

Executive Summary

In December 2002, the Minister of Defence announced that the Government would withdraw its Air Force operations from Whenuapai over a period of five years and consolidate its facilities at Ohakea Airbase. A Joint Officials Group (JOG), consisting of officers from Auckland Regional Council, Waitakere City Council, North Shore City Council, Manukau City Council and Rodney District Council, have prepared this report in order to enable the Auckland Regional Growth Forum to identify and form a regional opinion, from a strategic perspective, of the best possible future use(s) for the Whenuapai Airbase. This report concludes that the Airport with Ancillary Activities option best meets the relevant central, regional and local strategies and the environmental, social, economic and cultural criteria as set out in the report.

Seven options for the future use of the land have been addressed in this report. They include Urban Development, Countryside Living, Open Space, Public Work, Airport and Ancillary Activities, Airport and Urban Development and Land Banking.

With regard to the Public Work option, no 'public work', other than the Airport options, have been put forward by any central, regional or local government agency or any other designating authority.

With regard to Land Banking, neither central, regional nor local government has the ability through existing legal disposal processes to obtain the land for such a purpose, as land banking is not a public work. If this option was possible, it would not replace, in the short term at least, the economic loss to Waitakere City and to a lesser extent the north-western sector, of the NZDF departing from Whenuapai, particularly when this is compared to the urban development and airport options.

Along with the Land Banking option, the Open Space option would be unlikely to replace the economic loss to Waitakere City, particularly if it was for passive public open space. Private 'open space' could generate some economic activity within Waitakere City. In addition, much of this land is not considered particularly desirable or appropriate for passive public open space as it is compromised by the existing airport infrastructure and the likely cost to remediate the site for open space purposes.

The Countryside Living option, whilst having more of an economic benefit than the three previous options, through having additional local residents, is not considered to adequately substitute the loss of the NZDF from Whenuapai. Furthermore, due to the existence of a large number of existing titles, the development of the land for countryside living, should the lots be purchased by former landowners/successors, would be of concern. This is because it would be contrary to the strategic direction of the region effectively resulting in an uncontrolled subdivision of land. It would also be difficult for Waitakere City to impose financial contributions for the required upgrade of infrastructure such as roading.

The Urban Development option and the Airport and Urban Development option are contrary to the strategic direction of the Region's and Waitakere's strategic growth management objectives, potentially undermining the RGS. These two options have the potential to replace the economic loss of the NZDF concluding operations at Whenuapai, however it is considered that this would occur at the cost to the integrated and land use strategies as expressed in the RGS.

The Airport option with Ancillary Activities, as per the Land Banking, Open Space, and potentially the Countryside Living and Public Work options, is not considered contrary to the regional and district strategic planning strategies, including the RPS, RGS and the District

Plan. Regionally significant infrastructure is 'deemed' to be appropriate outside of the MUL and is defined to include airports and flight paths. Furthermore, in terms of this option the retention of an airport would likely have the effect of reinforcing the RGS and therefore discouraging the whole Peninsula (approximately 1500 hectares) from urban expansion pressures.

This option also has the potential to replace the economic loss to Waitakere City as a result of the NZDF departing from Whenuapai, as do the Urban Development and Airport and Urban Development options, however has the benefit which these options don't in that as stated is permitted outside of the MUL and reinforces the Strategic Direction of the region. In addition, a commercial airport at Whenuapai could potentially be beneficial to the development of business in the north western sector.

This Airport option with Ancillary Activities can be expected to generate adverse environmental impacts, in particular noise effects. These would need to be fully assessed through the Resource Management Act statutory processes and potentially measured against the existing operation and activities allowed under the existing defence designation. The RMA process would be a public process and should be fully integrated in terms of all plan changes, designations and consents required, be jointly notified, assessed and heard.

The opportunity cost is a critical issue that the region must address. The Airbase may represent the only practical opportunity of retaining the option for Auckland to have a second commercial airport, in that with the existence of the NZDF at Whenuapai, this means that there is potentially an already established use and effects boundary. The Airbase represents a significant piece of regional infrastructure that is strategically situated to service the Auckland region. All other options put forward could occur elsewhere in the region. It is questionable whether this is the case with an airport, due to the cost of establishing the required infrastructure, the difficulty in obtaining an appropriate site and the difficulty in obtaining planning approval from a zero or minimal effects base.