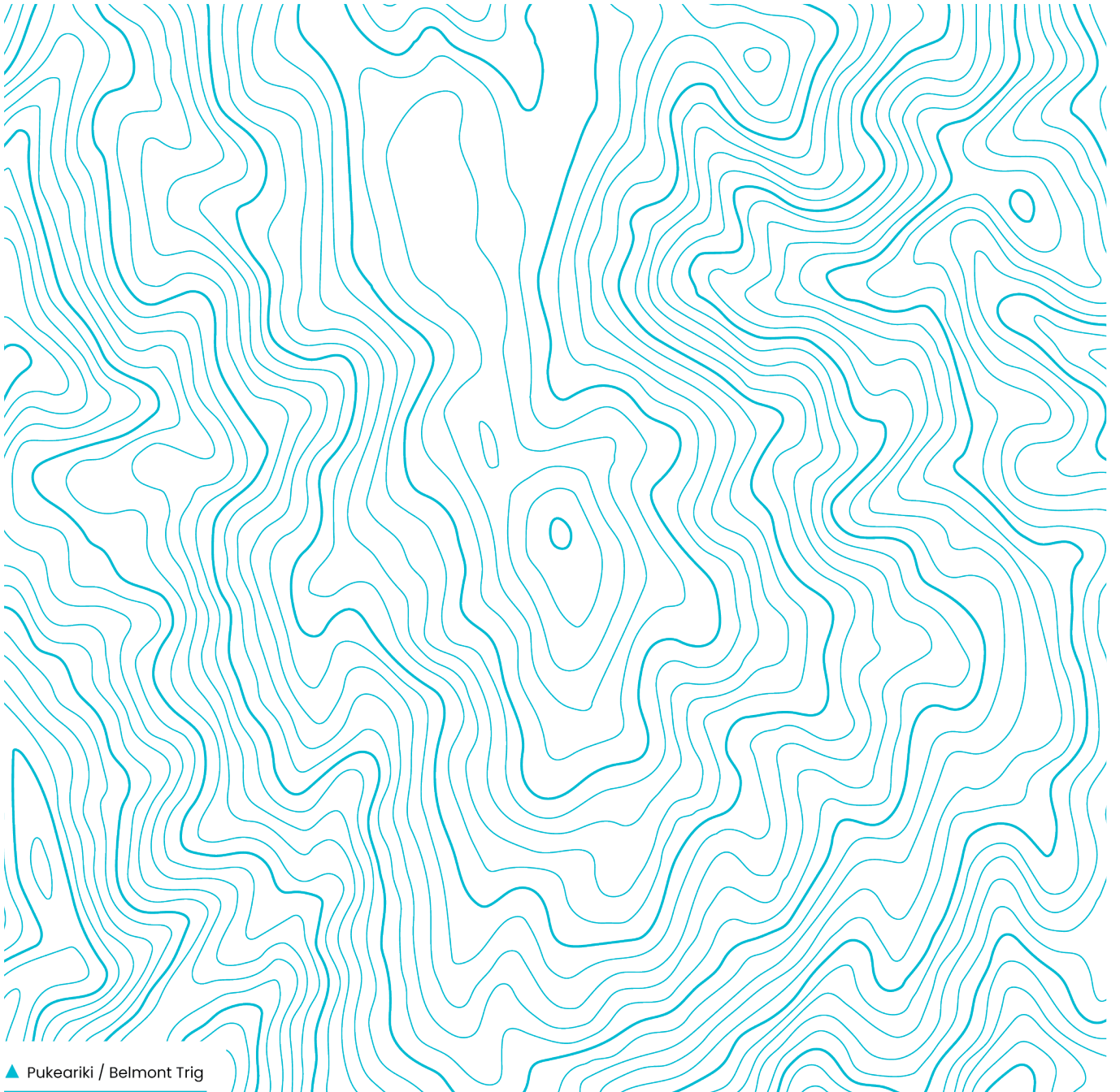


Future of local government

Public feedback results June 2026



Executive summary

From 3-15 June 2026, Hutt City Council sought public feedback on the Government's invitation to councils across New Zealand to explore potential local government amalgamations through a fast-tracked "Head Start" process.

From 418 respondents, the overall mood is:

- A very clear preference for working with other Councils to help shape Lower Hutt's future: 336 respondents selected this option (84% of those who answered the question).
- Support for taking part in regional discussions should not be read as blanket support for amalgamation.
- The dominant concerns are rates, affordability, value for money, infrastructure investment, and service quality.
- Local voice, local representation and protecting Lower Hutt's identity remain strong and consistent concerns.
- There is a repeated fear that Lower Hutt ratepayers could inherit or subsidise debt, deferred maintenance, or infrastructure problems from other Councils.
- Some respondents see benefits in greater coordination, shared services, reduced duplication, and a stronger regional voice to central government.

Overall themes

Respondents are pragmatic and alert to risk. Most do not want Lower Hutt to sit back and wait for central government, but they also do not want Councils to treat amalgamation as inevitable or beneficial without clear evidence. The strongest message is that residents want Councils to be active in the process while protecting local decision-making, affordability and service standards.

The dominant message is not simply "yes" or "no" to amalgamation. It is:

"Get involved, show us the evidence, protect local voice, and do not leave Lower Hutt ratepayers worse off."

1. Working with other Councils vs waiting

What this tells us

There is a clear preference for Councils taking an active role in shaping their future rather than waiting for government direction. Of the 401 respondents who answered

this question, 336 chose “Work with other Councils”, 42 were not sure, and 23 preferred waiting for the Government to decide.

What it does not tell us

It would be incorrect to interpret this result as direct support for amalgamation itself. Many comments that supported working with other Councils were essentially saying:

"Have the conversation, gather evidence, understand the options, and keep residents involved."

Several respondents explicitly supported regional discussions while also expressing strong concern about amalgamation, loss of local control, or taking on other Councils' costs.

2. Dominant themes

A. Rates and affordability

This remains the strongest recurring theme.

Common concerns included:

- Current rates levels
- Future rates increases
- Whether amalgamation would reduce or increase costs
- Whether efficiencies would actually become savings
- Concern about paying for infrastructure deficits or debt elsewhere
- The need to focus on core Council business

Typical sentiment:

If amalgamation progresses, residents want evidence that it will improve affordability and value for money rather than simply create a larger organisation with larger costs.

Related observation

Many respondents asked for transparent modelling, cost-benefit analysis, rates projections, and evidence of savings. General claims about efficiency are unlikely to be enough.

B. Infrastructure and service delivery

Infrastructure and services are a major practical lens for respondents. People frequently referred to water, roads, asset maintenance, transport, community facilities and the basics of local service delivery.

The recurring view was that governance change should only proceed if it improves:

- infrastructure outcomes
- service quality
- long-term planning
- accountability for delivery
- the resilience of the city and region

C. Maintaining local voice and representation

Local voice remains one of the most consistent concerns in the open-text responses. Respondents frequently raised local representation, community identity, local knowledge, and the risk that a larger governance structure could become too distant from communities.

Some respondents again referred to local-board style models or other structures that could preserve local decision-making within a larger regional arrangement.

D. Fairness between Councils

This theme appears clearly in the larger dataset. Concerns included different levels of debt, different infrastructure backlogs, different historical investment decisions, and whether Lower Hutt could be made responsible for problems created elsewhere.

The clearest concern was:

"Lower Hutt ratepayers should not inherit other Councils' debt, deferred maintenance, or poor investment decisions without a clear and fair basis."

E. Lower Hutt identity and local interests

Many respondents see Lower Hutt as having distinct needs, communities and priorities. Protecting Lower Hutt's identity was not only about branding or names; it was often linked to practical concerns about whether local needs would be understood and prioritised.

3. Support for amalgamation

There are respondents who clearly support amalgamation or some form of closer regional governance.

Reasons included:

- Potential efficiencies and reduced duplication
- Shared services across Councils that already work closely together
- Stronger regional planning

- A stronger collective voice to central government
- More consistent service levels across the region

However, strong support is less common than conditional support. A more typical position is still:

"Show us the evidence first."

Many respondents appear open to change, but not yet convinced that amalgamation is the right solution or that the benefits will outweigh the risks.

4. Opposition and reservations

There is also a visible group opposed to amalgamation or with reservations about the process.

Common reasons included:

- Loss of local identity
- Loss of local influence
- Fear that decision-making would become more remote
- Concern that a larger Council would increase bureaucracy rather than reduce it
- Concern about increased rates or service decline
- Concern about Wellington City debt, infrastructure issues, or other Councils' liabilities

Some respondents explicitly argued that Lower Hutt should remain independent. Others were less absolute, but wanted Council to keep a strong negotiating position and protect Lower Hutt's interests if any regional model is considered.

5. Community and social considerations

A smaller but important set of responses focused on community outcomes beyond governance structure and rates.

These included:

- Community resilience and emergency preparedness
- Accessibility of services
- Libraries, pools, hubs, events and community facilities
- Vulnerable communities
- Environmental protection, flood protection and climate resilience
- Māori representation and inclusive decision-making

These themes were present, but less dominant than rates, infrastructure, representation and fairness between Councils.

6. What people wanted Councils to consider

The most common requests were:

1. Financial impacts

People want cost modelling, rates modelling, transparent assumptions, evidence of savings, and clarity about debt and liabilities.

2. Local representation

People want local voices protected, local decision-making retained where possible, and fair representation structures.

3. Service outcomes

People want maintained or improved services, infrastructure investment, and clear accountability for delivery.

4. Fair allocation of costs

People want confidence that costs are distributed fairly and that historical liabilities are not transferred without justification.

5. Genuine consultation

People want residents to have a meaningful say before major decisions are made. Several comments suggested a referendum, stronger engagement, or clearer communication about what is being considered.

7. Snapshot of the respondent profile

- 383 respondents said they live in Te Awa Kairangi ki Tai Lower Hutt (96% of those who answered the question).
- The largest resident suburb groups were Wainuiomata (40 respondents) and Stokes Valley (32 respondents).
- 308 respondents were aged 25–64 (78% of those who gave an age). Participation from under-25s was very low (5 respondents).
- Gender was reasonably balanced: 203 female respondents and 191 male respondents, with three respondents selecting another gender.
- NZ European was the most commonly selected ethnicity (324 selections), followed by Māori (52 selections).

Samples of comments

1. Support for exploring options, but not necessarily amalgamation

"Central government would likely rush the process so we should work with other Councils but residents should have the final say."

2. Concern about Wellington debt and infrastructure

"I object strenuously to aligning with Wellington and having to pay for that Council's lack of funding and poor infrastructure."

3. Local identity

"I am still not happy about talk of our city being amalgamated. Hutt City is a unique place and have concern we will lose who we are."

4. Regional coordination

"Hutt City and Upper Hutt are so close would it be better they are working more closely? Share resources?"

5. Fairness and debt

"Fairness, especially with regards to debt and deferred maintenance, and representation."

6. Value for money

"We as ratepayers want the best value possible for our already high rates."

7. Equitable resources

"How to balance and share resources, talent and infrastructure needs equitably across Councils. Amalgamation should not be just about cost cutting."

8. Support for amalgamation

"Services and infrastructure are already shared with areas like Upper Hutt City and Wellington. Being in one city would give us a stronger voice when advocating to the central government."

9. Accountability

"Greater accountability and emphasis on quality unbiased information and recommendations from officers to enable considered decision making by Councillors."