

# Regional Governance Project

Wellington Resident Focus Groups

Prepared for Wellington City Council  
7 May 2013



# Regional Governance Project

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- Four councils have been working together to develop options for how local government could be structured. Depending on the level of support, one of those models may form the basis of an application to the Local Government Commission to reform local government in the region and be tested against the status quo.
- Two options have been proposed and are being consulted on (public submissions close 3 May 2013). Both are for a single council with one chief executive and staff, one mayor elected at large and councillors elected by ward.
  - Option 1: Single-tier council
  - Option 2: Two-tier council

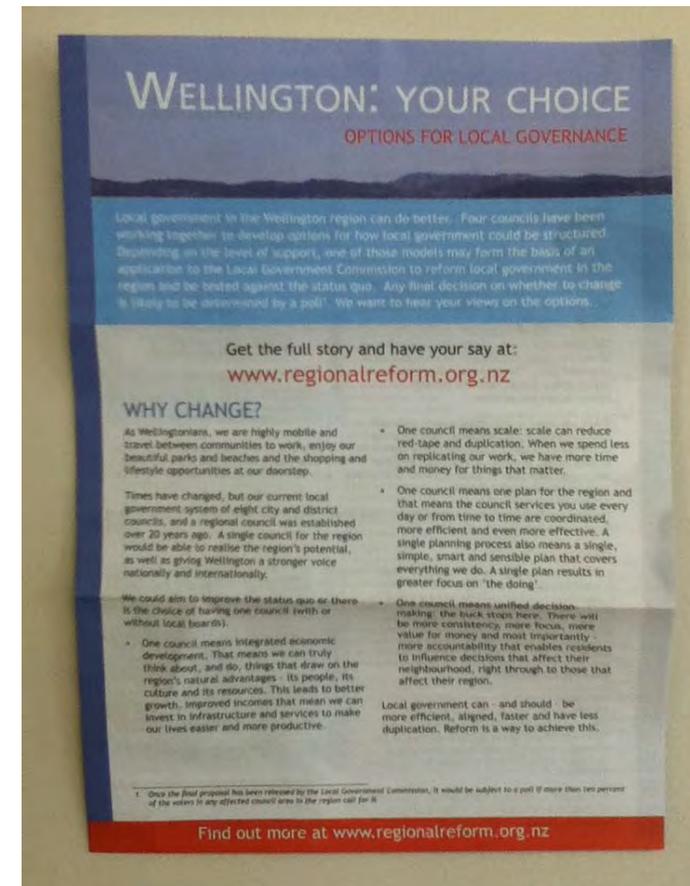
# Focus group research

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- Wellington City Council (WCC) commissioned focus group research with Wellington residents on the proposed options to compliment the public submission process.
- The overall intent of the research was to gauge the views of the ‘silent majority’ who do not traditionally participate in central and local government public consultation processes.
- Five focus groups (each with around 6 residents) were held in Wellington from 16-18 April 2013. They were 1.5 hours in length and conducted by independent facilitators. Participants received a gift of \$70.

# Focus group research

- The first part of the group discussion focussed on how local council could be structured and governed to meet residents' current and future needs (this information was surfaced via collage – see pages 7-11).
- The second part of the discussion focussed on residents' views on the proposed option for change and whether they preferred a single-tier or two-tier council. Residents were given time to read the consultation pamphlet at the focus groups.



# Focus groups were purposefully selected across life stage and WCC wards

Number	Focus group
1	Older people (65 + years)
2	Young people (18-25 years)
3	People with young children (youngest child under 5 years)
4	Medium/high earners (35-55 years)
5	Low/non earners (30-50 years)

Ward	Number of people
Northern	8
Onslow-Western	6
Lambton	6
Eastern	7
Southern	3
<b>Total</b>	<b>30</b>

## Exclusions:

- People who work for local government/DIA
- People who work in governance roles
- People who have made /intend to make a submission on the Regional Governance Project

# Ideal Local Governance

# Older people

What's important  
to us

Health

Grandchildren

Community

Gardens

Old times



Ideal local  
governance

‘Less chaotic,  
more focused  
and easier  
to deal with’

# Young people

What's important  
to us

The 'big picture'

Jobs

Opportunities

Family

Friends

Environment

Bright futures



Ideal local  
governance

'Listens to young  
people and  
communities and  
involves them  
in decision making'

LITMUS

# People with young families

What's important  
to us

Family

Children

Healthy living

Strong  
communities

Environment



Ideal local  
governance

'More  
centralised, efficient,  
transparent,  
has stronger  
regional representation  
and reduces  
duplication'

# Medium/high earners

What's important  
to us

Happy kids

Health

Fulfilling  
work

Nature

Environment



Ideal local  
governance

‘Provides a more  
coordinated service,  
promotes business  
and employment, is  
socially responsible and  
promotes diversity’

LITMUS

# Low/non earners

What's important  
to us

Family

Children

Employment

More options

Happiness

Lifestyle

Environment



Ideal local  
governance

‘More unified  
and less confusing,  
has visible  
councillors and  
interacts through  
technology’

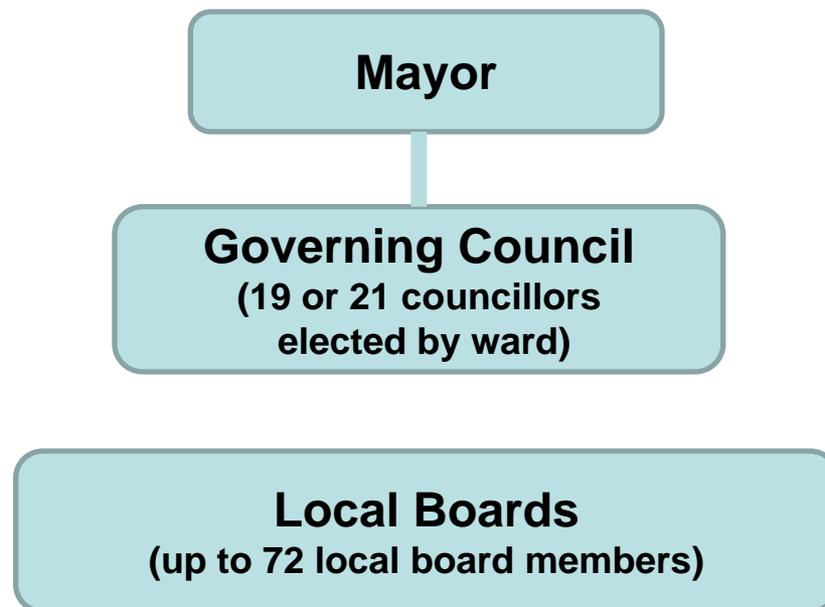
# **One Council or the Status Quo?**

# Proposed options for change

## Option 1: Single-tier council



## Option 2: Two-tier council



# Awareness of proposed options for change

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- Most residents were not aware of the proposed options for change before coming to the focus groups, and did not recall receiving the consultation pamphlet in the mail. The few who recall receiving the pamphlet, glanced over it before putting it in the recycling bin.
- Residents generally feel uninformed about the governance of councils, how decisions are made, and the role of local boards.
- Most residents did not vote in the last local government election.

# All but one resident offered a preference

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- Despite residents' lack of knowledge of the proposed options before coming to the focus groups, all except one person, felt sufficiently informed after reading the consultation pamphlet to say whether they preferred a one council model or the status quo.

# Most people prefer one council

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- Young people, families and low/non earners in particular, prefer the one council model over the status quo. They feel that amalgamating resources with stronger leadership and clearer accountability is more likely to result in:
  - Healthy and happy families
  - Preparation for natural disasters
  - Resilience to environment and climate change
  - Business growth and employment opportunities
  - World-class infrastructure and services.

# Older people prefer the status quo

- Despite older people holding negative views about local governance (chaotic, unfocussed, difficult to deal with), they prefer **fixing** the status quo, rather than moving to a one council model.
- Of all the groups, they are the most sceptical of the proposed change, and feel there is not a clear rationale for the change.

*'They will become distant from the local community. There will be a loss of local knowledge and local services.'*  
(Older people)

*'There are no benefits with a single council. It takes us away from the current structure which isn't broken.'*  
(Older people)

*'Weasel words. Doesn't say why we need to change. Don't know what they are trying to achieve? It's a load of bullshit.'*  
(Older people)

# Medium/high earners are not ‘closed’ but demand more evidence

- Medium-high income earners consider the consultation pamphlet lacks **evidence** to warrant a change from the status quo at this point in time.
- Rather than being ‘closed’ to the idea of a single council for the Wellington Region, they consider that Wellington should review how the Auckland super-city governance arrangements are working before proposing a one council model for Wellington.

*‘We need to know how it has worked for Auckland.  
What are the results and what have been the lessons?’  
(Medium/high earners)*

# Residents note the following strengths of a one council model

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1. Having one chief executive, one mayor and one governing council elected by ward would offer the Wellington Region **greater accountability**.
2. A single council would allow local government to make **faster decisions** and be **more responsive** to residents.
3. Pooling resources would lead to **cost savings** (in the medium-to-long term) which could result in a rate reduction (in some areas) and improved services (libraries, recreational facilities, etc.).

# Residents note the following strengths of a one council model

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4. Combining policy functions would lead to one set of **policies** (e.g. building consents and food safety inspections) for the Wellington Region.
5. A single council would provide a more **coordinated and streamlined service** and there would be less red tape.
6. Combining the functions and powers of the regional and local councils would result in **clearer responsibility** and lines of communication for these functions.

# Residents note the following opportunities of a one council model

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1. A single council advocating for the Wellington Region with Central Government would result in greater **bargaining power** with other regions.
2. A single council marketing the Wellington Region domestically and internationally would result in greater **economic growth** in key sectors (e.g. tourism, film, IT and education).

# Strengths and opportunities of a one council model

*'If there was one council, it would be cheaper and the dollar savings might trickle down to us.'*  
(Young people)

*'There would be more joining together for international events. It would create more options. There are a lot of events that we can't get as it's expensive to run.'*  
(Young families)

*'There would be quicker decisions, greater consistency across the region, economies of scale, more visibility for Wellington and it could improve the status of Wellington as a whole.'*  
(Medium/high earners)

*'There are different rules for the food and building industries across the councils at the moment – one council would make it more streamlined.'*  
(Young families)

*'Local government would be more focussed, coordinated and transparent, there would be less red tape, and the larger a body becomes the more accountable it needs to be.'*  
(Low/non earners)

# Residents note the following weaknesses of a one council model

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- The key concern with the one council model is that **social issues** may be overlooked at the expense of cost savings and other efficiencies. This could result in some communities and groups falling through the cracks.
- Other weaknesses identified include that services could become **impersonal** and lose their local flavour, and that mayors and councillors could become more inaccessible.

# Weaknesses of a one council model

*'People and regions could be left behind e.g. if the capital is doing well they may let Porirua deteriorate.'*  
(Young families)

*'The mayor may become inaccessible. At the moment you can pop into the Upper Hutt mayor's office and have a chat.'*  
(Medium/high earners)

*'Communities could get lost in the cracks and individuality squashed.'*  
(Low/non earners)

*'Social issues could be overlooked. Money would become a huge driver for decision making. Places with more health and poverty issues may be overlooked.'*  
(Young families)

*'One mayor brings the risk that they may be biased to one part of the region.'*  
(young people)

*'May end up talking to machines like IRD.'* (Medium/high earners)

# Threats

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- Residents consider a possible threat would be if a rogue mayor or counsellors were elected, there would be fewer local politicians to 'balance' their views and ensure fair policies.

# Separate councils for Wellington and Wairarapa

- Wellington residents consider that Wellington, Hutt Valley, Porirua and Kapiti Coast have sufficient things in **common** (e.g. proximity to central government, café and museum/arts culture) to come under one council for the Wellington Region.
- However, while there is resident movement between Wairarapa and Wellington Regions for work and play, Wellington residents consider Wairarapa is **distinct** (with a focus on primary industry) and should form its own council.

# Single-tier or Two-tier Council?

# At a rational level residents see the benefit of a single-tier

- Residents view single-tier council as more simple and straight-forward, which potentially would result in more **consistent and responsive** decision making. By comparison, decision making under a two-tier council model may be more protracted and lengthier and there could be more red tape.

*'Where do you draw the line for decision making in a two-tier council? What if the councillors don't agree with the boards decisions? It could cause conflict.'*  
(Young families)

*'Single-tier will mean more consistent decisions, more focussed decisions, more coordinated services and it will be cheaper.'*  
(Low/non earners)

*'Single-tier offers more streamlined decisions, will mean more accountability, decisions will be made quicker and there will be cost savings, and hopefully having more counsellors will bring more change.'*  
(Young families)

*'It seems as though with the single-tier there is more connection with the people and the top.'*  
(Young people)

# At an emotional level, residents prefer a two-tier council

- The two-tier council model with a tier of elected local boards is considered more likely to be **in tune** with communities' needs and represent residents' views.
- Residents are therefore prepared to **save less** for this second tier.

*'It's nice that money is being saved but in the end we would rather have a better service and pay a bit more to make sure we get heard and make sure our money is going to the right place.'*

*(Young people)*

*'As much as you want the number of councils and councillors to come down because it will cost less....but if the numbers come down are we going to be heard?'*

*(Low/non earners)*

# A two-tier council mitigates the risks of moving to one council for the Wellington Region

- The two-tier council model is seen to be more similar to the status quo (of 9 local councils). It therefore **mitigates the potential weakness** of a single council not being connected to local communities and representing local priorities.

*'Wellington has distinct geographical boundaries unlike Auckland. A single-tier council might ruin that, and councillors might not know what is going on in their local areas.'*  
(Medium/high earners)

*'The single-tier puts a greater amount of power in the hands of a small number of people.'*  
(Medium/high earners)

# Benefits of a two-tier council...

*'I like the idea of having local boards from particular areas who know and understand the needs of the areas. They would hopefully find out what people need and take it back because at the moment that doesn't happen. Communication and getting your point across needs to be easier.'*  
(Low/non earners)

*'The two-tier could work if they can make decisions and influence up.'*  
(Older people)

*'More opportunity to have the local voice reflected with up to 72 board members.'*  
(Medium/high earners)

*'More of a chance for the everyday citizen to be listened to if there are 72 board members. Even though you have less at the top you have more at the bottom to push changes.'*  
(Young people)

*'Two tiers offers greater democracy gives a sense of being heard and having a right to have an opinion and having it heard.'*  
(Low/non earners)

*'The whole purpose of the reform is to make it more effective for communities and individuals. It is important that it is easier for people to be heard. This would be better achieved through the two-tier system - two-tier is more representative and one-tier is more accountable.'*  
(Young people)

*'Boards seem to be made up of really local people who know what is going on in the communities. It is more likely that the smaller, but still really important issues will be looked at.'*  
(Young families)

*'Local boards are more the "social bodies". They are the "eyes and ears" of the communities.'*  
(Young families)

# Boards offer a safety net, despite low awareness of their role and function

- Residents have **low awareness** of the role and function of community boards under the status quo, and very few have engaged with them.

*'I have no idea what community boards do. I can't even name one. Perhaps they advocate for local interest or feed information to local people so everyone knows what is happening?'  
(Medium/high income)*

- While residents say they would be unlikely to vote in their local board elections, or go to their board with an issue, this mechanism offers an important **safety net**.

# Local boards' real value is the feeding up of community issues

- In the absence of 9 local councils, local boards offer councillors and council staff an important mechanism **'to tap into'** communities' priorities and issues and ensure they are included in decision making. Residents believe if this mechanism is not used effectively, then boards could become window dressing.

*'If the local boards don't have any real power, they may be a waste of time.'*

*(Medium/high earners)*

*'Why do we need a local board to know how many people are going to a pool? It's just statistics.'*

*(Low/non earners)*

*'What will local boards actually do? What does 'many local issues mean?'*

*(Low/non earner)*

*'Are local boards just window dressing? What is their value?'*

*(Young families)*

# Is there a place for a single-tier council in future?

- A few residents consider that the two-tier council could be **‘an in between step’** before moving to a single-tier council in future. This iterative plan for local governance reform would allow the single council to become embedded with local communities (through boards) before moving to a model which would allow greater efficiencies.

*‘Do the local boards need to be part of the model at all? Maybe they are completely separate. Maybe they can just be made up of really good people in the community rather than funding them under the model.’*  
(Young families)

# Summary

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## Preference for one council model

- Most residents support the proposed option of one council for the Wellington Region. The key strengths of the one council model is that it offers greater accountability, would enable local government to be more responsive to residents, and could lead to cost savings over time. Key opportunities of the one council model would be greater bargaining power with central government and could result in greater economic growth.
- The key weakness of a one council model is that it could lose local flavour and a threat could be power and dictatorship.
- A single council representing the Wellington Region should include Wellington, Hutt Valley, Porirua and Kapiti Coast, but exclude the Wairarapa.

# Summary

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## Preference for two-tier council

- At a rational level, most residents prefer the single-tier council, as it is considered more efficient and responsive. However, at an emotional level, residents prefer the two-tier council, with local boards that are considered more likely to represent local views, and therefore is an important safety net.
  
- To enable residents to more fully comment and engage on the proposed options for change, there is a need to:
  1. Further outline the rationale for the proposal to move away from the status quo, for residents who need more evidence on the need for change.
  2. Further explain the role and function of local boards, how they apply to the two models and how local representation would be maintained under the single-tier model to reassure residents that their priorities/needs won't be negatively impacted.