

Wrong song for chairman Chong

What a blessing. The resignation of NPDC councillor Murray Chong as chairman of a council sub-committee not only gets rid of someone with no great interest in his only formal responsibility, but gives the council a chance to show some real respect for an overlooked community.

Given our fast-aging population, the Aged and Accessibility Issues Working Party should be a key voice within the council, but under Chong’s stewardship - or lack of it – most of the issues it raised were ignored or lost in council processes.

When mayor Neil Holdom directed reorganisation of the council’s committees in 2016, he unwisely reaffirmed Chong as chair of the working party. I attended one of the Chong-chaired meetings in 2015 and saw his grasp of what’s required was tenuous.

The other councillor on the committee has been John McLeod. Both say they’re popular with voters because of their “tell it like it is” approach, but contrarian tendencies work against them achieving much. Both even voted against one of the working party’s main projects, the age-friendly community strategy.

Chong called it racist, which is some stretch given his other missteps in that treacherous arena. It’s been on council books for nearly four years, but despite having World Health Organisation approval has languished against head winds.

During 2017 and 2018, Chong cancelled three scheduled working party meetings (perhaps as many as five) because he said there was nothing to talk about. Analysis of the working party’s minutes contradicts him.

In that period, 66 issues appeared on the agenda. Only seven raised by the party have been fixed by the council - an annual success rate of 5.3 percent. One issue (CBD mobility scooters) was resolved through the party’s own resources, while another two (unreadable Pukekura Park signs and the Waiwhakaiho Hill footpath) were only sorted because of pressure from the wider community.

The council took an average 12 months or longer to fix the seven items (some dated back beyond the two-year period, so their longevity was unclear). Sorting the Waiwhakaiho Hill footpath extended over eight years.

According to the minutes, returning mobility scooters to Pukekura Park took 26 months, even though immediately after they were withdrawn in 2016, TSB indicated it would help pay for replacements.

The need for a new mechanical lifter at the Aquatic Centre is still unmet after 21 months, with one abortive application now having to be redone.

Accessibility of council website documents has been on the agenda for 10 months, with no resolution.

An accessibility issue over long grass in public reserves has sat on the agenda for two years and is unresolved.

A tidy-up of Queen St outside the art gallery, requested in November 2017, has yet to be reported back as completed.

A general audit of disability carparks requested in May 2017 so they could be better distributed has not happened. Nor has the renewal of an outdated accessibility map.

After no consultation for public projects like the Yarrow Stadium upgrade, the Len Lye Centre and the airport rebuild until after they were planned and sometimes built, that seems to have improved – apart from the airport, with which the party has made little progress.

A review of the council's official Accessibility Strategy adopted in 2011 was due in 2018, but has only just begun. It took nine months to find a replacement iwi rep for the working party, with Chong threatening to remove the position altogether.

Some final points. The group is powerless because of its status as a working party, which means Local Government Act standing orders don't apply. It's effectiveness relies on the advocacy of its three councillor members (John Williams joined last year).

The party minutes don't seem to be on the council website, which makes me wonder how other councillors know what it does. A trio (Mike Merrick, Harry Duynhoven and Stacey Hitchcock) regularly attends meetings, and the mayor sits in on a few, but that leaves the council majority with no formal briefings.

The community it serves is probably much larger than that of Te Huinga Taumatua, a formal committee with tangata whenua representation to which every issue coming before the council must be referred. That works well. By comparison, issues raised by the aged and disabled are neglected.

So who should chair it? Surely someone with experience, consistent interest and the respect of colleagues, like Duynhoven or Hitchcock (Merrick is retiring). Certainly not a non-councillor – that would weaken the group's muted voice even more.