



SUMMARY FINDINGS:

Auckland Council and the Social Policy Forum

This is one of three summaries of the main findings of a research report completed by the Auckland University of Technology to stimulate discussion on how social issues in Auckland might be best addressed under the proposed new local government structure.

How Auckland can improve its performance in the social wellbeing of its people in the new environment is a critical issue for the new Council. It is one that the people of Auckland need to involve themselves with.

The framework for the new structure is already in place. The Local Government (Auckland Council) Act 2009 has been passed and Cabinet has approved a new Social Policy Forum for Auckland. Further details will be worked out over the next few months.

This paper looks at the new legislation and structures and what has been decided in the new environment.

***Please note:** The report is a work in progress, as much is still to be decided about Auckland's future in the coming months. At the time this paper was produced, March 2010, many of the details about how the new structures and processes would operate had not been made public.*

A new way for Auckland

The Local Government (Auckland Council) Act 2009 changes the way Auckland is to be governed. Under the new Act, the eight current local bodies in greater Auckland are amalgamated into one 'super city', with one mayor and one council. Local boards provide a vital link between communities and the new Council.

The new Auckland Council is responsible for the economic, environmental, cultural and social wellbeing of all Auckland people. How and where the social wellbeing of Aucklanders fits into the new environment has not yet been decided.

Indications are that social concerns are not top of the new Council's priorities. In its latest draft organisational structure, released earlier this year, the Auckland Transition Agency* ranks social wellbeing well below the other three wellbeings.

Central government clearly wants to be part of the action. Last year it approved a new Auckland Social Policy Forum, to provide an environment for communities and central and local government to work together, at a political level, to address social issues in the region.

So far there is no detail about how the forum will intersect with Auckland Council structure and processes. It is clear, however, that the Government is looking for new and better ways of working with local government to improve the social wellbeing of Auckland people.

* The Auckland Transition Agency was set up by the Government to amalgamate the councils across the Auckland region into the new Auckland Council by 2010. The ATA has recently released its discussion document on the role of local boards, for comment by 26 March.

The new Act

The Local Government (Auckland Council) Act 2009 introduces significant change in the way Auckland is governed. It does not change the overall purpose of local government as it is under the current Act (Local Government Act 2002), but gives the mayor and council new powers and opportunities.

What stays the same...

The purpose of local government is to:

- make democratic local decision-making possible, and to act for and on behalf of communities
- promote the social, economic, environmental and cultural wellbeing of communities.

Local bodies must be transparent and accountable. By law they are required to:

- listen to their communities
- be aware of how their decisions might affect the wellbeing of different communities, now and for the future
- be prudent stewards of their regions.

Local councils have a responsibility to provide opportunities and facilitate the involvement by Māori in council decision-making processes.

...and what changes:

Mayor

The new mayor needs to be a leader – of people and of processes. He or she needs to have a vision for Auckland and share this vision with the people of Auckland in a way they can understand and engage with. Further, he or she needs to work with the people and communities of Auckland, through the new Council, to realize the vision together.

Auckland Council

There will no longer be eight separate councils in Auckland. The new Council comprises a governing body (which consists of the mayor and 20 elected councillors), and between 20 and 30 local boards. The governing body and the boards work together but have distinct and different functions that clearly define the work they do.

Local boards

Local boards represent their communities. They have more scope and power than current community boards, and what they do complements, rather than being subordinate to, the work of the Council.

Council Controlled Organisations

New Council Controlled Organisations with responsibilities for the planning and delivery of particular activities of the new Council will be established. These CCOs will have independent directors or trustees and be accountable to the new Council via an annual agreement that sets out the CCOs activities and intentions and via contracts for service and reporting. Three CCOs have been legislated for (Auckland Transport; Watercare Services Limited; Waterfront Development Agency) and another four major CCOs are proposed (Economic Development, Tourism and Events Agency; Property Holdings and Development; Major Regional Facilities; Council Investments). Other existing CCOs may pass across in their current form to the new Auckland Council.

Social Policy Forum

The Social Policy Forum will be a new entity. The Government's Discussion Document released in January 2010 outlines the proposed forum membership, high level objectives on what the forum hopes to achieve and how the forum might work. The closing date for feedback on this document is Friday 21st May 2010. The discussion document can be downloaded at: <http://www.beehive.govt.nz/release/feedback+sought+auckland+social+policy+forum>



Image top by Ed Corkery and image bottom by Advák from Flickr

The mayor is the lynchpin of the whole system.

What has been decided in the new environment

The mayor – setting the vision and terms of engagement

The new mayor of Auckland will have some significant new powers. How successfully Auckland addresses its social issues hinges on this office.

As owner of the vision and charged with selling it to the people of Auckland, the mayor has a considerable say in how the vision is achieved. He or she appoints the deputy mayor, sets up the council committees and appoints the chairs of committees.

Who he or she chooses for these positions will strongly influence the importance placed on different aspects of the Council's responsibilities. This includes which social issues are given priority, and what concerns are brought to the Social Policy Forum for consideration and action.

How the mayor articulates the vision for Auckland; how the mayor ranks the importance of social and economic wellbeing... and the role of the Auckland Council in achieving them, will probably do more to set priorities than any other action.

Auckland Council – unique powers, unique opportunities

The new unitary authority combines the powers of a regional council and a territorial authority. Responsible for all the functions of local government in greater Auckland, the Auckland Council will have more residents than any other council in New Zealand – a third of the country's population.

The Council is responsible for all regulatory activities, including those that have a social impact. It must work with local boards to agree on the work to be carried out in local communities, and to make sure this work is done. The programme of activities agreed between the board and the governing body is formalised in the long-term council community plan (LTCCP).

Local boards will be much larger than current community boards. They are likely to have 50,000–80,000 citizens each and encompass communities of interest rather than arbitrary geographic areas.

Local boards – working effectively with residents

Local boards are the ‘people on the ground’ in local politics. Organised effectively, they are ideally placed to help build healthy communities.

Promoting social wellbeing Under legislation local boards are to promote the wellbeing of people in their communities – this includes their social wellbeing.

Democratic decision-making Local boards are there to make it possible for people in their communities to help decide on things that matter to them. Boards take decisions to the Council on behalf of the community. Legislation does not specify how decisions are to be made collectively, and this lack of guidance gives local boards the opportunity to look at decision-making in a new and different way.

Reflecting community priorities Local boards must develop plans that reflect their community’s priorities about what local activities they want the Auckland Council to provide. These plans feed into the Council’s long-term council community plan (LTCCP).

Constraints on local boards

Local boards do not control two key areas:

- Regulatory matters are dealt with by the governing body. Decisions on non-regulatory matters are also made by the governing body – if such matters are best dealt with on an Auckland-wide basis.
- Budgets are set and distributed by the governing body on an ‘equitable capacity’ basis, which means taking into account factors such as the cost of services, rates revenue – and the community’s dependence on social services.

Making structures and processes work to improve social wellbeing

Whether or not the social wellbeing of Aucklanders improves under the new environment depends on how the legislation is interpreted and the new structures and processes that are put in place. At the moment this is not clear. Information is still coming through, and there are some inconsistencies to be worked through.

* This document was revised and re-released in February 2010 after submissions were received.

Transition to the new structures The Auckland Transition Agency is to put the new legislative framework into action. Its recently released draft discussion document* about the possible ‘shape’ of the new Auckland Council has no formal status but is an indication of the agency’s current thinking.

The document includes a proposed organisation structure, which shows social development relegated to a relatively low position, compared to the other wellbeings.

The 2009 Act does not specify how social wellbeing is to be handled under the new arrangements. The role of Local Boards is still unclear.

The Social Policy Forum Discussion paper invites commentary on the Government’s proposal for this political forum. The document shows that there is still much more work to be done to ensure that this Forum is more than a Talkfest. If it is to achieve its stated objectives, the Forum will need to have a social protection approach (i.e. addressing disadvantage) and a social investment approach (i.e. preventing disadvantage). Turning around Auckland’s social problems will involve broadening the range of central government politicians at the table from the Minister of Social Development to include the Ministers of Education, Health, and Housing, to name but three examples.

Comments on the discussion document are due in May. Now is the time to have your say.

It will be important the the Forum takes a broad approach, covering both social protection... and social investment...

The report, from which this summary of findings on social issues is taken, *Making Links Taking Action*, was written by Elisabeth Rowe and Dr Emma Davies. A full report can be downloaded from www.asbcommunitytrust.org.nz and www.ipp.org.nz

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