

## **Council Briefing Meeting Minutes**

**Date:** Wednesday, 9 September, 2020  
**Time:** 9:00 a.m.  
**Location:** Council Chamber  
Forum North, Rust Avenue  
Whangarei

**In Attendance**

Her Worship the Mayor Sheryl Mai  
(Chairperson)  
Cr Gavin Benney  
Cr Vince Cocurullo  
Cr Nicholas Connop  
Cr Ken Couper  
Cr Tricia Cutforth  
Cr Shelley Deeming  
Cr Phil Halse  
Cr Greg Innes  
Cr Greg Martin  
Cr Anna Murphy  
Cr Carol Peters

**Not in Attendance**

Cr Jayne Golightly  
Cr Simon Reid

**Scribe** Sue Reid (Democracy Adviser)

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### **1. Apologies**

Apologies were received from Crs Golightly and Reid and from Cr Cocurullo (early departure).

Her Worship the Mayor convened the meeting at 09:00.

### **2. Reports**

#### **2.1 The long term future of Local Government - Water, RMA and Caring for Communities**

Mr Rob Forlong (Chief Executive) ran through the presentation providing elected members with an opportunity to discuss the long-term future of Local Government, given the number of changes happening in the sector.

He said this was one of the largest strategic issues affecting the council and was not directly related to the Long Term Plan but about some of the reorganisation and initiatives going on either through local or central government.

Mr Forlong gave an overview of the current and upcoming reforms and highlighted some of them. He said some of the trends he had been noticing in the sector included:

- Shifting decision making from local government to central government bodies (e.g. increased government intervention powers in the RMA and a self-regulatory role for Kainga ora)
- Shifting of decision making from elected to appointed bodies (RMA commissioners/EPA role expansion/water reforms)
- Combining organisations and service delivery (water reforms, MBIE)
- Greater focus on regional rather than local decision making (RMA reforms/ Covid regional leadership groups)
- More use of corporate arm's length delivery bodies (FENZ/Water reforms)
- Creation of "new" bodies to replace those which get into trouble (e.g. Worksafe for DoL, Taumata Arowai for DHB water regulators, Oranga Tamariki for CYFS, Kainga ora for Housing NZ).

Mr Forlong highlighted the planning reforms, gave examples of spatial planning and discussed the future of infrastructure. He explained the differences between the way local and central government operated and then covered the RMA and the things that need to be addressed.

The timeline showed that 2022–25 is when the new reforms will start to come in and covered the changes there have been in the last few years. The Three Waters Reform has a two-year time frame and the RMA a five-year timeframe.

Mr Forlong ran through the drivers of the Three Waters reform and compared municipal and self-suppliers of water and the potential health effects. He said WDC's water and wastewater performed well, including during the 2020 drought and wastewater overflows, while common in Auckland, were virtually non-existent in Whangarei.

It is important that Councillors look at what is best for our ratepayers. Removing waters will not be good for WDC but might be best for WDC's ratepayers. If waters are taken away, WDC will lose 41-46% of its assets and make the balance sheet a lot smaller.

Mr Forlong covered the four possible strategies and recommended WDC "play a straight bat", respond to things and put its ideas forward.

### **Elected members feedback and discussion included:**

- This is about centralisation of infrastructure and there should have been an assessment of the infrastructure in councils before it commenced, as a lot has been based on theory. WDC has looked after its infrastructure and sorted out sewerage with no spills.
- WDC debt level is one of the lowest of councils and residential rates are also low.
- A couple of the smaller councils around the country probably need to be amalgamated but not taken over.
- Wellbeing's and LGNZ were discussed and Mr Forlong said, if you take waters, Government strategy has been to avoid compulsion and allow councils to decide. He said there will always be some councils who can't manage and will need help.
- There is a strong regionalisation starting to happen and, to some extent, inter-regionalisation. When you look at the RMA and other reforms spatial planning has become a key focus which works well as a co-ordinated approach between infrastructure and organisation and involves communities.
- Hapu and iwi involvement and management plans were discussed.
- We have to look at the studies that have been put in for the first tranche, play with a straight bat and be involved with LGNZ to have some influence and represent the community.
- There was concern around amalgamating Water with Auckland, which might impact on decision-making or problems with response times. Mr Forlong said it was necessary to look at the costs and benefits given that it is such a high proportion of WDC assets and expenditure and that he would obtain some data for elected members.
- If there is a need for major change to infrastructure, it was queried if it was better to be part of a big group or smaller group. Mr Forlong responded that a smaller group is more nimble and innovative, but a bigger group would have the advantage of the best experts and more people to share the bill.
- It is important to build relationships with central government, to work with them, be flexible and move in the same direction as central government want the same outcome as we do.
- The new entity would be in a position to raise a huge amount of debt if required.
- WDC has the ability and skill base to look after its district, to build strong water systems and make consents easier. We have good maintenance and construction and do not need to rely on central government.
- This is a complex issue and there should be an opportunity to discuss in a confidential workshop.

- With the same rules across the country, the regions will suffer. Auckland is big and will be able to dominate.
- There is an avalanche of change coming out of central government which is taking the local out of decision making. We need to be sitting round the table to state our position and protect our local people so that Northland does not get lost within the Auckland area.
- It could be a dramatic change in what WDC manage and could be a dramatic change in who manages it and the skill sets required.

Mr Forlong covered the next steps which will be to get into scenario planning and to look at the different options available which elected members are comfortable with. In terms of process, Water is the most urgent as it is coming down the track in two years although there will be a bit of a delay until the dust settles from the general election. Mr Forlong will see if some government officials will have discussions with elected members. Once the new government has been elected, he will try to get the MPs for Northland in for discussions with elected members.

He said this will influence decision making for the LTP and it is important to make sure the water assets are maintained.

### **3. Closure of Meeting**

The briefing concluded at 11:05.