

Project report

Second engagement – Cross-Council Community Reference Panel: Amalgamation

Completion date: 08/07/26

Total interviews: 70

Audience: Wellington region

Country: New Zealand

Objectives

Last time, many said they wanted more confidence that changes to local government would lead to better outcomes. What would help you feel more confident about a proposal for changes to local government? Why would this help?

Many told us they wanted more practical information about how changes could work. Thinking about things like costs, council services and how local decisions would be made, what would you need to know to help you understand any future proposals? What questions would you want answered?

One of the strongest messages from the last round was the importance of keeping a strong local voice. If changes were made to local government, what would help you feel your community still had a real say in local decisions?

Many told us they thought some services could work well regionally, while others should stay local. For example, you might think about things that could benefit from councils working together, sharing resources, or reducing duplication. Thinking about that, what services/decisions do you think could work well across the region? What makes you say that?

We also heard that some decisions that are important to be made locally because they affect individual communities. What services/decisions do you think are important to be handled locally or within the community? What makes you say that?

As councils develop proposals for changes to local government, what do you think should be their top priority? What advice would you give councils as they develop proposals? Why is that important?

Text tested

Below is the text from the previous page you've just read. When you're ready, you can hit next, where we'll ask you some questions about it:

The Government has asked councils to explore opportunities to simplify and strengthen local government. As a result, councils across the region are considering how local government could be organised and delivered in the future, including potential changes to governance and the way some services are delivered.

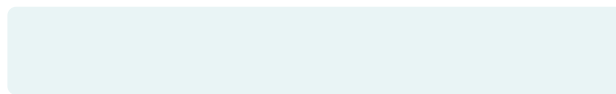
We're seeking community feedback to help inform discussions and the development of any future proposals.

In our last engagement, we asked for your thoughts on some ideas that could help guide discussions about potential changes to local government. Thank you to everyone who shared their views. We heard a range of perspectives, including the importance of affordability, local voice, accountability, delivering core services, and providing more practical detail about how any future changes could work.

This time, we'd like to build on that conversation. We're interested in what would give you confidence in any future proposal and what matters most as these discussions continue. As before, no decisions have been made, and we're interested in your honest thoughts.

Factors

No factors were tested



Overall summary

1 - Overall feedback

- Overall confidence was low without clear evidence that changes will deliver better outcomes, particularly through cost savings and maintained services. A handful of respondents also wanted evidence that decisions would be made, and changes delivered, more quickly than under the current system.
- Transparency and accountability were central to trust: A portion of respondents want clearer understanding of council spending and a better understanding of who is responsible for outcomes, and a handful specifically wanted clear rationales for decisions.
- The most common information need, raised by the large majority of respondents, was practical detail: What exactly will change, when, who will do what, and what it will cost households (especially rates impacts).
- A strong theme was fear of higher rates and service loss. Within that, a handful of respondents specifically worried about costs shifting between areas, most often around water infrastructure, where they did not want to end up paying for problems in other districts.
- Some wanted consultation that is accessible and demonstrably influences decisions. A few respondents specifically described past consultation as a "tick-box" exercise where the decision felt already made.
- Views varied on regionalisation: A slight majority supported regional scale for major infrastructure, while a small number of others were sceptical due to past amalgamation experiences and risks of bureaucracy.

2 - Points in support of sharing services regionally

- Regional delivery of major infrastructure, especially water, transport, and roading, was the most common answer to what could work well regionally, named by just over half of the respondents. A smaller number spelled out specific reasons, most often reducing duplication or accessing specialist capability.
- A handful of respondents saw shared back-office functions (e.g., HR, finance, payroll, IT, procurement) as a practical route to efficiency and potential savings.
- A portion of respondents welcomed stronger governance discipline, meaning clear goals, measurable outcomes, sticking to budgets, and improved value for money for ratepayers.
- A small number of respondents saw better communication and engagement, particularly regular updates and public meetings, would help build trust and encourage participation. A separate handful of respondents asked for clear, easy to understand explanations and visual, non-technical materials such as charts, diagrams, and photos.

3 - Concerns with sharing services regionally

- Cost and rates risk dominated concerns, raised by the large majority of respondents in some form. Within that, one respondent specifically worried about hidden or underestimated merger costs, describing project budgets that doubled or tripled after approval, and a separate handful were worried about costs being shifted between areas, including paying for other districts' problems
- Loss of local voice was a recurring concern, expressed broadly as wanting a genuine say in decisions. Within that, a small number specifically worried that smaller towns or suburbs could be outvoted, neglected for investment, or lose local service centres and responsiveness.
- Wasteful spending was raised by a small portion of respondents, and a small number, not all the same people, went further, saying explicitly that they had lost trust in councils or government, or felt past promises had not been kept.
- A small number of respondents raised concerns about bureaucracy and "bloat," including fear that amalgamation adds layers and increases headcount rather than reducing it. A few pointed specifically to the Auckland Supercity merger as evidence this can happen.
- Doubts about consultation quality were a recurring theme, with a number of respondents wanting visible proof that feedback changes outcomes. A small number went further, saying they believed decisions were already made before the public had a real chance to weigh in.

4 - Research objectives

- **Overall Confidence:** Confidence increases when proposals clearly demonstrate value for money, measurable outcomes, and budget discipline, points raised by a portion of respondents, alongside maintained or improved core services, raised by some respondents.
- **Local Voice:** Local voice was most often linked to guaranteed local representation, raised by a small number of respondents, such as ward or community board presence and local service centres, though respondents also proposed a range of other mechanisms, from more frequent meetings to binding local votes.
- **Public consultation:** Most want consultation that happens early enough to genuinely influence decisions. A couple of respondents suggested specific ways to do this, one an online portal to supplement town hall meetings, another published "you said, we did" reporting showing what changed as a result of feedback.
- **Costs and services:** The main requirement, raised by the large majority of respondents, is clear household-level cost impacts. A small number also wanted assurance that savings would flow through without service cuts, and clarity on how costs are allocated across areas.
- **Practical information:** People want specific detail on what is changing, responsibilities and accountabilities, delivery plans with timelines/milestones, and transparent rationales for decisions. One respondent specifically wanted to see the options considered, including the option of doing nothing, and why the chosen option was preferred.

Research objectives - detailed summary

Measures to build confidence in proposals for changes to local government

- Stronger accountability for delivery, linked to confidence, was mentioned by a small portion of respondents: clear commitments to outcomes, consequences for failure, and assurance that decision-makers can be held to account. A few respondents went further, suggesting councillors' pay be tied to performance, or that councillors and staff resign if project costings turn out to be significantly under-scoped.
- A handful of respondents wanted a clear, evidence-based rationale before decisions are made: confidence increases when proposals show the problem to be solved, the options considered, and why the chosen option is better than the status quo. Separately, one respondent specifically wanted "doing nothing" listed as one of the options for comparison.
- Real consultation, not "tick-box" engagement: just over a quarter of respondents wanted assurance that community input is sought before proposals are finalised and that there is visible proof it changed decisions.
- Proof and comparators: several asked for case studies/scenarios showing how similar changes have worked elsewhere (and where they have not), including lessons from prior amalgamations.
- Focus on "the basics" was a recurring condition for trust for a number of respondents, particularly core infrastructure and everyday services (water, roading, pipes, footpaths, lighting, rubbish collection). A handful specifically raised scepticism about spending perceived as non-essential, most often cycleways and diversity-related initiatives.

Needs for practical information: costs, council services, and decision-making processes

- Household-level cost impacts were central for the large majority of respondents: people wanted to know how proposals would change rates and charges for typical households. A couple of respondents suggested specific formats for this, one an annual percentage increase, another a side-by-side "now vs future" comparison.
- Transparent budgets and spend reporting were requested by a small portion of respondents: open-book budget detail, regular reporting (a couple of respondents specifically suggested a quarterly budget-versus-actual cycle), explanations for cost changes, and clarity on what is being funded in each local area.
- A handful of respondents wanted clarity on merger/amalgamation costs, raising examples including the cost of integrating IT systems and disposing of surplus offices. One respondent specifically asked whether central government would help fund the transition. A couple of respondents also wanted cost/benefit analysis: proposals should outline multiple scenarios with expected costings, benefits, disadvantages, and how benefits will be measured.
- A handful of respondents specifically asked for clear, easy to understand explanations and visual, non-wordy materials (charts, diagrams, photos, stats, quotes) to make costs, impacts, and progress easy to understand.
- A handful of respondents raised procurement and contractor transparency: interest in who is involved (consultants/contractors), why they are used, what they cost, and how competitive bidding and contract management will demonstrate value for money.
- A few respondents wanted service delivery expectations and protections: assurance that service levels will not drop (e.g., refuse collection maintained, response times not worsening) and that complaints can be dealt with

promptly, with accessible points of contact.

- A couple of respondents wanted clarity on responsibilities: who will be responsible for what, who will charge for what, and how services will be funded and costs passed on (including where new entities are created).

Maintaining a strong local voice

- Representative structures that protect smaller places were raised by a small number of respondents: community board representation, local committees with decision-making power, and local elected representation within any new authority, alongside concerns that larger structures could favour bigger or wealthier areas. One respondent specifically wanted council seats "locked in" for smaller towns so they could not be outvoted.
- A handful of respondents raised fair share and local funding protection concerns: wanting confidence that local funding would not be diverted to other areas, with clear reporting of what local projects are funded and how allocations are decided (e.g., population-based vs even splits).
- A few respondents suggested binding or meaningful public influence: local votes or referendums for major or contested projects, mechanisms to trigger a vote when concern is high, and an expectation that strong local opposition should stop or reshape proposals.
- A portion of respondents wanted more frequent, more accessible engagement: regular local meetings, community events, and ongoing progress updates. One respondent specifically suggested an online portal or forum to supplement town hall meetings.
- A few respondents raised local connection and capability of representatives: emphasising residency requirements and relevant experience/competence so decision-makers understand local needs and live with the consequences of decisions.

Services beneficial from regional collaboration and those best handled locally

- Common candidates for regional coordination included transport/public transport, roading networks, and water infrastructure/services, most often justified by economies of scale, shared demand across boundaries, and reduced duplication. A couple of respondents also discussed emergency response, though views were mixed: one saw it as suited to a regional setup, while another wanted response teams kept local even if procurement were centralised.
- Rubbish collection was also raised, with a handful favouring regional delivery for consistency and cost, against two respondents who wanted it kept local, one to support a local business and keep costs down, the other for its role in connecting people within the area.
- Strong support for local delivery where place matters was common, raised by a slight majority of respondents: parks/reserves and local facilities (libraries, pools, sports/leisure), community events, community centres, local rules affecting neighbourhood life, and decisions requiring deep local knowledge (e.g., some consenting decisions).
- Back-office consolidation was identified by a handful of respondents as a low-risk area for savings: HR, finance, payroll, IT, analytics, rating notices/payments, enforcement, and centralised procurement/contracting, provided this does not create additional bureaucracy.

- Caution that a single regional approach would not suit every area: a small number of respondents stressed that local needs vary between urban and rural areas or between different suburbs and towns, with a couple describing this using the phrase "one size fits all."

Priorities for councils developing proposals

- Demonstrate value for money: proposals should prioritise affordability for ratepayers, quantify savings, show where money will be redirected, and avoid wasteful spending. Around a third of respondents wanted clear evidence that changes will reduce duplication and not increase costs.
 - Protect and improve core services first: some respondents placed a strong emphasis on delivering basics reliably (water/pipes, roads, footpaths, lighting, rubbish collection, utilities).
 - A handful of respondents wanted councils to publish costed options and implementation plans: timelines, milestones, delivery responsibilities, and risks/downsides. One respondent specifically wanted realism about what they called the "realities of amalgamation," and how disruption will be managed.
 - Build a credible governance and accountability framework alongside any structural change: a point raised by a portion of respondents. Within that, a couple specifically wanted transparency of voting and decision rationale, and one respondent wanted mechanisms to ensure consultation has visible impact.
 - Safeguard local representation and equitable investment: a small number of respondents wanted councils to ensure smaller towns/suburbs are not ignored, keep accessible local service centres/contacts, and make allocation rules explicit so all areas can see they are receiving a fair share.
- 

A selection of respondent quotes

A selection of quotes

- *"I want the local council to be transparent in everything especially when it comes to the costs."*
- *"I would like to feel any changes would result in a stronger will by councillors to control costs and listen to concerned residents."*
- *"A guarantee that rates and other council-related costs are reduced significantly to allow homeowners to be able to afford to keep and stay in their own homes. Accountability for those with wasteful spending, and the contractors Tiaki Wai water are governed with lowering their rates also. We the public are not happy at all."*
- *"There needs to be a clear statement as to how performance will be monitored post change and feedback mechanisms to enable corrections to systems to return underperforming councils back on track."*
- *"A good plan needs to show real facts on how it saves cash and improves services, without drowning out the voices of smaller towns."*
- *"I think that it would be important that it isn't a one size fits all scenario. We have a number of councils around Wellington, so what might fit here might not work elsewhere."*
- *"The promise of openness in decision making and the real opportunity to meet and discuss at community meetings where some form of consensus can be reached."*
- *"Trust, this would probably come about with better communication and transparency."*
- *"Being transparent about plans, costs and budgets.. in particular being clear about what is being done, why, and when it will be completed."*
- *"The showing of less money being spent."*
- *"Clarifying the advantages of these changes would make me feel more confident."*
- *"The ability to make the right decisions at the council and more local level having regard to all of the necessary facts. It's important because it shows robust decision making but shows that everyone is listened to and it's a balanced reasonable decision."*
- *"I lived in Auckland when it changed into a 'Supercity' and that was a disaster."*
- *"That there is a firm commitment to reducing complexity of what the council does and that head count of employees in back office roles not focussed on actual deliverables is capped. I remember with Auckland council that this did not occur and bloat was the result."*
- *"How is a large council going to cater for the needs of all suburbs? Or is the plan just to worry about the main hubs like Lower Hutt Centre, Wellington, Porirua centres? We already are forgotten!!"*
- *"Ensure that costs from other councils' water issues are not passed on to Kāpiti."*
- *"All elected and senior employed officials are personally liable for costs of failure and poor outcomes. Pay is based on agreed outcomes and not salary for just keeping a seat warm."*

- *"A big thing I see a lot is people hiring 'consultants' - from people I speak to, the consultants usually cost a lot of money and don't actually do anything worthwhile - often the problems could be better solved in-house."*
- *"If it isn't broken don't mess with it."*
- *"It is important to know that your dollars are being spent substantially for the needs of your community and not hijacked for another probably more influential area."*
- *"I would say ask the staff in greater Auckland on how that worked when it was put together, what worked and what did not."*

Contact:

hello@qualifyr.ai

Qualifyr.ai

