

Unitary Authority

TO	Thames-Coromandel District Council
FROM	David Hammond - Chief Executive
DATE	22 November 2012
SUBJECT	Unitary Authority

1 Purpose of Report

To seek Council direction on a proposal to initiate a project to research and develop issues and options relating to the reformation of the Thames-Coromandel District Council as a unitary authority.

2 Background

For some time now, there has been much discussion within the district and the region on options for local government reform. At its meeting on 7 November 2012, a petition signed by a thousand Thames-Coromandel residents was presented asking the Council to "take all actions required to reformulate TCDC as a unitary authority".

Subsequently, the Council has indicated that it would begin to look at the viability, costs and benefits of a unitary authority structure (the regional council and district council functions in one organisation).

A press release was issued making the Thames-Coromandel District Council position on region-wide amalgamation clear.

3 Issue

The Council has been petitioned to take a leadership role in facilitating the establishment of a unitary authority within the District. If it were to take up this challenge, the Council would need to source and provide information, including cost and benefit of such an approach, to guide thinking and decision making on this matter.

4 Discussion

Discussion at the local level around local government reform has become increasingly topical. Responding to this, Parliament is reforming the law which is prompting groups and communities to actively engage in reorganisation processes. The Local Government Amendment Bill has had its second reading and it is anticipated that legislation will be passed before Christmas.

At TCDC we have already undertaken our own reforms, decentralising power back to our communities and reducing rates through prudent cost control. Continuing improvement is a culture that does not need amalgamation or central government law reform to make happen. Council is also supporting shared services and shared procurement activities.

However, with such discussion of changes on the horizon, and with strong calls being made locally for a unitary authority, Council is being asked to take a leadership role in discussions and considerations around the unitary authority option.

Intuitively and anecdotally, big amalgamations do not deliver well on improving a local community's access to democracy. Under a region-wide unitary authority model, the risk of losing a local voice from the Coromandel inside the head office of a large Waikato or Bay of Plenty authority is high.

Local Coromandel people are telling us that they are concerned by the disconnect they see between the Hamilton based regional council and Coromandel community aspirations. As examples of this, our communities have highlighted the mangroves and velodrome debates.

Thus, a strong call has been made locally for a "unitary authority" or, one Council managing both Councils' functions, and based locally. A unitary authority has considerable merit, but would need to be costed. The cost of setting up such a structure would need to deliver the future benefits.

In discussing the press release, Council has mooted the potential for a wider Thames Valley concept. This has not been warmly received by neighbouring councils, and it is noted that their communities are not raising concerns to those councils in the same way as Coromandel communities are responding.

Issues and options around the formation of a unitary authority should be scoped and reported back to Council to inform its on-going consideration of this possibility. It is proposed that a project in this vein be initiated.

The ideal timeframe would be for a scoping report to be returned to Council for its consideration between March and May 2013. The timing may be dependent on the Regional Council's ability to support TCDC in understanding issues of costs and services given its own priorities.

5 Suggested Resolution(s)

That the Thames-Coromandel District Council:

1. Receives the report.
2. Asks the Chief Executive to initiate a project to research and develop issues and options relating to the reformation of the Thames-Coromandel District Council as a unitary authority.