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SUMMARY FINDINGS:

Social issues and priorities for Auckland

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.

Auckland's social problems are many and complex, and if ignored, can only get worse. The extent of these issues and how they can be addressed more effectively are urgent considerations for the new Council.

The people of Auckland need to be part of the discussion. There is no better time to reflect on more effective ways to deal with Auckland's social issues. The framework for the new local government structure is in place – the Local Government (Auckland Council) Act 2009 has been passed and Cabinet has approved a new Social Policy Forum for Auckland – and the details of how the new structure will work will be finalised over the next few months.

Of particular interest is how central and local government and the local communities of Auckland will interact to produce positive, long-lasting solutions to Auckland's social concerns.

This paper looks at social issues facing the region and suggests ways of tackling them under the new regime.

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 this is to be carried out in practice is still being debated.

Auckland in context

Auckland is home to about a third of New Zealand's people. As with other parts of the country its population is aging; at the same time it is the youngest and most ethnically diverse population in New Zealand.

Nearly 40 per cent of Aucklanders are under 25 years, and there are more than 190 different ethnic groups in the region. About 46 per cent of people identify as Maori, Pacific Island, Asian, Middle Eastern, Latin American, African or another ethnic group.

Auckland is the key to New Zealand's competitiveness on the world stage. It is also at greatest risk of rapid urbanization and urban decay, increasing disparities among people and lack of access to services.

Auckland attracts people

People are attracted to Auckland for employment, entertainment, diversity and culture. They seek a better standard of living.

To live well, people need a good job – and decent housing, health services and education. They need to live in safe neighbourhoods and to be able to move easily around the city. They also need well-maintained beaches, well-designed parks and open spaces, and cultural activities that enrich city life.

The wellbeing of Auckland's people – economic, environmental, cultural and social – is essential for the region to be an attractive place to live, work and do business.

Social issues in Auckland

The wellbeing of Aucklanders is directly related to age, ethnicity and location. Most residents live well. Those who are worse off tend to be young, poor and/or have disabilities. They are more likely to live in particular suburbs; Polynesians (Maori and Pacific) and migrants, especially refugees, are overrepresented among those with lower living standards. These groups often overlap.

Disparities between and within areas Social issues exist throughout Auckland; they are present in all council areas. However, there are considerable differences *between* councils and between suburbs within the same council area. Such inequalities are likely to get worse rather than better.

Poverty, overcrowding and ill health The relationship between poverty, neighbourhood deprivation, overcrowding and ill health is well documented. Children from low income areas, for example, are three times more likely to be sick, and much more likely to be hospitalised than those from more affluent neighbourhoods. They are more at risk from physical abuse, and more likely to struggle later in life with income, employment and general quality of life.

Supporting Auckland's youngest citizens is one of the most powerful investments New Zealand can make.

We will get the best out of investment concentrated in deprived areas because international evidence shows that the middle classes and the poor fare better in environments with fewer disparities. Improving the quality of life for the most disadvantaged Aucklanders will improve the wellbeing of everyone.

Investment decisions also need to recognise the importance of the first years of life. We currently spend most of our health dollars on acute adult conditions and the last few years of life. Research shows, however, that investing in young children gives the best spending rate of return.

■ One in six people in Auckland live in houses that are over-crowded. Generally, people who live in overcrowded housing live in Manukau City, are of Pacific Island origin and are children under 15 years.

■ Children in single-parent households, Maori and Pasifika children, and children in house-holds where no adult is in paid work, are more likely to be living in poverty than other children.

■ The birth rate in Counties Manukau's District Health Board's most deprived areas in 2007 was more than three times higher than the birth rate in its least deprived areas – 64.3% compared with 18.5%.

What this means for Auckland

If Auckland's social issues are not addressed, gaps between and within Auckland's areas will get bigger, exacerbating divisions between communities and leading to tensions, even violence. Stresses on families and communities will increase. Poverty and hardship will likely be passed from generation to generation. Everyone in Auckland will feel the impact, both in terms of 'negative' spending (the cost of special education, youth justice, prisons, and physical and mental health services) and lost opportunity, as those who are deprived and disadvantaged are not able to achieve their full potential.

We will get the best out of investment in Aucklanders if we concentrate on the most deprived areas.

Tackling Auckland's social issues

Auckland's social issues are being confronted – by central and local government, and a wide range of community groups and individuals. Introducing new governance arrangements here provides a unique opportunity to seek out other and better ways and means to improve the social conditions of the people who live there. One key is to focus on areas of most benefit to most people.

Another key is to work more effectively with Auckland's diverse population to design systems and processes with those communities that better meet their needs. The region has a healthy mix of people from a wide range of ethnic and cultural backgrounds. The new Council can capture its 'cultural capital' to help strengthen vigorous, socially functional communities.



Image by Edwin Ng

Some ethnic communities fare better than others; some have more culturally appropriate services than others. All sorts of approaches have been tried to enable more effective interventions with and by families and communities who are struggling for whatever reason, often in restricted economic circumstances. The new governance arrangements in Auckland open up opportunities to learn from what has and hasn't worked well to do things better.

Combine resources

Central government already invests heavily in families and children – through family income, social support services, child health and early childhood education. The most underprivileged individuals and families, however, do not always receive the help they need, and different communities do not always have equal access to services. More must be done to ensure that those who need help can access it easily, as and when they need it.

Local government also contributes to the social wellbeing of children and families; as directed through the Local Government Act 2002. Despite this, local government's role in social development is not well recognised, and more can be done.

People generally want to take part in decisions that affect their wellbeing. Government actions are more likely to produce positive results when families, individuals, whanau and communities can help plan and make decisions about what is important to them.

The new Council needs to combine forces with local boards, central government agencies, Maori, non-government organisations and residents' groups for more effective results. Responsibilities are best shared, particularly when resources are tight.

Importance of place

Place-shaping Local government has an important role in 'place-shaping'. Good urban planning helps create public spaces where people want to be. It is important to plan well for public spaces in the suburbs and the central city.

Place-based initiatives can simultaneously improve the social and economic wellbeing of people in a dysfunctional neighbourhood. The outcomes may include respectable employment, healthy child development, educational achievement and family functioning, for instance.

Use of strong community engagement Local government is in a unique position to understand and interpret community needs and priorities for positive social outcomes. Strong community engagement is the key. Even transient neighbourhoods can become vibrant communities if local people feel involved in the change. A good example is Project Twin Streams, an urban sustainability project to restore Waitakare streams, which involves local government experts working with local communities and residents.

Using core business to work with communities Local government can use the power of its core business to help transform socially impoverished people and places if the Council has social issues high on its agenda. These powers include the regulation of land use, the provision and placement of facilities and the provision of public transport. However, as transport and some other core functions will be the responsibility of Council Controlled Organisation, their Statements of Intent with the Council will be critical in achieving social ends)...

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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