



Leading the way

Note from roundtable with Harvey Brookes, Acting General Manager, Auckland Plan Strategy and Research

Friday 14 November 2014

In 2010, the city of Auckland, New Zealand, introduced a city-region council and directly elected mayor. Centre for Cities hosted Harvey Brookes, a key architect of the Auckland city-region strategic plan, in a roundtable event to share his experiences of city-region mayoral governance and discuss the challenges, successes and implications for the UK.

The [event](#) was especially timely given the growing number of combined authorities in major UK city-regions, the recent announcement of a metro mayor for Greater Manchester, and the relatively strong voices on both sides of the debate for and against metro mayors in UK city regions.

Auckland key facts

Auckland has a complicated geography and is characterised by a juxtaposition of urban and rural land in its city-region, which poses its own particular challenges for city-region strategic working.

Auckland generates 34 per cent of New Zealand's GDP, and of the NZ\$180 billion foreign direct investment into New Zealand needed in the next 10 to 15 years, the city estimates NZ\$90 will need to come into Auckland. Auckland receives NZ\$18.6 billion in Central Government funds per year, and the Council's annual budget is NZ\$3.2 billion, of which about half is sourced from direct property rates.

City-region governance and leadership

Hosting the Rugby World Cup in 2006 brought governance and leadership issues in Auckland to the fore. The National Government planned to build a new stadium in which to host the tournament on the country's largest

port in the city-centre. But tensions and disputes between the eight local authorities that made up the city-region, with each vying to gain the most from the investment, hindered the project going forward – and the new stadium was not built.

In order to resolve these issues and similar coordination problems extending back many decades, a Royal Commission was set up to look into city-region governance and how to improve collaboration and coordination. It reported in 2009 and recommended a new single metropolitan council to be formed with four rationalised city councils alongside it. However this modest proposal would have done little to resolve the issue of too many councils, too many decision-makers and too little clarity in the city-region. Instead, Central Government decided that a single city-region council would be formed to focus on growth and development, headed up by a mayor. Len Brown, the first Mayor was elected in 2010 and subsequently re-elected in 2013.

The new city-region council is made up of 20 elected representatives from different parts of the city and a single mayor directly elected at large. This single government sits alongside 21 local boards made up of municipal and community representatives. Unlike in the English model of a combined authority, the local boards that make up the city-region do not sit on the governing body.

What powers does the Mayor have and how have they been used?

The Mayor of Auckland has modest executive powers compared to international examples, but more than any other Mayor in New Zealand. In New Zealand, Central Government delivers health, education, fire and social services, while local government focuses primarily on local urban and civic policy. The responsibilities of the Mayor include promoting a vision for the city, leadership, taking a lead on spatial planning, and appointing a Deputy Mayor and staff for a small office.

The legislation set out to implement a new metro mayor included the need for a long-term spatial plan. While the Mayor is charged with putting forward 10-year financial and spatial plans, they are ultimately decided on by the councils and community. This type of highly-collaborative approach has so far worked under the leadership of Mayor Brown, despite the challenges that he faces gaining consensus across a high number of diverse constituents. It has also been supported by the city's efforts to work in collaboration with local, regional and national actors, articulating the benefits for all of a more successful and prosperous Auckland. The Upper North Island Strategic Alliance (UNISA) brings the city together with other actors in the Auckland economic district to discuss a shared vision for the area.

Mayor Brown was elected on a ticket of making Auckland 'the world's most liveable city'. This simple phrase has caught on with the people of Auckland, and the Mayor has been able to galvanize support for policies that support his goal, such as improving transport and urban housing. The Mayor and his team have been clear about what they want to achieve, setting targets and communicating them effectively – engaging with the community at large.

City-region strategic working in practice

Strategic planning

As in many UK cities, policy-makers and politicians in Auckland face an ongoing challenge to provide the housing the city needs, whilst being mindful of preserving the natural setting. Auckland house prices lifted away from New Zealand's from around 2010, rising steeply – the median house price is now NZ\$800,000 (approx. £400,000) which has brought into sharp focus the need to build more homes. The previous wider metro approach to land use, which demanded 100 per cent of development in the inner-urban area with no land zoned for housing outside the centre, was ineffective and caused price distortions within the city. With good and affordable housing a key plank of the liveability goals of the Mayor, addressing the housing challenge remains a priority.

Auckland's distinctive urban-rural mix in the city-region requires intelligent and sensitive land use planning policy. The city mapped market attractiveness of land against 'technical possibility' for housing, to determine where new developments should be located. The city has introduced a '70-40' approach to land use – with up to 70 per cent of new development delivered in the existing urban area and up to 40 per cent from rural areas in the city-region. The '70-40' approach reflects the Mayor's approach for effective communication with the city, setting out clear strategy that resonates with people.

It is worth noting that the Auckland city-region spatial plan sits awkwardly in the national and local framework – it is based on different legislation than national policy, or local plans, and the relationship is unclear. Council plans do not need to conform to the city-region plan and must only have regard to it.

Transport

The car has taken precedence over bus or rail in Auckland in the past few decades. Interestingly, the city used to have a well-connected tram system covering the city-region. This was effectively disbanded in the 1950s, and by the 1990s, the overground heavy rail line that served the city was 'almost dead', according to Harvey. Like many cities around the world, automobile transport took over from public transport and, like many cities in the UK, Auckland now has a 'concrete collar' motorway that divides the city-centre from the rest of the city.

Connecting the various town centres and the city-centre, as well as improving access to public transport and public space, was also a key part of the Mayor's liveability vision. A NZ\$2.4 billion city rail link project is central to regenerating the old transport network and bringing the city-region together. National Government will cover half the costs of the project, and although it has taken longer than hoped, by being clear about the ambitions and benefits of the scheme, the city has finally gained approval for it to go ahead. The only point of difference now is the start time – either 2018 or 2020.

Going forward, to keep congestion at bay, the city has proposed to fill a NZ\$12 billion shortfall in the transport budget with a regional fuel tax, property taxes, or the current preferred option of a network congestion charge.

Challenges for Auckland and looking ahead

Under the leadership of the city-region council and Mayor, Auckland has taken significant steps to drive economic growth and ensure a high quality of life for its residents, but there remain some challenges ahead.

Demographics

Auckland absorbs half of all migrants into New Zealand, and of those that come to Auckland, half will stay for the long-term. This will contribute to a projected doubling in the population of the city from 1.5 million people to 2.5 million by 2020, which although crucial for economic growth and prosperity in the city, according to Harvey, will increase demand for services and housing.

Social

Unemployment and youth unemployment are a particular problem in Auckland; worse than in the rest of New Zealand. And the most entrenched social challenges are concentrated in the Southern area of the city. Of the NZ\$18 billion in Government funding to Auckland, NZ\$12 billion is spent there. The Southern Initiative aims to bring together different services and avoid duplication to reduce costs. However, the Mayor and city-region council have few levers on socio-economic factors within their remit.

Governance

Despite the successes of the current Mayor in bringing together local politicians and policy-makers around an agreed vision for the city, there are nonetheless tensions between the 21 local boards and the 160 members

that make up the boards, and the city-region council. Some boards feel constrained by legislation and funding, while the mixed geography of rural and urban areas is an inevitable challenge, with some areas feeling more distant than others.

Mayoral impact

Moving forward, Harvey identified a slightly higher budget and more decision-making power, as well as levers to influence socio-economic factors, as factors that could improve the ability of the Mayor to govern effectively at the city-region and tackle the challenges above.

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