

**Local Government Reform
Discussion Group Feedback
Ethnic Forum May 2012**

The Ethnic Forum was an early engagement opportunity for people from the ethnic community to discuss the key theme of Local Government Reform in Wellington.

There were 72 participants in total. The participants were split across 10 tables with one facilitator and note taker at each table. The note taker recorded key points of each discussion see *Discussion Group Feedback*.

The following three questions were put to the participants at each table.

- *Is there a need for change?*
- *Why and why not change?*
- *Thoughts about advantages/disadvantages of any amalgamation?*

Although a map and description of all options was on each table the discussions focussed more on option 1 and 4 than the other options. There were more comments on disadvantages of option 4 compared with advantages. Some comments listed under option 4 could also be relevant to the amalgamation of councils outlined in option 2 and 3.

People supported some change but there were many questions about how to make fair choices and how will policy be coordinated across regions. There was a lot of discussion around how to keep local representation and maintain the face to face contact with councillors during change. It was agreed that a political structure was an important aspect of council but how could it be changed to be fair across the region and how could change be made without too much local impact.

One common statement was “why fix something that isn’t broken?” It was felt that councils already worked well together and they did not need to be merged into one large council.

Questions asked by many participants showed a lack of information and understanding of what each option would mean for the region.

Below are headings identifying the key areas that came out of the discussion groups with a short summary of what participants said. More detailed comments made by participants follow after this section.

Why change at all?

During the oral feedback some tables reported that there was nothing wrong with the Wellington City Council and there appeared to be no problems across

the regions – why fix what is not broken? They didn't necessarily see the Council as a problem that needed fixing and asked was it simply for cost savings?

Some felt that councils in the wider Wellington region already talk to each other and work together to deliver services. Many were concerned that local government reform was all about cost savings and believed that change would cost more in the long run. Some said that we should not be changing for change sake.

Support for change

Some participants thought that some type of change was necessary and inevitable and believed that it had the potential to create efficiencies. Support was expressed for changes to the current system and to the way that councils worked together. Many participants favoured shared services without any sort of amalgamation. Others saw amalgamation as being an expensive and uncertain way to proceed.

There was support to improve services of each separate council. Some wanted a region-wide approach to festivals, events, and emergency management. Pooling resources and reducing senior management costs was also seen as part of any change.

We need more evidence for change

Many participants were concerned with the lack of evidence to support this change proposal. Some suggested conducting a cost benefit analysis others favoured a full review of all council services and expenditure and how these could be shared across the region.

It was noted that the Auckland amalgamation is still in its early days. Some suggested undertaking qualitative research and opinion polls in Auckland to understand what people think of the new "super city" and whether their voice is heard. More time was needed to undertake a full assessment of the advantages and disadvantages of the Auckland model.

The impact of change on council services

Participants identified many disadvantages of huge change to the current system. Many perceived that the amalgamation was about cost savings and they feared that this would impact upon council service delivery. They did not support job losses because it could mean a reduction in front line jobs and services and impact upon the regions job market.

The impact of change on local identity & representation

Each region has its own local identity and there was concern that a larger body could force a collective identity upon the entire region while others thought that identity was already strong in each region and that would remain.

Some options did not have a good fit with the unique character of some parts of the region.

A high concern was access to local councillors. Representation would be affected by amalgamation with fewer councillors serving more people over a larger region. It would be more difficult to talk face to face with your local councillor however some talked positively about the benefits of online communication tools and felt that the people's voice would not be lost. A key theme to any change was ensuring a local voice for all communities especially hard to reach communities.

Option 1 advantages

There was strong support to improve the region-wide councils through collaboration and the improvement and merging of some services. Some saw this as a way to increase efficiency and reduce costs.

Auckland super city model

Many people commented on the difference between Wellington and Auckland and felt we should not be comparing the two or following the super city model. The reasons Auckland changed were unique to that region and they are not the same reasons that Wellington would need to change e.g. Auckland has major transport issues. There was also concern regarding Auckland's rates going up and that the same would happen here under the super city model.

Some felt that councils across the region already communicated and worked well together.

Option 4 advantages

Some participants could see the benefits of one council for a larger region but the discussion was more focussed on the disadvantages rather than advantages of this option. Some advantages were that one large council could improve service delivery, decrease bureaucracy and maximise the potential of the region.

It was suggested that local boards could be a useful way to keep local contact with councillors. One suggested that boards should represent a wider range of groups such as Maori, ethnicity, youth rather than purely on geography.

Option 4 disadvantages

There were questions over how each councillor could represent more people and how the smaller voices get through under a large council. Political structure was seen as crucial and some asked how there could be a fair structure under the super city model.

Also the question was asked about whether community services would be lost under option 4? It seemed unrealistic that one council could serve the needs

of such a large region and that there would be more pressure on infrastructure and the CBD. Some did not see big as being better, more efficient or cheaper.

In some cases discussion around option 4 was also relevant for option 2 and 3.

Discussion group feedback

Outlined below are the key areas that came out of the discussion groups with comments from participants in bullet points.

<p>Why change at all?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A good question is why change? • What is broken that needs fixing? • There were queries as to what would happen with any amalgamation? • What is the current relationship between councils, has it not been possible to cooperate and so this need to amalgamate has arisen? Why change the set up and incur costs etc if merging services could do the same thing! • Paying out redundancies is expensive when the Government is thinking of amalgamation. What is wrong? • Possible job losses (too many), affecting economy etc • If this is about cutting costs, then inevitably services will face cuts too • Are we going for efficiency or lower costs? • Talk to each other without massive change • We communicate with our neighbouring territories better than the Auckland councils ever did - does that make a difference? • Change costs money • The amalgamation of Pencarrow, Eastbourne, Petone and the Hutt did not go smoothly • Should look at merits rather than assume it will happen • Benefit of the doubt, Auckland Super City still young enough to be allowed teething problems • Each option – issue of efficiency of size • No major change • Each option – issue of efficiency of size • If we don't change, change will be imposed.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There is a need for efficiency – change could create

<p style="text-align: center;">Support for change</p>	<p>efficiencies, there are too many with 9 councils</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We should pool resources e.g. mayors wages • Would be good if this lead to a reduction in senior management positions, savings could then be invested in front line services, positions and projects • Japanese Kaizen model – always need to change/be more efficient • Councils should look at reducing the amount of bureaucracy and reporting (annual reports etc). Senior managers spend of lots of time and resources compiling these and wasting resources on them (writing, meetings, talking etc) without actually achieving anything. • Less talk, more action! • Hutt Valley is a natural population (option 2 suits) • Costing us money not to change • Eventually the current model would break – there is the potential for the current model not to meet the needs of people • There are territorial disputes, change can expand the region faster • Regional services should be shared but that does not mean everything should be merged. • Will we achieve economies of scale by getting bigger? • There should be change to provide for more shared services but retain districts • Option 2 possibly an interim step • One person wants to see option 3.
<p style="text-align: center;">We need more evidence for change</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The perceived advantages of either option are not evident or communicated • Give us the opportunity to look at how council services are run and used, how money is spent, where people are consuming more than their fair share of services • Why are we talking about amalgamation etc rather than discussing what services and level of responsibilities local councils should provide? Would this not be a better starting point • Granted, this is a starting point, more information and analysis is required, particularly in terms of financial benefits • Evaluate Auckland super city model. Wait 2 – 4 years and see

	<p>the lessons</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The amalgamation decision should be made by councils rather than central Government as people on the ground have more of an idea of what would work • If there is a demonstrated benefit for citizens, then change. But change will cost so I want to see the benefit for it if we do it • There was a lot of support for talking about where councils could share services etc and cooperate more than formally amalgamate (surely the cost of this is high?) • We don't know enough about advantages/disadvantages of each option • In twenty years, once Christchurch is rebuilt and once Auckland has ironed out the super city creases, how will Wellington's voice be heard?
<p>The impact of change on council services</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Boundaries don't stop communities talking to each other. Support for communities/projects/happening in the region. E.g. emergency preparation, cultural celebrations, festivals. • Biggest fears are the demise of community services • How to balance redundancy and keeping the number of people on benefit down? • Concerns about jobs being lost • Reduction in services and decline in quality etc • Too much administration is expensive, reduce admin means reducing cost • Opportunity to look at how we rate, can increase rates in areas you want to 'retard' development • It seems that services are at good standard. Sharing library services doesn't need a local government reform • What would be the role of the regional council in some of the options other than in all merged? We would need some way to co-ordinate policy and decisions across the region
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Each region has its own identity. We should retain that. • More difficult public relations in asserting its identity and understanding by the public different needs or priorities as the communities across the region are quite different. These local specialist services may be lost in a bigger organisation • Rivalry between Wellington and the Hutt – forcing a collective identity that may not fit

<p>The impact of change on local identity & representation</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Who do you identify with? In a democracy a lot of it is about being able to access your politicians • More difficult public relations in asserting its identity and understanding by the public • Need to rebrand (also an advantage for some) • Just because Porirua has different identity/different needs does not mean it would lose that identity or not have its needs met by a regional council • Issue of fairness for smaller areas of representation • It is important to keep local representation • Different communities might want different services, have • Reduced representation in larger city/council an issue. Need to make sure there's a way for communities to link in and have a voice. • Lose local voice – but conceivable for Councillors to go online • You should be able to walk somewhere and tell them your opinion • Peoples voice may not be lost there are other ways of hearing from communities e.g. media etc. • It is important to keep the face to face end and the local representation that you can contact your local representative and opportunity for interaction.
<p>Option 1 advantages</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Councils should look at reducing the amount of bureaucracy and reporting (annual reports etc). Senior managers spend of lots of time and resources compiling these and wasting resources on them (writing, meetings, talking etc) without actually achieving anything. Less talk, more action!” • There should be change to provide for more shared services but retain districts • Regional services should be shared but that does not mean everything should be merged • Irrespective, shared services should be explored to obtain synergies in costs of back office services. Ideally should do this first before any larger merger • Councils could share services etc and cooperate more than formally amalgamate (surely the cost of this is high?). • There is no strong evidence to support change therefore we

	<p>should make changes to the current model to make it more efficient</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Towards the end of the discussion, a consensus was reached on our table that Wellington should stay as we are provided we work more effectively together • No we welcome collaboration and improvements in services but not changing for the sake of change.
<p>Auckland super city model</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Region does not make decisions that benefit whole region only their own district • Changing, super city, amalgamation is becoming fashionable. • There is a feeling that we have to emulate Auckland • In Auckland a major problem was transport – it doesn't seem to be a problem here • Someone from North/South Auckland has little to do with Wellington/Porirua/Hutt Valley • North Shore Council offices are still functioning, how is this efficient? • We should never compare ourselves to Auckland • Auckland was four equal blocks in terms of size and economic distribution, whereas here the CBD is a hub, with quite varied, smaller territorial authorities at the periphery. How will these areas be effected cost wise? • Population is an issue. Different to Wellington, Auckland has a culture, identification e.g. Manukau etc.? • We communicate with our neighbouring territories better than the Auckland councils ever did, does that make a difference? • Auckland's changes are recent, it may be a good idea to wait and see how it turns out • Rates are going up in Auckland • The Wellington Region is more unique than Auckland as councils already work really well together.
<p>Option 4 advantages</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Making all councils the same means that all areas will maintain their identities • Have better service delivery overall • Have less bureaucracy • Councils are easier to control • Maximise the potential of the region • Have boards based on more than just geography e.g. Maori, ethnic, youth

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Potentially lose access to local politicians – but local boards could be a way of keeping access to them • In China the countryside is part of the city because this is where crops are grown to supply the city with food. • Wairarapa is Wellington’s playground so it should be part of the city • In China every city is bigger so one system is easier
<p style="text-align: center;">Option 4 disadvantages</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Preferences spoken for model 2 or 3 over 4 • Each councillor will represent more people • Councillors with an even wider portfolio will lose touch with local issues • There would be more pressure on the CBD and more pressure on infrastructure • Concern that local identity could be lost for the region • It seems an inappropriate solution. It might work for Auckland but Wellington is a dense urban space with small industries • Community services would be lost under option 4 • When we look at all these different things can one council take on all of these things? My feeling is no, wait • There would be more pressure on the CBD with one Council and more pressure on infrastructure • Unsure if the Wairarapa should be part of the major city? • Big is not necessarily efficient or cheaper • In a big council small voices are missed out – “he who shouts loudest is heard best” • Different councils have different challenges • Political structure is critical but how could that work in a fair way.