

Project report

Cross-Council Community Reference Panel - First Engagement

Completion date: 26/06/26

Total interviews: 101

Audience: Wellington region

Country: New Zealand

Targeting: Cross-Council Community Reference Group

Objectives

What are your initial thoughts after reading these? What in particular stands out to you about them? You can scroll up to re-read them as needed.

How confident are you that these ideas are focused on the right things when discussing potential changes to local government? What makes you feel this way?

What would you hope to see improve in your community as a result of these potential changes? What makes these improvements important to you?

Focusing specifically on these potential changes, what concerns, if any, would you have for your local community? What makes you concerned about this?

What's something you'd add or change about these ideas to make them better? What about the change would make them better? Is anything missing?

Do you have any final thoughts you'd like to provide?



Text tested

1. Regional where it adds value, local where it matters most

Some services and decisions are better handled and delivered across the region, where working together with other councils helps provide better consistency and improve outcomes for everyone.

Some services and decisions are more effectively handled locally, and so collaboration with other councils should be complemented by strong local delivery where place-based services, identity and relationships matter most.

2. Local voice and democratic legitimacy

Any future arrangement must strengthen public confidence, participation and community trust. Local voice across both rural and urban areas is meaningful, and should be exercised where it has the greatest impact.

It should also be clear how communities influence decisions, and how accountability is maintained. Accountability should be clear and, where possible, simple.

3. Affordable and financially sustainable over time

Future options should be affordable, transparent, financially sustainable, and make good use of public money.

This includes reducing duplication of services, supporting efficient and prioritised investment, and ensuring future generations are not left with higher costs as a result of inaction. Trade-offs between service levels, cost, and investment should be transparent.

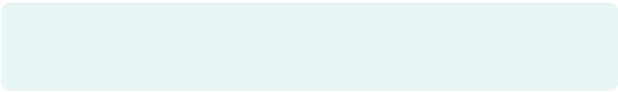
4. Active partnership with Mana Whenua

Engagement with Mana Whenua should be simplified, strengthened, and embedded in governance arrangements in ways that are consistent with Treaty settlements and obligations, and that support effective and active partnerships.

5. Capability, resilience and capacity to partner

Factors

No factors were tested



Councils should have the people, skills, systems and resources needed to meet current and future challenges. This means attracting and retaining the best talent, building a strong and well-supported workforce, and using AI alongside modern digital systems to extend what people can do.

Core processes and capability should be adaptive: structures should be designed to learn, adjust, and build capacity over time. Not just to be fit for purpose, but to also meet the diverse and changing needs of communities.



Overall summary

1 - Overall feedback

Overall reactions were mixed: many agreed with the ideas presented, but a substantial group dismissed them as generic “management speak” without enough practical detail.

Cost, rates and financial accountability dominated feedback, with frequent scepticism that any reform would be implemented well or reduce waste.

A recurring tension was how to gain regional efficiency (including amalgamation/shared services) without losing local voice or smaller communities being deprioritised.

Across the responses, there was a strong call to refocus on core services (especially water and roads) and improve trust through clearer communication and transparency.

2 - Pros

Broad support for the overall idea of balancing regional coordination with local decision-making, particularly where regional delivery adds value (e.g., public transport and shared infrastructure).

Many welcomed a stronger emphasis on financial sustainability, transparency and accountability for spending, including clearer justification of trade-offs and project costs.

A frequently cited potential benefit of amalgamation/shared services was reducing duplication, improving consistency, and potentially lowering rates or slowing rates growth.

3 - Cons

Many felt the ideas presented were too high-level, vague, and overly wordy, lacking concrete examples, clear definitions, and practical implementation detail (including how savings would be achieved).

A number of respondents expressed concern that reforms could increase bureaucracy, disrupt delivery, or create costly restructuring without improving outcomes for ratepayers.

A strong risk raised was losing local voice and fair resourcing—especially smaller towns/suburbs being overlooked in favour of larger centres under regional structures.

AI references prompted concern for a number of respondents (e.g., job impacts, environmental footprint, and unease about replacing human decision-making), with several wanting AI limited or removed.

4 - Research objectives

Initial thoughts and standout aspects: The main standout themes were affordability/rates, accountability for spending and project overruns, and the regional-versus-local balance, with many also saying the statements were too generic or “management speak”.

Right focus for government changes: Most felt the right themes were identified but confidence depended on credible delivery, with common scepticism due to past failures and the lack of practical detail on how changes would work.

Improvements hoped for in communities: The most common hopes were better delivery of core infrastructure (especially fixing water leaks/pipes and improving roads), more efficient services with improved value for money, and lower or slower-growing rates.

Concerns for communities: The dominant concerns were increased rates or cost-shifting, loss of local representation/voice (particularly for smaller areas), and money being wasted or diverted from core services.

Suggestions for improvement: The most frequent request was for clearer, simpler communication backed by specific examples, transparent costs, and explicit accountability/financial controls so the public can see how benefits and savings would be achieved.

Final thoughts: Overall sentiment was “good on paper” but trust is low, and respondents want visible follow-through on core services and finances before believing structural changes will help.

Research objectives - detailed summary

Initial thoughts

Affordability and financial proof dominate first reactions. Initial responses repeatedly stress that the ideas presented are being discussed without the information needed to judge them. People want clarity on likely rates impacts, transition and technology costs (including systems integration), and what “good use of public money” means in practice—particularly in light of perceived past waste and cost blowouts.

Strong scepticism: “generic”, “management speak”, “box-ticking”. Many interpret the statements as familiar, high-level messaging that sounds good but lacks substance. A common view is that councils and decision-makers ‘know what to say’ but do not follow through. Many also asked for more operational detail to understand what would actually change in practice.

Basics first: fix core infrastructure and day-to-day services. Water leaks/pipes are the most consistently raised “must-fix” issue, often linked to potholes and repeated roadworks. Roads/footpaths are also repeatedly named and should be prioritised over discretionary projects. Public transport reliability was also mentioned, though less frequently than roads/footpaths.

Amalgamation is contested, with clear “right size” concerns. Some support merging (especially where small populations fund multiple councils) to reduce duplication and improve economies of scale. Others oppose mergers, fearing higher rates, transition disruption, job losses, added bureaucracy, and poorer outcomes if an entity becomes “too big to function”.

Regional vs local split is understood, but people want clearer boundaries. Many accept that some functions work better at regional scale (commonly transport and major infrastructure), while others should remain local (amenities, planning/zoning). However, people want more clarity on what “regional” and “local” mean, how representation will work, and how smaller communities avoid being deprioritised.

Mana Whenua partnership draws both strong support and objection. Supportive views frame partnership as an obligation under Te Tiriti and as beneficial for community and environmental outcomes. Critical views were raised by some, who argue it is not democratic or should not confer perceived “special status”.

The mention of AI in the ideas presented drew concern from a number of respondents, who found it off-putting or unnecessary. Concerns raised included environmental impact, job losses, and unease about replacing human judgement. A small number wanted human oversight retained and final decisions left to elected representatives.

Plain English is repeatedly requested. The material is often described as “wordy”, overly complicated, or too distilled to be meaningful without examples. People ask for shorter, more clear and direct statements, or even practical examples so they can understand implications and trade-offs.

Confidence in focus

Confidence is conditional: “only if it is followed through”. Some feel the ideas presented “cover the bases” at a high level, but confidence commonly depends on whether they will be implemented with discipline, measurable targets and visible results.

Lack of operational detail reduces confidence. People repeatedly say they cannot judge the proposal because it does not explain how it will work: what services change hands, what governance looks like, what happens to staffing and systems, and how savings would be realised (and evidenced).

Trust deficit remains a major barrier. A recurring view is that councils and politicians do not listen, prioritise poorly, or avoid consequences for failure. This pushes people to demand stronger accountability and transparency as a prerequisite for buy-in.

Implementation difficulty is acknowledged as real and potentially costly. Even supportive voices note that building capability, retaining specialist expertise, and integrating systems across councils takes time and significant investment. There is concern about rushed change causing disruption and overlooked issues, including impacts on staff and service delivery.

Concerns about process and timing affect legitimacy. Some express unease about rushed timelines and insufficient time for submissions, consultation and due diligence, particularly when major structural change is proposed.

Desired improvements

Respondents often framed desired improvements as what they'd like to see improved within their community, rather than specifically focusing on improvements as a result of amalgamation.

Fix water infrastructure and stop leaks. This was the most frequently mentioned improvement by respondents. Water pipes/leaks and water wastage are repeatedly framed as urgent and foundational. People link this to reduced road damage, fewer potholes, and less prolonged disruption from repeated works.

Better roads and footpaths, with safer pedestrian environments. Priorities include faster repairs, better maintenance planning, footpaths suitable for prams and older residents, and safer street design (crossings, speed management, and lighting).

More reliable, more frequent, and more affordable public transport. Although much less frequently than water, and other infrastructure improvements, this was mentioned by a number of respondents. People want improved frequency (including weekends), and better regional connections between towns.

Rates restraint and clearer, fairer charging. Many want capped or reduced rates increases, clearer breakdowns of where money goes, and in some cases more usage-based charging for water rather than a flat amount.

Faster decision-making and delivery. A consistent expectation is that streamlined structures should reduce delays and “waiting times” for repairs and decisions, with speed of implementation seen as a key performance indicator.

More consistent outcomes and standards across councils. Some seek demonstrable consistency in service quality and better value for money, including clearer infrastructure standards and maintenance strategies.

Place and community improvements once essentials are secure. Suggestions include revitalising struggling suburban centres, improving parks/green spaces, climate change preparation and resilience, and more social housing/community support.

Concerns

Amalgamation could increase costs and bureaucracy. A prominent concern is that mergers create expensive transitions, ballooning back-office structures, and less productivity—resulting in higher rates rather than savings.

“Too big to function” risk. People worry that a large “super council” could become less responsive, slower, and unable to maintain specialist capability across diverse communities unless deliberately designed.

Cross-subsidisation, debt transfer, and unfair burden sharing. There is concern from a few respondents that communities with manageable costs could inherit other councils' liabilities (often discussed in relation to water infrastructure). They want clear rules on debt/liability treatment and how costs will be shared fairly.

Loss of local voice and smaller communities being deprioritised. Many fear decisions and resources will concentrate in larger centres, with rural/peripheral communities overlooked and locally raised revenue spent elsewhere.

Poor spending priorities and "nice to have" projects. Some respondents cite frustration at spending on projects perceived as non-essential while pipes, roads and other basics deteriorate. Disruption from prolonged works is also linked to concerns about impacts on local businesses and access.

Weak accountability for mistakes and cost blowouts. Some respondents mentioned they want to know who signs off budgets and procurement, who monitors delivery, and what consequences apply for repeated failure or waste.

AI risks: environmental impact, unemployment, and decision integrity. AI is seen by some as unnecessary or inappropriate. Concerns include environmental impacts, job losses, reduced human accountability, and discomfort with AI influencing decisions.

Rushed process and insufficient consultation. A few respondents worry change is being pushed through too quickly, risking harm, overlooked details, and poor implementation, alongside calls for longer submission timeframes and more accessible engagement.

Suggestions for improvements

Publish clear financial modelling and definitions of "good use of public money". Provide upfront information on rates impacts, transition costs, IT/systems integration costs, ongoing operating costs, and debt/liability treatment. Define what "good use" means, how it will be measured, and how subjectivity will be managed.

Specify what is regional vs local, with practical examples and boundaries. State which services move to regional delivery versus remain local, why, and what "region" and "local" mean (including whether boundaries change). Include examples (commonly expected: transport and major infrastructure at regional scale; planning/zoning, libraries/amenities and local places at local scale).

Build hard accountability into governance and delivery. Clarify who approves projects and budgets, procurement expectations, cost monitoring, and consequences for poor performance. People want transparency on sign-off responsibility and visible follow-through when projects fail or overrun.

Create guardrails for "core services first". Introduce decision rules and financial controls that prioritise things like water, roads/footpaths, and public transport before discretionary projects. Some views support requiring explicit ratepayer approval for non-core spending.

Protect local representation and local reinvestment. Include mechanisms to ensure smaller communities retain influence, urban and rural areas are fairly represented, and locally raised revenue is transparently allocated (including expectations about being spent locally).

Clearly define Mana Whenua partnership. Define what "active partnership" means in day-to-day decision-making: when it applies, and how the public can see it as an active partnership.

Clarify AI: purpose, limits, and safeguards. If AI remains referenced, explain why it is needed, what it will and will not be used for, how environmental impacts and employment risks will be addressed, and how human oversight and final decision-making are guaranteed.

Plan implementation realistically and phase change. Address capability risks explicitly: how specialist expertise will be

retained, how staff and knowledge will be protected, what systems will be integrated and at what cost, and how change will be paced to avoid disruption.

Use plain English and restructure for accessibility. Reduce length, avoid jargon, and provide bullet-point summaries. Add specific examples and scenarios so people can understand trade-offs, practical impacts, and what success looks like.

Improve public participation and access to information. This was mentioned by a few respondents. Make it easier to find supporting detail while answering questions, and provide clear contact details, meeting information, and submission pathways. People also want to be kept informed when changes happen and where to go for more information.

Final thoughts

Overall, reactions on these ideas were mixed, with many respondents broadly accepting the ideas as presented, but withholding firm support until they could see more detail on how the changes would affect their rates, services, and day-to-day lives. Support was often conditional rather than outright.

The decisive test remains delivery on core services. People repeatedly return to fixing water leaks and maintaining roads/footpaths. If reform does not tangibly improve basics, it is likely to be seen as another exercise in rhetoric.

Affordability, rates restraint, and fairness are make-or-break. Support rises when people believe duplication can be removed and savings returned through lower rates or better services. Opposition hardens when there is fear of higher rates, cost blowouts, or communities being forced to cover others' liabilities.

Trust and accountability underpin legitimacy. Across views, there is a strong demand for transparency, clear responsibility for spending decisions, and consequences for failure. Without this, confidence remains low regardless of how well the ideas read.

Regional efficiency must not come at the expense of local voice. While many accept regional delivery for some services, there is persistent concern about losing local influence, slower responsiveness, and smaller communities being overlooked. Durable support depends on explicit protections for representation and local reinvestment.

A selection of respondent quotes

A selection of quotes

- *"Greater scrutiny of the costs of implementing all of these. Transparency is particularly important given recent council blowouts. I'm sure all these were theoretically in place previously but they have no impact. Needs accountability."*
- *"The infrastructure cost of water in Wellington is crippling and I would not like this cost passed on to Kapiti where our costs are reasonable."*
- *"I like the amalgamation as council fees are currently out of control."*
- *"I appreciate the identification of the importance of including Mana Whenua as a partner. Responsibility to Te Tiriti is vital. I also believe it is important to maintain the local as outlined. Smaller centres have an important role in regional success."*
- *"Trust, we need to trust what you are doing and that our voices are going to be heard."*
- *"I think it all sounds pretty logical and obvious - of course we should be doing everything as efficiently as possible and delegating resources where they are most needed."*
- *"I like the idea that council needs to be transparent with funding decisions, as we the ratepayers deserve to know where our money is going. I agree that many matters are best handled at a local level."*
- *"I support a lot of regional based services. Local voice must always be available for input and consideration. I agree and support a strong and active partnership with Mana Whenua. I agree that core services should be adaptive over time. Human resources and material resources must be top notch."*
- *"The proposed changes are unnecessary. All this is happening under the current system."*
- *"I think they focus on the right things but I think the issue is always whether it can be implemented efficiently and without wasting taxpayer money."*
- *"I think in some of the professional areas it is hard for smaller councils to retain sufficient expertise, so pooling these resources across councils there could be some cost savings and better decision making."*
- *"I think these are key issues, but would need more detail about how each issue is presented. I support these being core issues though."*
- *"I think infrastructure standards should be developed across the country which sets guidelines for the standard of development and maintenance so we don't end up with the ongoing issues like water management."*
- *"I think public transport needs to be cheaper."*
- *"I think this overall will be a good thing in the long run."*
- *"Don't get me wrong - local government probably does need reorganising - but was it necessary to start doing this so late in the parliamentary term? Without proper consultation and time to consider alternatives?"*

- *"I think it is too rushed. The government is pushing things through before the election, just like the water provider changes. The public are outraged. If they do this rushed also will be too much too soon. People will continue to go without and fall through the cracks."*

Contact:

hello@qualifyr.ai

Qualifyr.ai