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Children's place in the new Auckland: Where are the opportunities?

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Children's environments affect how they live and how they grow up. Planning and decisions about land use, transport, urban design, social housing, community facilities, community development, regulation of gambling, liquor and fast food outlets all impact on children and young people's lives - and all are within the domains of local government. Social, health and education services are largely funded by central government. Thought needs to go into how to make the best use of central and local government's powers and resources in the interests of children.

Auckland's demographics are well documented elsewhere.¹ What's striking is that Auckland has some of the richest and poorest neighbourhoods in the country, with children disproportionately living in the poorer areas. The distribution of births in Auckland's fastest growing population, Counties Manukau, suggests that disparities are likely to worsen. The 2007 birth rate in Counties Manukau District Health Board's most deprived areas, by New Zealand Deprivation Index, was more than three times the birth rate than in the least deprived areas: 64.3 percent of births in Counties Manukau (for deciles 8 to 10) compared to 18.5 percent (for deciles 1 to 3).²

The poorest children often have least access to the good things that a city can supply. Their families have less money and many have insecure or overcrowded housing. Quality parenting and early childhood services, good public transport, libraries, sports fields, playgrounds and swimming pools are often harder to get to and are rarely as well resourced as those in wealthier areas.

¹ E.g., Rowe, Elizabeth. 2008. *The Role of Local Government in Achieving Social Well-Being for the Auckland Region: A report prepared for the Royal Commission on Auckland Governance*

² www.dnmeds.otago.ac.nz/departments/womens/paediatrics/research/nzcyes

This much isn't new. What is new is that the structure of local government is dramatically changing in Auckland. We will have just one Mayor and one Council with 21 subsidiary local boards. Political will to focus some attention on the well-being of Auckland's children is critical to effective action. It's also important to find levers for change. Auckland Council is charged with creating a Spatial Plan and there will be an Auckland Social Policy Forum of central and local government politicians. The Local Boards will have some place shaping capability. These all may hold promise for children.

The Auckland Social Policy Forum

The Government announced the establishment of a Social Policy Forum in response to the Royal Commission's proposal for a Social Issues Board.³ The members of the Forum are proposed as the Minister for Social Development and Employment as Chair, the Mayor of Auckland Council and Chairs of relevant Auckland Council Committees, together with some select representation from local boards⁴. A series of high-level objectives are proposed for the Social Policy Forum:

- **Progressing social issues in Auckland** at the political level
- Demonstrating **strong leadership** on social issues
- Setting a **clear strategic direction** and identifying long-term social goals and strategies
- Clearly identifying **the roles and responsibilities** government and Auckland Council have in responding to critical social issues
- Driving the **alignment of thinking and action** on social issues.

The Minister for Social Development and Employment released a discussion document on ways to make this forum work earlier this year. The final look of this forum is not expected until the end of the year. From our perspective, other Ministers (e.g. Health, Education) need to be at this table if this new political mechanism is to help central and local government work well together.

³ Royal Commission on Auckland Governance, Vol 1, p,265

⁴ p7 discussion document

We believe it is useful for the Social Policy Forum to decide on the focus of its activity as it begins its work, to avoid it trying to become all things to all people. The focus of activity will help to determine the advice it needs. In our view, it would be preferable for the forum to focus on identified deprived areas with particular attention to the well-being of pregnant women, infants, young children and young people transitioning from school. These stages in life are such important building blocks of human resilience.

The Spatial Plan

The new Auckland Council will be responsible for an overarching spatial plan to “...provide an effective and broad long term strategy for growth and development of the region.”⁵

While it appears that the drivers behind this mechanism are economic, the paper on “Spatial Planning Options for the Auckland Council” considered by Cabinet on 15 October 2009 drew on international best practice:

“Internationally, spatial plans lay out a long-term, strategic direction for a region and its communities, including social, economic, cultural and environmental objectives and articulate the region’s role in a country. This direction enables effective management of rapid growth in the region, and the integration of land use planning and infrastructure investment.”⁶

Involving diverse groups of children at the right times, in planning things that matter to them can improve the richness and quality of information available to planners and decision-makers. This is both regionally through the spatial plan and at a local level through the Local Boards. There are already concrete examples locally to draw from: Auckland City Council staff described engagement with local children living in high density central city housing as helpful in the development of the Victoria Quarter.⁷ Children at New Lynn Primary school were engaged in the development of the New Lynn Urban Plan 2010-2030. Eight to ten year old children asked questions described as helpful by the Social Infrastructure Planner and spent some time designing the sorts of things they wanted to see in the town park. Likewise, the Hobsonville Land Company has engaged with young people about their recreational needs in the development of Hobsonville Point, a growth area in the region.

⁵ (para 4, Cabinet Committee on Implementation of Auckland Governance Reforms Minutes, 15 October 2009 [AGR Min (19) 10/1], approved by Cab minute (09) 3/8)

⁶ Spatial Planning Options for the Auckland Council, 15 October 2009, paragraph 4

⁷ Mason, N. & Hanna, K. (2009). Undertaking child impact assessment in Aotearoa New Zealand Local Authorities. Evidence Practice Ideas. Office of Children’s Commissioner.

Final word

If Auckland's central and local government representatives are to make decisions that result in improved child well-being, they will need to:

- Hear diverse children's and young people's voices on matters that affect them. This will involve building the capacity and capability of elected representatives and their staff to meaningfully engage with children.
- Make sense of quality data. Create accessible and evolving pictures of how Auckland's children are faring alongside the hard and soft social infrastructure that supports and risks healthy child development. This could be done at regional, local and neighbourhood levels. The Human Early Learning Partnership work in Canada is a good example of this kind of work done well.⁸ What is needed is a mechanism to make sense of the existing data, identify the gaps and any unnecessary overlaps in data collection. Then the gaps need to be filled systematically so that measures of children's well-being, and the social infrastructure that supports them, are visible and useful to decision makers.

Auckland could become a great city for many more children. Underpinned by vision, political will and quality information the new Mayor, Auckland Council and Local Boards could significantly contribute to improving children's well-being alongside the families and communities they serve. It remains to be seen the extent to which this potential will be realised.

⁸ See Early Child Development Index as part of the Early Child Developing Mapping Project www.earlylearning.ubc.ca