



Auckland Ratepayers' Alliance
PO Box 133 099, Eastridge, Auckland 1146
Phone: (09) 2815 172
Email: enquiries@ratepayers.nz

21 April 2020

Stephen Town
Chief Executive
Auckland Council

By email: stephen.town@aucklandcouncil.govt.nz

Dear Stephen,

Inaugural Auckland Town Hall Rich List

1. We acknowledge your letter of 17 April 2020 regarding the imminent publication of our Auckland Town Hall Rich List.¹
2. Last week our staff emailed the individuals listed on the Rich List. We asked them to correct or clarify any of the information as it pertained to them. To date, none have contacted us to object to the publication of the information – indeed, I understand you responded by email with a minor correction to your own information.
3. Our researchers put together the Rich List based on official information responses provided to us by the Council and its CCOs, along with annual reports, and job title listings on Council websites and public social media. Some extrapolation was required to match names with salary bands but in most cases this could be done with certainty. If we can do it, anyone can. It is merely presenting public information in a more effective way. We simply added the extra step of asking those listed for verification.
4. So we totally reject your assertion that the Rich List is an “unacceptable intrusion into [the] privacy” of the individuals listed. These aren’t frontline or lowly paid anonymous staff. Without exception, those listed are in senior positions paid \$250,000 or more per year – more than many Ministers of the Crown, and Chief Executives of some government agencies.
5. The public interest, and ratepayers’ right to know where their money is spent, cannot depend on the specific job titles. Once you are paid quarter of a million dollars the public has just as much right to know who you are, and what you do, as it has the right to know about the details of an equivalent remuneration package for a public sector CEO. You appear to believe transparency should depend on the structure and organisation of the public sector. We reject that.

¹ The letter was incorrectly sent to our national parent body – this reply is on behalf of both organisations.

6. In addition, the marginal impact on privacy with public disclosure that an individual is paid between \$300,000 and \$320,000 (as is already the case) and a precise figure of say \$309,571, is slight. This is the point in our reference to the earlier Ombudsman decision.
7. Around three years ago, we made similar submissions to WaterCare in regard to a request for precise remuneration of its senior executive team. We could use mid-points within salary bands and judgements based on seniority of staff and relative positions. We asked Water Care for the precise amounts. No member of WaterCare's senior management group objected, and we were provided the precise amounts.
8. Rather than genuine concerns for privacy, we fear that your strong reaction is more likely explained by the political embarrassment Auckland Council must have in the share volume of staff on such high salaries. That is understandable. But we make no apology for publishing the collated information with full knowledge that many ratepayers will be outraged at what it shows.
9. This sort of scrutiny should be expected. In Britain this debate is settled – our sister group, the UK TaxPayers' Alliance has been publishing its own Town Hall Rich List annually since 2007, and the sky has not fallen.
10. In Britain, public disclosure of specific salary information for highly paid employees was essential for gender equality groups to expose differences in gender pay at public sector organisations. Without these sorts of efforts, the public outcry and corrections of the enormous pay disparities between male and female hosts working for the BBC would never have occurred. We are aware of separate efforts to uncover this sort of information for similar purposes in New Zealand. I understand Auckland Council has resisted those efforts too.
11. You will recall that there was strong reaction the first time we published our local government league tables, Ratepayers' Report. Reactions within the sector even saw the President of your peak body, Dave Cull, emotively describe the Taxpayers' Union as untruthful in public comments about the league tables – an allegation he later withdrew, apologised for, and made a significant payment to the Taxpayers' Union in relation to.
12. Now that the dust has settled, councils around New Zealand use our annual league tables to benchmark performance and Stats NZ has adopted aspects of our research methodology on residential rates for the purpose of CPI calculations.
13. As with the league tables, we have provided the draft Town Hall Rich List data to Auckland Council for verification and feedback. If it's not accurate, then work with us to improve it - or accept that your lack of transparency forces us (and all ratepayers) to make extrapolations and informed guesses. If it has errors (in particular if we have misidentified a staff member) tell us the specifics, so we can correct the report immediately.
14. But we are not going to hold off publication because of faux outrage, or vague claims that we have something wrong.

Summary

15. Without exception these individuals are paid more than many government ministers. They enjoy job security greater than just about every employee in the private sector right now. Their generous salaries are funded by the ratepayers we represent. Even your letter acknowledges an acceptance that there is a degree of public interest in transparency and accountability for the value the Council attributes to the carrying out of senior roles. Our report does little more than collate publicly available information on those values.

16. If you wish to provide clarification of the amounts (or, at least, inform your staff that they are permitted to engage with our researchers should they wish) please ensure we receive the information before mid-day Friday 24 April. We will be publishing shortly after that.

Yours sincerely,
Auckland Ratepayers' Alliance Ltd



Jordan Williams
Executive Director
jordan.williams@ratepayers.nz