

25th July 2012

The Committee Secretariat
Local Government and Environment
Select Committee Office
Parliament Buildings
WELLINGTON



Local Government Act 2002 Amendment Bill 2012 Submission from Community Waitakere Charitable Trust

Introduction

Community Waitakere is a Charitable Trust, dedicated to achieving a sustainable Waitakere with strong, connected communities. We have a thirty year history of supporting and strengthening community organisations; building and maintaining relationships with central and local government and communities; undertaking and supporting community development initiatives and fostering collaborative actions that achieve our vision.

Community Waitakere is recognised locally, regionally and nationally as a key linkage between national, regional and sub-regional networks, enabling the sharing of resources, information and knowledge. We are the “glue” which joins diverse community organisations with each other and with local and central government agencies and funders. Community Waitakere has positive working relationships with the governing body, through council officers and elected members with a commitment to the principles of community development.

Our work locally encompasses the three Western Local Board areas (Whau; Waitakere Ranges and Henderson/Massey), and we have established positive relationships with them individually and as a “cluster”, particularly in our roles of advocacy, leadership and connection.

Local government is the closest form of government to local communities, and provides many essential roles in strengthening community wellbeing. We continue to hold the view that holding responsibility for the four well beings at the local authority level has contributed enormously to the social wellbeing and health of our communities, and to fostering community participation and social cohesiveness. This has enabled our communities to find local solutions to local issues, thus increasing communities’ ability for self-determination.

Overview:

The purpose of the Bill is identified as “Councils must play their part in creating an environment conducive to sustained economic growth. This means reducing red tape, minimising the rates burden on households and businesses, limiting debt and the cost effective provision of good quality infrastructure”.

This fails to recognise the key role that local government plays in partnership with community organisations and social service providers to support strong local communities and social cohesion.

Concerns have already been raised by Local Government New Zealand and the Society of Local Government Managers that this Bill has been developed in haste, is not based on sufficient evidence, and if passed in its present form may 'require subsequent amendment to address unforeseen circumstances.

Lack of community engagement

The Bill has been introduced without time for citizens and communities to consider and understand the problems it is designed to address and to consider possible options.

It is based on conclusions from the Better Local Government report which has created considerable concern in the community sector that the role of local government is to be reduced to the "3 R's": roads, rubbish and rates.

Local communities across NZ are currently engaging with their local authorities to face the challenges of the current environment. Most local councils are striving to find a reasonable level of rates alongside the need to ensure the resilience and social wellbeing of their communities.

We are not aware of any community within NZ advocating for central government to intervene and change the fundamental purpose of local government.

Refocus on the purpose of local government

The purpose of local government as currently defined (Local Government Act 2002) reads:

"provides for local authorities to play a broad role in:

- Promoting the social, economic, environmental and cultural wellbeing of their communities, taking a sustainable development approach"

The Bill proposes replacing this purpose with:

- Meeting current and future needs of their communities for good quality local infrastructure, local public services and performance of regulatory functions"

The Local Government Act (2002) has been applauded within NZ and internationally for its enabling terminology, locking in the "four well-beings" as a core component of the focus of local government and the platform from which local social strategy can be developed. This refocus would defer the role of local council to "service providers" rather than representatives and advocates for local communities. The consequence of this would be an emphasis on procuring cheapest services rather than making decisions based on long term community wellbeing outcomes (eg local youth employment). It will also curb the scope of social, environmental and cultural activities our local councils will be able to be involved in, in response to the various needs of the many diverse communities across NZ. Finally local councils will have reduced accountability for the health and social wellbeing of their communities.

Community Waitakere submits that:

- There is an extension of time for wider debate and engagement around the purposes and proposals of this Bill to ensure that central and local government are working together with communities to determine what currently works well and what, if anything, requires amendment, and at what level, to strengthen our social infrastructure in times of serious change

- The proposed amendments to section 3 and section 10 are removed so that the focus and responsibility of local government includes the four well beings
- Local government retains the ability to make decisions about their own business. Benchmarking spending and utilisation of debt from the “top down” could seriously damage the health and wellbeing of our communities and our local environment

We wish to be heard orally in support of this submission.

Pat Watson
Chief Executive
Community Waitakere