

## Horowhenua District Council urged to apologise over emailing blocking

**Monday November 12**

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The Chief Ombudsman Peter Boshier has recommended the Horowhenua District Council apologise to the Mayor Michael Feyen and four others for blocking their emails.

They complained to the Ombudsman about being included on an email quarantine list where the council prevented their messages from going directly to staff.

Mr Boshier says the emails were diverted to the Council's Chief Executive to be vetted — some without their knowledge.

“This practice ran contrary to the principles of transparency, accountability and fairness.”

Mr Boshier's investigation focussed on the period from 2011 when this practice was first introduced until August 2017 when it was suspended.

Mr Boshier found there was no formal policy in place over this six-year period and this meant the practice was left largely unchecked.

“The reasons why some of the particular individuals appeared on the list weren't documented. Three of the complainants were never informed that their emails were being quarantined.”

“The quarantine list included elected representatives as well as some constituents. Some emails from those on the list to council staff and councillors were blocked. In principle, I think constituents should be able to communicate with their elected representatives. This is fundamental to democracy,” he says.

The Council started quarantining Mr Feyen's emails in 2015 during his first term as a councillor. The measure was imposed after Mr Feyen sent an email to all staff. The council stopped blocking his emails in August 2016 prior to his election as Mayor.

“I acknowledge the Chief Executive is obliged to put reasonable measures in place to protect staff from abusive or offensive messages.”

“However, I have looked at the specific examples of 'unacceptable' email correspondence and I consider the decision to add Mr Feyen and another individual to the quarantine list without warning was disproportionate and unreasonable.”

Mr Boshier says it appears a high number of the quarantined emails from the five complainants never reached their destinations.

“Overall, I believe the Council took a cavalier approach to forwarding quarantined emails to their intended recipients including elected representatives.”

Mr Boshier says the Council has since developed a new policy and has sought advice from his office.

He says the policy introduced in October last year has addressed his administrative concerns.

“The new policy defines what unacceptable behaviour will trigger the quarantine process. Affected individuals are notified, have the right to complain and their status is reviewed every six months. The policy also excludes emails sent to elected officials.”

Mr Boshier says there are lessons to be learnt from this case.

“We already have comprehensive guides on managing unreasonable complainant conduct on our website. My office is happy to work with local authorities on providing more guidance and training on this issue.”

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