

## The Community Board Story

Prepared by the Community Board Executive Committee, August 2021

Community boards were established by the Local Government Commission (LGC) during the reorganisation of local government in 1989. The reorganisation process created 159 community boards. Community boards were not the first 'sub-municipal' body. Prior to the reforms of 1989 there were 136 community councils in New Zealand. The Chair of the Local Government Commission at the time, Sir Brian Ellwood, stated that one of their reasons for establishing community boards was because some of the amalgamated councils were likely to be so large that former communities of interest might lose representation.

### Roles

Community boards are "unincorporated" bodies which are neither a local authority nor a committee of a local authority (s.51 of the Local Government Act (LGA 2002)). Their functions, duties and powers are set by statute as well as delegated by the local authority of which they are a part. While the LGA 2002 sets out the statutory role of community boards it also describes the purpose of local government (s.10 LGA 2002) which is also the overall purpose of community boards, namely:

- a) To enable democratic local decision-making and action by, and on behalf of, communities; and
- b) To promote the social, economic, environmental, and cultural well-being of communities in the present and for the future.

England has an extensive and growing network of local and parish councils, number approximately 12,000, which:

- Represent the local community (to the principal authority among others);
- Deliver services to meet local needs; and
- Work to improve quality of life in the parish or neighbourhood.

Promoting well-being and enabling democratic participation set the context in which boards operate and when they prioritise their roles. Their roles are to:

1. Represent, and act as an advocate for, the interests of its community; and
2. Consider and report on all matters referred to it by the territorial authority, or any matter of interest or concern to the community board; and
3. Maintain an overview of services provided by the territorial authority within the community; and
4. Prepare an annual submission to the territorial authority for expenditure within the community; and
5. Communicate with community organisations and special interest groups within in the community; and
6. Undertake any other responsibilities that are delegated to it by the territorial authority (s51 LGA2002).

It is clear that community boards do make a difference. They keep the local in local. They help councils deal with diversity in their communities. They provide both sources and lines of communication. And they provide for citizen involvement in the making of local policy (Kerry Marshall, resident of LGNZ, 1997).

Boards are remarkably diverse as are the communities they serve. Some boards represent fewer than 500 residents while others more than 60,000. The functions that they have responsibility for also vary considerably. In some areas, such as Christchurch and Southland, there is a network of community boards that cover the complete city or district, while in other coverage is only partial. Wellington

City, for example, has just two community boards. Currently there are approximately 110 community boards in just over 40 different councils.

## Representation reviews

At least once every six years local authorities are required to undertake a representation review. The purpose of the review is to ensure that their representation arrangements are fair and effective (as defined by the Local Electoral Act 2001), particularly if population levels have changed. The review must look at the number of councillors, whether they should be elected by wards, at large or a combination, the boundaries of any wards and whether community boards are needed.

In undertaking their reviews councils are required to prepare a draft representation proposal for community feedback and submissions. This process is not set in legislation and can vary from council to council. When reviewing established community boards, or considering whether to establish them in the first place, a good process should be grounded on the existence of communities of interest, and in relation to those communities consider

- The degree of isolation
- The existence or otherwise of a sense of identity
- Whether there is a need for devolved or distributed decision-making, such as a large rural community with multiple villages
- The degree of heterogeneity or varying preferences, such as between rural and urban residents

Community boards are sub-municipal bodies; bodies designed to bring government closer to citizens. In his famous work "Consideration on Representative Government" The British philosopher John Stuart Mill noted that "the very object of having local representation is in order that those who have an interest in common, which they do not share with the general body of their countrymen (sic), may manage that joint interest by themselves."

In addition the review needs to consider the likelihood that those communities of interest will have representation around the governing body and thus a voice to articulate their concerns and interests. Factors to consider include:

- Whether or not communities of interest are likely to have distinct elected representation
- Whether there are enough members on the governing body to give communities of interest effective representation;
- The existence of wards and if so their size
- The opportunity for communities to influence their council's policy agenda/decision making:
- The proximity of communities of interest to staff and elected members
- The existence or otherwise of other mechanisms for engaging with communities (opportunities to engage in the decision-making processes).

### **Community board a vital link in the democratic chain**

District and city councillors have an overview of their district or city, but it is the community board members who are working at the local service station or shop and are readily available, day in and day out (Georgina Beyer, Mayor Carterton).

Following consultation and subsequent hearing on the draft proposal councils must adopt a final representation scheme, forward this scheme to the Local Government Commission and advertise, in a local newspaper, the fact that citizens can either appeal or object to the proposal to the Local Government Commission (LGC), including the dates by which appeals and objections must be made. It is important to note that appeals can only be made where a person has previously made a submission to the councils on the draft proposal. The LGC will normally conduct hearings in every district where there have been appeals or objections and its decision is final.

## The value and importance of community boards

As local government units become larger sub-municipal bodies, such as community boards and, in Auckland, local boards, have become more important to ensure that diverse communities can have a democratic voice. Bringing government closer to the people not only ensures better representation but also promotes a stronger civic culture. Reasons frequently given for establishing community boards and other forms of sub-municipal government include:

1. The existence of community boards enhances the local government system of the district and provides benefits to the communities that they serve. These include local responsiveness, the dedicated representation of local interests, the ability to mobilise community activity, and the capacity to provide additionally to the services and facilities operated by the district or city;
2. Community boards not only provide a mechanism for bringing public decision-making closer to citizens and communities (subsidiarity or localism), they also allow decision-making on local services to be devolved so as to better ensure they meet the principles of allocative efficiency and respond to local needs and preferences;
3. Community boards encourage local people to talk together, take and active interest in public affairs and bring people into government as active participants. Boards were established to be major sources of accountability for their councils and to “keep them honest” (Faye Storer, Chair, Waiheke Community Board, 1997);
4. Community boards provide a training ground for prospective local government politicians due to the low barriers of entrance and the ability to learn skills along-side their usual occupation;
5. Decisions should be made at the lowest level of competency. The Board believes this is the most important way to engage and involve people in the decision making process. This grassroots decision making makes the best decisions for local areas (Maungakiekie Community Board submission to the Royal Commission on Auckland 2008)
6. Efficient resource use is one of the areas where community boards in theory should be creating value. They are closer to the grassroots than their parent council; they have a lower ratio of elected members to citizens and so (numerically) a greater potential to relate to the community; they have more time to focus on community engagement because they have fewer decisions to make and community engagement is intuitively at the core of their purpose (Mike Richardson, Research Paper for the Royal Commission on Auckland 2008);

### The advantage of community boards over residents' groups

Compared with other forms of grassroots organisation, including community associations and residents' groups, community boards have a number of advantages that follow from their statutory foundation. These include accountability to local people through elections, stability and continuity, ability to recommend targeted rates and the capacity to act as a catalyst for promoting participation in public realm.

Where a service is used by a community collectively, the control over services needs to be exercised by a representative body. In these circumstances we are clear **that the principle should be to decentralise power to the lowest appropriate level**. For many services, this will mean the community groups and neighbourhood councils to whom power is decentralised, while for others it may be local authorities and other elected bodies (Open Public services UK Government 2009).

For further information see the Community Board Executive Committee webpage at [www.lgnz.co.nz/???](http://www.lgnz.co.nz/???) or email [admin@lgnz.co.nz](mailto:admin@lgnz.co.nz)