



Southland District Council
Mayor's Office - Invercargill - New Zealand

21 February 2025

Brendan Duffy
Chair
Local Government Commission
P O Box 5362
Wellington 6140

Dear Brendan,

1989 was a long, long time ago. When I look at my daughter who is about to turn ten, I reflect that I was her age back then.

I can still joke to people that I learned to type on typewriters in school, it was the golden age for the fax machine and mayors would have been much harder to get hold of!

The world has changed a lot since 1989, but the structure of local government in Southland has not, except for maybe how easy it is to now reach the mayors.

My unplanned local government journey began in 2010 by getting shoulder tapped, and then arm/ear twisted to run for my local community board in Lumsden. As a young businessman relatively new to the area, the locals were keen to have me involved in running the town.

I was shocked and humbled to be elected as chair after putting my hat in the ring, not really knowing what I was getting myself into, and certainly not realising that it would lead to me becoming Mayor of Southland District Council 12 years later!

It didn't take me long to find inefficiencies in the local government system. The advantage of the community board was that we could work around a lot of these by working locally with local solutions. This is synonymous with a lot of our communities all around Southland.

This approach was threatened by two representation reviews, the first in 2013 where we lost our Community Board status and became a Community Development Authority (CDA), and then again in 2018 when all of the nineteen CDAs were abolished in favour of just nine Community Boards.

Not liking this direction, I stood for council, determined to bring Southland District Council (SDC) and the communities that it represents closer together. This same ambition paved the way for my successful road to becoming mayor.

Southland is blessed with so many great people. The stereotypical Southlander is the quiet achiever who works tirelessly behind the scenes to get things done for their community. The awards that we give out to our community heroes really highlight the value of what our people do. These people pop up everywhere in their communities, running events, running the schools, running sports clubs, saving lives in emergencies and somewhere in amongst all of that they find the time to work and raise their families.

Our towns thrive when these people are able to drive their direction, with the least amount of bureaucracy. SDC has proven that by supporting and working with these people, utilising the expertise of qualified staff, our communities can flourish.

We haven't got it right all the time, and we are still not at the perfect model, but we are certainly heading in the right direction in this aspect.

Gore is a fantastic part of our region as well, it shares many of the characteristics of our other Southland Towns. Whilst being bigger than any of them, in relative terms it is still very small – too small to have the burden of the costs involved with a separate council administration.

I often drive through Gore and Mataura when visiting parts of my patch and have always thought that they could benefit from being a part of the wider Southland District. This would save them a lot of their overheads, and they would still be able to retain their identity.

In my current day to day mahi as mayor, I am still finding myself constantly frustrated with inefficiencies as I work in the local government space in Southland. Particularly around the number of councils and the duplication of roles in governance and head office functions.

One thing that has never made sense to me is why there is a split between a territorial authority and a regional council. From a planning perspective alone it makes no sense. From day one in the role of mayor I was finding overlaps and confusion around which organisation has responsibility for which area, which was highlighted even further during the two states of emergencies that we have had.

This letter would be far too long if I provided all of the examples over the last 15 years that I have encountered that defy logic, and where our structure does not align with efficient, affordable and realistic outcomes for our communities. For context, I will provide one example which highlights a couple of issues with the status quo.

Firstly there is a disconnect between the services offered between SDC and Environment Southland (ES) and secondly, there is in my opinion a disconnect between ES and the community that it represents.

One of our nine community board's main focuses this triennium has been around gravel in their local rivers. The build-up has been putting their infrastructure at risk, primarily the concern is around bridges and roads, but also extends out to our communities and farms with increased flooding events.

I have been helping them advocate for the last two years for a solution. At one point one of them threw their hands up in the air and in desperation asked "why does this have to be so hard???" What is technically the responsibility of the Regional Council, has become our problem to lead – the community don't care which council is sorting it, they are paying for both, they just want it sorted and are sick of being bounced between two organisations in search of a solution.

With the structure of our Regional Council, I see a real disconnect from its purpose and its communities. In an attempt to resolve the gravel situation, they were invited to our council to provide some context and answer some questions. During this session, they stated that they were working with all of their key stakeholders for gravel. Fish and Game, Forest & Bird, DoC and Iwi. I reminded them that they had missed their key stakeholder off the list – their community!

I have lost count over the last couple of years with many interactions with the Regional Council where I have said “this would be so much easier if the conversation could happen down the hallway” and this was a prime benefit stated by all of the unitary councils that I have spoken to.

A Unitary Authority in Southland District is a no brainer to me. The efficiencies gained far outnumber any potential pitfalls, and I am struggling to find any, having asked all four of the unitaries for negative aspects and finding none!

This naturally leaves an additional Unitary Authority for the city of Invercargill and Bluff. We would halve the governance and the associated costs and political complexity. We would significantly reduce the confusion in our communities and the associated apathy.

Importantly we would also have more effective planning with half the number of plans and bylaws at a fraction of the cost. We will be easier to work with, our communities will have an enhanced voice, and the money saved from all of the duplication can be put back into our communities where it belongs.

The unitary model has been proven to work well in other regions, “you will never look back” is the universal encouragement we have received from existing unitary authorities we spoke with. And, unlike 1989 or the formation of the Auckland Super City, the transition to two unitary authorities for Southland won’t be novel or difficult to implement, we don’t need to re-invent the wheel.

It is with great pleasure that I attach our request to explore much needed change in Southland and I would welcome you to reach out to me at any time for any questions, clarification or discussion.

Kind regards



Rob Scott
Mayor