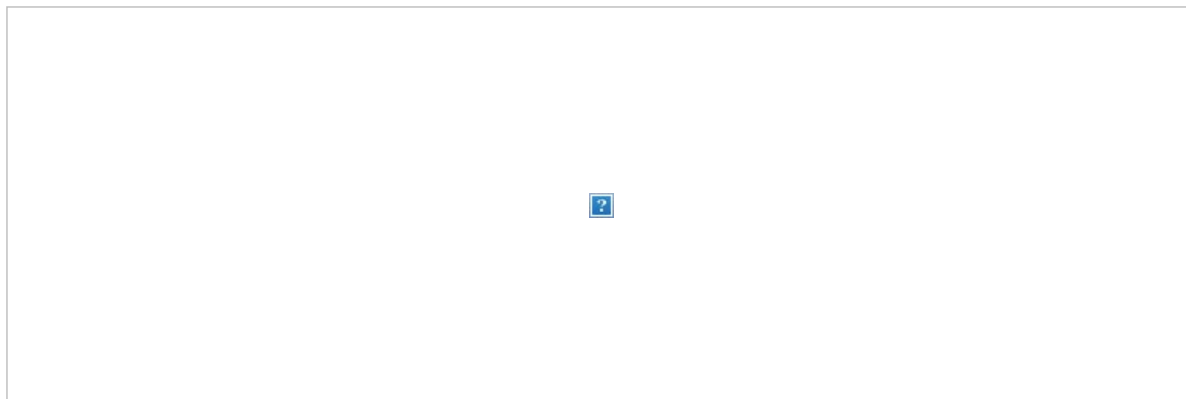
Please see attached a letter from LGNZ and Taituarā.

Ngā mihi
Susan



Susan Freeman-Greene // Chief Executive
E susan.freeman-greene@lgnz.co.nz // **M** 027 461 4443

Local Government New Zealand // *Local democracy's vision and voice*
lgnz.co.nz // Level 1, 117 Lambton Quay, Wellington 6011, Aotearoa



From: [Sonia Gerken](#)
To: [Sonia Gerken](#)
Subject: FW: FW: Media Questions for Radio News
Date: Tuesday, 18 July 2023 11:10:10 AM
Attachments: [2023-05-16 Press Release re Council reunites.pdf](#)

From: Emily Mason <EMason@goredc.govt.nz>
Sent: Tuesday, 16 May 2023 3:58 PM
To: Sonia Gerken <SGerken@goredc.govt.nz>; Kaitlyn Wright <kwright@goredc.govt.nz>
Subject: FW: Media Questions for Radio News

From: Corey Fuimaono <corey@95bfm.com>
Sent: Tuesday, 16 May 2023 2:08 PM
To: Emily Mason <EMason@goredc.govt.nz>
Subject: Fwd: Media Questions for Radio News

Kia Ora Emily,

I sent this e-mail to the CEO, Stephen Parry, in hopes of a reply from him, and other councilors, before 5pm today.

I've forwarded this to you, in hopes for some answers which would be appreciated before we go out to air: as Parry is on leave.

Best,

----- Forwarded message -----

From: **Corey Fuimaono** <corey@95bfm.com>
Date: Tue, 16 May 2023 at 13:58
Subject: Media Questions for Radio News
To: sparry@goredc.govt.nz <sparry@goredc.govt.nz>, <pmcphail@goredc.govt.nz>, <gdickson@goredc.govt.nz>, <rmcphail@goredc.govt.nz>, <jstringer@goredc.govt.nz>, <khovell@goredc.govt.nz>, <smacdonell@goredc.govt.nz>, <breid@goredc.govt.nz>, <nphillips@goredc.govt.nz>

Good Afternoon councilors & CEO,

I'd like to ask you the following questions which will help add some context to a story we'll run for our news bulletin later today. An answer before 5pm today is much appreciated.

1. Please explain why your community would be in favor of a vote of no confidence in the mayor, Benjamin Bell.
2. It's explained in legal briefs that the Mayor may be removed from committees - can you

explain why it's in the community's interest why His Worship should be removed?

3. It's clear that the council can't force the mayor to resign, as an elected official. Please explain what the end-game is for the council and how it should move forward after today's extraordinary meeting.

4. How would you respond to the idea that the councilors who signed the letter to CEO Stephen Parry, dated 11 May 2023, to grow up and work with the mayor - and with a petition now being made to see the CEO's resignation.

Kind regards,

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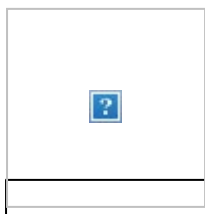
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m +64278691196

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From: [Sonia Gerken](#)
To: [Sonia Gerken](#)
Subject: FW: Press Release
Date: Tuesday, 18 July 2023 10:34:25 AM
Attachments: [image00001.png](#)

From: Ben Bell <bbell@goredc.govt.nz>
Sent: Tuesday, 16 May 2023 12:06 PM
To: Sonia Gerken <SGerken@goredc.govt.nz>
Subject: Press Release

Ben Bell has shared a OneDrive for Business file with you. To view it, click the link below.

 [Draft Press Release - 16 May.docx](#)

Hi Sonia,

Here is a very rough draft of what Councillors would like to put out this afternoon.

Would be keen to brainstorm if that's easier, bit of a cluster of thoughts at the moment.

Cheers,
Ben

Mayor Ben Bell and all 10 Gore District Councillors entered into a discussion late Monday afternoon to see if they could put their differences to the side and refocus on the people of the Gore District before Tuesday's extraordinary meeting.

After in-depth, transparent, and honest conversation, elected members have reunited and apologised to each other and the community for the position they now found themselves in.

The conclusion of the conversation resulted in an indication that agenda items 4. *Vote of no confidence* and 6. *Request to remove Mayor from Committees, Sub-Committees and Joint-Committees* were no longer necessary.

The Mayor and Councillors have come to an understanding that they will all need to communicate more openly and effectively so that they do not have further misunderstandings that could lead to an irreparable breakdown in trust.

The issues of the relationship between the Mayor and the CEO are a separate issue and will be addressed via a mediation process and an independent review.

The Council has received the petition for "GDC CEO Steve Parry to Resign" at 2pm with 4,XXX signatures.

As per Gore District Council Standing Order 17, petitions "must be received by the Chief Executive at least 5 working days before the date of the meeting at which they will be presented." Given this, the petition will be considered at the next council meeting on Tuesday 13 June.

To protect the integrity of both the mediation process and the independent review the Council has resolved to undertake, the Council will be making no further comment on this topic until both these processes are complete.

From: [Sonia Gerken](#)
To: [Sonia Gerken](#)
Subject: FW: Re: TVNZ Sunday story - questions for Steve Parry
Date: Tuesday, 18 July 2023 10:49:31 AM
Attachments: [image003.png](#)

From: Rex Capil <rcapil@goredc.govt.nz>
Sent: Tuesday, 9 May 2023 5:42 PM
To: Keith Hovell <khovell@goredc.govt.nz>; Richard McPhail <RMcPhail@goredc.govt.nz>
Cc: Sonia Gerken <SGerken@goredc.govt.nz>; Stephen Parry <SParry@goredc.govt.nz>; Rex Capil <RCapil@goredc.govt.nz>
Subject: Re: TVNZ Sunday story - questions for Steve Parry

Hi Keith and Richard

The response is going to Sunday tomorrow. I will forward to you as soon as I receive tomorrow

Talk tomorrow

Rex

Rex Capil
GM Community Lifestyle Services

From: Rex Capil <rcapil@goredc.govt.nz>
Sent: Tuesday, May 9, 2023 1:29:41 PM
To: Keith Hovell <khovell@goredc.govt.nz>; Richard McPhail <RMcPhail@goredc.govt.nz>
Cc: Sonia Gerken <SGerken@goredc.govt.nz>; Stephen Parry <SParry@goredc.govt.nz>; Rex Capil <rcapil@goredc.govt.nz>
Subject: FW: TVNZ Sunday story - questions for Steve Parry

Hello Keith and Richard

FYI – I have discussed with my colleagues and we believe this is serious and significance and have asked me to forward to you on a ‘no surprises’ basis

I will leave for you to distribute as you see fit to your elected member colleagues (either in totality or to those you think warrant seeing this) – but advice would be based on the content and the line of questioning for the Council to consider the implications and risks post the Sunday programme has aired.

What do you think Monday may look like for elected members and staff and our organisation in general.

I reference you to the risk analysis and assessment report as discussed at the recent ARC meeting – which highlighted the need to look at such matters through a risk lens for the organisation.

There are serious allegations in here implicating staff (not just the CEO) and I reference the resolution passed last Wednesday at the extraordinary Council meeting:



Where does this line of question and content from the Sunday programme leave the Mayor, the Councillors and the council staff in terms of the relationship breakdown and substance behind the words resolved unanimously and made public less than a week ago by our elected members?

Do the Mayor and Councillors still support the CE and staff as stated less than a week ago? If so do you believe some of the messaging and questions below really show support for this statement?

I am happy to discuss this in more detail as required.

I will also send to you later today the response that is being prepared now to the Sunday programme to these questions

Rex

From: Sonia Gerken <SGerken@goredc.govt.nz>
Sent: Tuesday, May 9, 2023 12:41 PM
To: Rex Capil <rcapil@goredc.govt.nz>
Subject: FW: TVNZ Sunday story - questions for Steve Parry

From: Emily Mason <EMason@goredc.govt.nz>
Sent: Tuesday, 9 May 2023 12:31 PM
To: Sonia Gerken <SGerken@goredc.govt.nz>
Subject: FW: TVNZ Sunday story - questions for Steve Parry

FYI

From: Kristin Hall <Kristin.Hall@tvnz.co.nz>
Sent: Tuesday, 9 May 2023 12:21 PM
To: Stephen Parry <SParry@goredc.govt.nz>
Cc: Nadene Ghouri <Nadene.Ghouri@tvnz.co.nz>; Emily Mason <EMason@goredc.govt.nz>
Subject: TVNZ Sunday story - questions for Steve Parry

Kia ora Steve,

As you know our story on the current issues at Gore District Council is running this Sunday May
th

14 . We still believe an on-camera interview would be the best way to address our questions. We had hoped to speak to you as planned in Gore on Friday 28th April until our interview was cancelled late in the piece.

We would like to please know by 5pm today if you're prepared to front for an on-camera interview which would need to take place by tomorrow or by our final deadline of midday Thursday.

Our questions are as follows:

Relationship with the mayor

- Several sources, including former mayor Tracy Hicks who has spoken on-the-record, have told us they believe there is a “connection” between Rebecca Tayler’s departure from council, and Ben Bell running for mayor – do you believe this, and can you explain why/why not?
- Tracy Hicks says he believes Ben has “targeted” you, because “the council appears to be pretty united. The only person that has a problem and appears to have a problem with Chief Executive, is the mayor”. Do you agree with this?
- Do you feel personally targeted by Ben Bell? Why/why not?
- It's been put to us that the Team Hokonui campaign was essentially engineered by Rebecca Tayler, and it was done in order to, quote, “get rid of the rot”. What is your reaction to this?
- Do you believe Rebecca Tayler is influencing or pulling strings behind Ben’s mayoralty? Can you explain why you believe that? (You mentioned to us during our off-the-record conversations on the phone that you recognise the way she writes and believe she’s behind some of Ben’s emails to you). What is it specifically that gives you that impression?
- Ben Bell says that after he was sworn in, he did receive a call from you, but not a voicemail, and he “would have expected an email or text” in the first few days of his mayoralty. Did you try to contact the mayor after he didn’t return your call?
- Ben Bell says that he was initially told by you that “it would be fine” for him to have a personal assistant, but that you essentially went back on that statement when it was brought up formally with council. Did that happen?
- Ben Bell says that when he received an email from you and the senior management team on November 18th, he hadn’t even had the chance to meet two of the senior leaders yet. He says he was left heartbroken and bemused by the accusation that he had affected their mental health. Can you confirm whether or not Ben had met all of the senior leadership team at this point?
- Ben Bell also says if the issues raised in the email were as serious as alleged, then he would have expected you to raise them with him in person in the first instance, rather than in writing. He also says you were on official leave when the letter was sent. What is your response to this?
- Ben Bell has been accused by staff and councillors of having a cold and legalistic tone in his communication. Do you agree with this?
- During the extraordinary meeting on March 28th you described a meeting with an LGNZ mediator. You said the mediator “eventually exited the process saying he was now biased, the account had not been paid and the Mayor was not answering his calls”. Can you explain why the mediator believed they were biased?
- Ben Bell says that during the extraordinary meeting on March 28th, he left without answering questions for his own mental protection. He says he was on the verge of a breakdown and didn’t want to “lose it” in front of his colleagues. Do you believe your communication and interactions with Ben up until March 28th contributed to this at all?
- In the March 28th meeting Ben was described as thinking he has “presidential powers”. He says that he strongly objects to this, and believes there is no evidence for that claim. Do you believe there is evidence for that claim? If yes, what is that evidence?

- It was also claimed in the March 28th meeting by you that Ben has had to be woken up and picked up by staff in order to get to appointments on time. Ben denies this and says there is no evidence to back it up. Do you have evidence for this? If yes, what is that evidence? If not, why was it said?
- A current councillor has told us that he has seen Ben “yelled at” and “abused” by council staff and that he’s not shown the respect he deserves. Have you ever witnessed or contributed to this treatment of the mayor?

Allegations from former council staff

We have spoken to multiple former council staff who allege a culture of bullying and forcing people out of their jobs at the Gore District Council. These former employees have worked at council at various periods between the early 2000s and now, meaning the allegations date from the early days of your leadership until recently.

The allegations are:

- That staff are targeted if they “know too much” about council operations or if they are considered to be high performers
- That the threshold for being removed from your job is “very low” and that you have a history of cataloguing minor infractions in order to justify getting rid of staff
- That you have openly bragged about getting rid of staff who don’t toe the line
- That you have acted in a threatening and intimidating manner towards staff you have issues with
- That you foster a “toxic” workplace culture and manipulate staff you do not like
- That your management style is one of “divide and rule”

Our questions are as follows:

- Do you and/or your senior management team target high performers, and/or those who have an intimate knowledge of confidential council matters?
- Do you have a history of pressuring or restructuring staff out of their jobs because of minor transgressions?
- Have you ever bragged about the high turnover of staff, or warned staff that if they don’t like your leadership style, they “know where to go?”
- Have you ever acted in a threatening or intimidating manner towards staff or former staff who you have an issue with?
- What is your response to being described as a manipulator or as a manager with a “divide and rule” style?
- Why do you think multiple former staff over a wide time frame have made these claims?

As you’ll understand, we want the full picture from all parties involved, therefore we need to give you the opportunity to respond to the allegations that have been raised with us.

Thanks very much,

Kristin

Kristin Hall she/her
Reporter, SUNDAY

m. +64 21 197 9688
@kristinhallNZ



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15 May 2023

CC:

Stuart Crosby, President, LGNZ
Sam Broughton, Vice President, LGNZ
Sanchia Jacobs, President, Taituarā
Jo Miller, Vice President, Taituarā
Steve Ruru, Vice President, Taituarā
Warren Ulusele, Partnership Director, DIA
Anthea Oliver, Operational Policy Manager, DIA

Dear Gore District Council,

We acknowledge that the last few months have been tough for Gore District Council, Chief Executive Steve Parry, Mayor Ben Bell and the Gore community.

The current situation at Gore District Council reflects poorly on everyone involved. Whilst primarily this is keenly felt by the Gore community, it also does disservice to local democracy and local government generally.

The Department of Internal Affairs, following their meeting with you on Friday 12 May 2023, has briefed us on the conversations they have had from their meetings.

As stewards of the sector, Taituarā and LGNZ are united in wanting the situation turned around. This will require all parties concerned to shift. It is incumbent on all of you, with our support, to deliver positive change for the future.

Given the degree of intense community politics that is in play at Gore, the Council should recognise that ongoing, regular external support is necessary to shift the dial. In our conversations with DIA, they have indicated they support LGNZ and Taituarā working with you to resolve this.

We believe that all parties in Gore – that is the Mayor, the Deputy Mayor and Council, and the Chief Executive are committed to restoring the public's trust and confidence in the Council. That's our priority too.

The key mechanism to do so will be the independent review that you have resolved to take. Our view is that the Terms of Reference need to be right to achieve this. We think they need more work if they are to command confidence.

As DIA explained to you, there is no Ministerial intervention that solely removes the Mayor. Once a Council seeks Ministerial intervention, it's up to the Minister to decide on the next steps. There would be no way, as a Council, for you to influence his decision. That would put local government in a tough

bind. The loss of democratic voice is a very real possible end outcome for your community if you take that path.

For a Council that prides itself on prioritising serving their people, we do not believe it's your desired outcome.

We would like to work with you to make sure that the course of actions you take next don't have unintended consequences – we don't think all the options Council has at its disposal have been exhausted yet.

In our view, the Terms of Reference, as currently drafted, don't sufficiently get to the heart and breadth of the issues to ensure you get the outcome that you need to restore confidence in the Council. We also think that four months is too long for this review.

Given the complexities and intricacies of the issues facing the Council, and the wider impact of this situation for Gore's community and local government, we would like to work with you this week on an amended set of Terms of Reference that you could resolve to pass in a special meeting.

We also request that LGNZ and Taituarā speak to the Council directly at the meeting tomorrow via video conference/zoom or whatever your technology platform is.

Looking forward to working with you to find a solution that meets the needs of Gore.

Ngā mihi nui



Susan Freeman Greene
Chief Executive
Local Government New Zealand



Jo Miller
Vice President
Taituarā

From: [Richard McPhail](#)
To: [.Councillors \(with e-mail\)](#); [Ben Bell](#)
Subject: Re: Moving forward - Legal Privilege - Not for disclosure
Date: Tuesday, 9 May 2023 1:11:46 PM

Good afternoon all

I have noted the commentary of the councillors below and agree there has been implied connection. The issue needs addressed separately.

I will defer this to the deputy Mayor to deal with [REDACTED]

Regards

Richard

Sent from my iPad

On 9/05/2023, at 12:42 PM, Paul McPhail <PMcPhail@goredc.govt.nz> wrote:

Good afternoon fellow councillors

We the undersigned councillors are concerned by the content of the recent emails from the Mayor and the indication it is giving that the council or councillors have a breakdown in communication with the CEO.

The resolutions passed were quite clear.

We are concerned by the implication from the Mayor that we have a dispute.

We want this clarified- we are acting as the employers [REDACTED] to attempt to remedy the dispute/relationship breakdown between the Mayor and CEO.

We reiterate the dispute exists between the Mayor and the CEO not as the email states the full council and the CEO

Cr P McPhail Cr B Reid Cr N Phillips

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From: Ben Bell <bbell@goredc.govt.nz>
Sent: Monday, May 8, 2023 10:32:39 PM
To: .Councillors (with e-mail) <Councillors@goredc.govt.nz>
Subject: Fwd: Moving forward - Legal Privilege - Not for disclosure

Good evening all,

Please find the below email chain. This has been forwarded for transparency and is still legally privileged.

Happy to discuss further at tomorrow's meeting in a confidential setting if you

have any questions.

Regards,
Ben

From: Ben Bell <bbell@goredc.govt.nz>
Sent: Monday, May 8, 2023 10:26:11 PM
To: Richard McPhail <RMcPhail@goredc.govt.nz>; [REDACTED]
Subject: Re: Moving forward - Legal Privilege - Not for disclosure

Good evening [REDACTED]

Thank you for your effort on this, I appreciate the pace this has taken.

I will circulate this email chain with Councillors for transparency and leave it in Cr McPhail's capable hands to speak with elected members and the CEO personally.

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

I trust that Cr McPhail will keep you updated.

Regards,
Ben

From: Richard McPhail <RMcPhail@goredc.govt.nz>
Sent: Monday, May 8, 2023 7:33:02 PM
To: [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] Bell <bbell@goredc.govt.nz>
Subject: Re: Moving forward - Legal Privilege - Not for disclosure

Good evening [REDACTED]

Thank you for the update. And yes it was good weekend spent with friends and family duckshooting. Always a good catch up.

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

Thanks and regards

Richard

Sent from my iPad

[Redacted]

Dear Mayor Bell and Cr McPhail

I trust you both had a nice weekend.

Thank you for clarifying your position Mayor Bell. I appreciate your swift response

[Redacted]

[Redacted]

[Redacted]

I look forward to hearing from you further

regards

[Redacted]

[Redacted]

[Redacted]

[Redacted]

[Redacted]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED] and any files transmitted with it are privileged and confidential information intended for the use of the addressee. Neither the confidentiality of nor any privilege in the e-mail is waived, lost or destroyed by the reason that it has been transmitted other than to the addressee. If you are not the intended recipient of this e-mail you are hereby notified that you must not disseminate, copy or take any action in reliance.

From: Ben Bell <bbell@goredc.govt.nz>
Sent: Friday, 5 May 2023 5:46 PM
To: [REDACTED]
Cc: Richard McPhail <RMcPhail@goredc.govt.nz>
Subject: Re: Moving forward - Legal Privilege - Not for disclosure

You don't often get email from bbell@goredc.govt.nz. [Learn why this is important](#)

[External Email] Caution! This email originated from outside of the organisation. Do not click links or open attachments unless you recognise and can confirm the legitimacy of the sender, and know the content is safe.

Dear [REDACTED]

As we all understand, it is not in anyone's interests to engage in a prolonged email chain around these matters.

I am somewhat disappointed by the responses from yourself and Cr McPhail. I want to make it clear that nothing in what I have said contradicts what has been resolved. I have only provided further thoughts and questions on how what has been agreed upon by Council could best be implemented, taking into account how we might use the opportunity to move things forward for Council as a whole.

[REDACTED]

It is important to note that while I have agreed to Cr McPhail's appointment as an intermediary to facilitate communication between myself and the CEO, it cannot be construed as a delegation of my duties as Mayor. I also reject any suggestion that I am unaware that Councillors as a whole are the CEO's employer or that I have deviated from the doctrine of collective responsibility.

For clarity nothing has changed from my perspective in terms of the resolutions passed on Wednesday. I simply suggest that, in implementing the resolutions as passed, the points and possible approach I have raised be given consideration. I am willing to await

further updates and guidance as you and Cr McPhail move forward with the implementation of the resolutions.

Regards,
Ben

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Ben Bell | Mayor
T: 03 209 0330 | **DDI:** 021 962 883
E: bbell@goredc.govt.nz | **W:** www.goredc.govt.nz
Gore District Council, 29 Bowler Avenue, PO Box 8, Gore, 9740

<image001.jpg>

<[image002.png](#)>

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From: [REDACTED]
Sent: Friday, May 5, 2023 1:21:09 PM
To: Ben Bell <bbell@goredc.govt.nz>
Cc: Richard McPhail <RMcPhail@goredc.govt.nz>
Subject: RE: Moving forward - Legal Privilege - Not for disclosure

Dear Mayor Bell

Thank you for your email and I note your reaffirmation of your support [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] My understanding from information received
from Cr McPhail post our meeting on Wednesday was that Council
unanimously resolved [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

As you may appreciate my understanding is that the Council resolved on 26 March 2023 that Councillor Richard McPhail would be the dedicated intermediary referred to in the below resolution:-

THAT as the employer of the Chief Executive, the Council note the breakdown in the relationship between the Mayor and the Chief Executive and agree to nominate and appoint an elected member (not the Mayor) to act as a dedicated intermediary between the Mayor