



Project Overview:

Our review of the findings

Cross-Council Amalgamation Community Reference Group

Summary of community engagements

20 July 2026

Introduction

The following report summarises three separate research projects, done on behalf of local councils in the Wellington region. The three projects were designed to help engage with residents to better understand their thoughts, expectations, and concerns, to help inform discussions and the development of proposals on local council amalgamation as part of the Government's Head Start process.

The following councils chose to participate in this research:

- Hutt City Council
- Greater Wellington Regional Council
- Porirua City Council
- Upper Hutt City Council
- Horowhenua District Council
- Masterton District Council
- Carterton District Council.

The research was done using Qualifyr, an AI-powered qualitative research tool, with support on planning and execution from the Qualifyr team. Using our custom built AI interviewer, participants in this research were asked a series of open-ended questions in a back and forth text based conversation, with the results summarised by AI. Interviews and the reports themselves were reviewed by the Qualifyr team.

The reports summarise the cohort of respondents, and their answers to the questions, which are listed under each engagement.

Participants were recruited using Dynata - a global panel of nearly 70 million people. Participant numbers were allocated broadly in line with population (number of people living in each council area), while ensuring smaller communities were represented. While participants may have come from all participating council areas, not every participant responded to every round or question.

Each engagement was conducted over the following timelines:

- **Engagement One:** 16 June to 26 June 2026
- **Engagement Two:** 01 July to 08 July 2026
- **Engagement Three:** 13 July to 16 July 2026

More information about Qualifyr is included at the end of the report.

Overall Summary

Engagement with residents was done over three separate projects, each one with a distinct goal.

For the First Engagement, we focused on testing a set of ideas which councils would consider during the amalgamation process. You can read these on the Project One Report below. Reactions from residents on these ideas were mixed: Many respondents accepted the ideas as presented, but withheld firm support until they could see more detail on how the changes would affect their rates, services, and day-to-day lives, and so support was often conditional rather than outright. Many respondents engaged constructively with the ideas presented, focusing on cost, accountability, and the balance between regional efficiency and local decision-making. A substantial group dismissed the material as vague “management speak” or expressed a broader distrust of councils’ ability to deliver on stated intentions, regardless of the specific ideas represented.

The Second Engagement focused on building on the last engagement, re-engaging with the same group of respondents to continue the conversation, and learn more about their thoughts and feelings towards potential changes to local government. Within this project, respondents discussed what services they feel should be operated within the community at a local level, what services they think could be better handled at a regional level, and what would give residents confidence that changes to their local government would lead to better outcomes. Cost and rates increase dominated concerns, raised by the large majority of respondents in some form. Major infrastructure such as water, transport, and roading were widely seen as suited to regional delivery, while parks, community facilities, and other local services were seen as best kept local. Overall confidence in the reforms delivering better outcomes was low, with transparency and accountability over council spending seen as central to building trust. Representative structures that protect smaller places were raised by a small number of respondents, such as community board representation, local committees with decision-making power, and local elected representation within any new authority, alongside concerns that larger structures could favour larger or wealthier areas.

For Engagement Three, we introduced the idea of Community Councils, went into more detail on the regional and local service split, and asked what would give people confidence as changes happen to local councils. This group was opened up to both new and returning respondents. Reactions to Community Councils were split: Many respondents were open to the idea, seeing it as a way to keep local representation and a direct line into regional decision-making, while a substantial group worried it

would add another layer of cost, duplication, or bureaucracy without changing how decisions actually get made. The regional and local split of decisions was seen as sensible by a slight majority, similar to the second engagement's findings. When asked what would give them confidence going forward, many respondents wanted communication that was clear and honest as changes happen, and a number specifically wanted to be engaged before a direction had already been set, rather than after.

Across all three engagements, transparency and financial accountability were the most consistent demand: Respondents in every round wanted clear, itemised costs, budgets, and rates impacts. Confidence in any reform was consistently linked to visible follow-through rather than to stated intentions. Local representation and local funding mattered throughout, with respondents wanting guarantees that smaller communities would not be outvoted or deprioritised by larger centres.

Views on splitting services between regional and local delivery were consistent across all three rounds: Major infrastructure such as water, transport, and roading was widely seen as suited to regional delivery, while parks, community facilities, and other place-based services were seen as best kept local, though respondents wanted this boundary defined with specific examples rather than stated as a general principle.

Scepticism about consultation with residents ran through all three engagements. Respondents wanted proof that engagement with the community happens early enough to help shape decisions, rather than after a direction has already been set.

Key Themes

Several themes recurred across the three engagements. The clearest of these are outlined below.

Rates and household costs were mentioned by close to half of respondents in the First Engagement, and by a clear majority in the Second, then dropping to close to a third in Engagement Three. A majority of respondents wanted clarity on what any change would cost households, while a smaller number specifically asked for public reporting of budgets against actual spending.

Communication was a consistent theme across all three engagements, though the specific ask changed as the ideas became more concrete. In the First Engagement, respondents repeatedly described the material as "wordy" or overly complicated and asked for shorter, clearer statements with practical examples. In the Second Engagement, this became a request for visual, non-technical materials such as charts, diagrams, and photos, alongside a demand from just over a quarter of respondents in this engagement for real consultation, not a 'tick-box exercise,' with visible proof that community input changed decisions. By Engagement Three, communication became the dominant theme: Close to half of respondents said clear, honest communication as changes happen would help them feel confident, and a number specifically wanted to be engaged before a direction had already been set, rather than after.

Major infrastructure, such as water, transport, and roading, was seen as suited to regional delivery by just over half of respondents in the Second Engagement's open-ended question, and a slight majority there also saw place-based services such as parks and local facilities as best kept local. In Engagement Three, where the question itself set out this same regional-local split using those examples, a slight majority of respondents found the split sensible.

Engagement One Report

Ideas presented

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

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.

Respondent Breakdown

Location	n
Wellington City	46
Lower Hutt	19
Upper Hutt	8
Kapiti Coast	15
Masterton	6
Carterton	4
South Wairarapa	2
Horowhenua	1
Total	101

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?

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

- *“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.”*

Engagement Two Report

Respondent Breakdown

Location	n
Wellington City	32
Lower Hutt	15
Upper Hutt	5
Kapiti Coast	10
Masterton	3
Carterton	3
South Wairarapa	2
Total	70

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?

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 costed options and 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

- *"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."*

Engagement Three Report

Respondent Breakdown

Location	n
Wellington City	29
Lower Hutt	33
Upper Hutt	11
Porirua	4
Kapiti Coast	14
Masterton	4
Carterton	2
South Wairarapa	4
Horowhenua	1
Total	102

Objectives

- One idea being explored is for each community to elect a Community Council. Community Councils could make decisions about local matters, have their own budget for local priorities, and have a direct role in representing their community in regional decision-making through their Chair being part of the regional Governing Body. What are your initial thoughts on this idea? What, if anything, do you think would need to change for this to work effectively?
- Another idea being explored is that decisions could be made at the level where they have the greatest impact. This could mean decisions affecting the whole Wellington region, such as long-term planning, public transport, water infrastructure and environmental management, are made regionally. Decisions that mainly affect individual communities, such as local parks, community facilities, neighbourhood improvements and local events, could continue to be made locally. How do you feel about an approach like this? Are there any types of decisions that you think sit best elsewhere? What makes you feel this way?
- Considering the ideas from the previous questions, where a community council is elected by the community to represent their interests, and where some decisions are made locally, while others regionally. Does this feel like it creates the right balance between regional/local decision-making, and representation? What makes you say that?
- If changes like these were to progress, they would take time to implement. Throughout that time, councils would need to continue delivering services while keeping communities informed about what is changing and why. What would you/your community need to feel confident as changes happen? How would this help?
- If these ideas continue to be developed through the Government's Head Start process, there will be further opportunities for communities to have input before final decisions are made. What advice would you give councils about how they should work with communities during that next stage of the process?

Overall summary

1 - Overall feedback

- Overall views on Community Councils were split: Just over half of the respondents liked the principle of stronger local voice and decision-making, while a smaller minority questioned the added value versus existing councils and boards and worried it would create an extra layer.
- Splitting decisions by scale and impact, keeping some decisions local while handling some at scale, was seen as sensible by a slight majority of respondents. A similar share felt this looked much like the current split between local and regional councils, and wanted clearer, agreed definitions of exactly which decisions would sit at each level, rather than just the general principle.
- Cost, duplication, and bureaucracy were recurring concerns. Around a third of respondents raised cost, salaries, or rates, and a smaller minority raised duplication of services or felt this recreates existing structures. A small number specifically called for demonstrated efficiency or warned against "double work" and bloated structures, though this was not a widely repeated ask.
- Communication and transparency mattered to confidence: Close to half of the respondents wanted clear plans, timelines, and costs, and a small number wanted evidence that feedback is actually acted on, rather than being consulted after decisions have already been made.

2 - What's connecting with people? - Strongest points of connection:

- Close to half of the respondents said clear, honest communication as changes happen would help them feel confident, though most described this in general terms rather than naming specific content. A small number specifically wanted information on costs, and a similar number wanted information on timelines.
- The regional/local decision-making split made intuitive sense to a slight majority of respondents. Most simply agreed with the principle as stated, while a couple of respondents specifically framed it as decisions sitting with whoever is most affected by them.
- The balance between regional and local decision-making felt right to a slight majority of respondents, though their reasoning varied, citing local knowledge, cost savings, reduced bureaucracy, or simply not trusting regional bodies to reflect local needs, with no single reason standing out as dominant.
- The core Community Council concept resonated with a modest number of respondents, driven by a belief that local people understand local needs better than a regional body would.

3 - What concerns did people have? - Strongest points of concern:

- Cost was the single biggest concern, raised by a notable minority of respondents. A couple of respondents were worried about salaries, and concerns about flow-on rate increases were noted from a handful of respondents.
- Duplication was a smaller minority concern, with a recurring view that this just recreates existing councils, wards, or community boards under a new name.
- A modest number worried that fairness across communities, including funding equity, would not be resolved by this proposal, with some questioning how funding would be calculated and allocated between areas in practice.
- A small number of respondents worried that, once changes start, councils won't follow through on commitments, and a similar number separately doubted that community feedback would actually shape decisions.
- A small number were sceptical the new community councils would have any real decision-making power at all.

4 - Research objectives

- Initial thoughts on Community Councils: Just over half of the respondents supported the idea for stronger local voice and locally controlled priorities, while a smaller minority saw it as duplication that could increase bureaucracy and costs unless authority and value are clearly proven.
- Balancing regional vs local decision-making: A slight majority of respondents felt splitting decisions by scale and impact makes sense in principle, though a small number of the same respondents also asked for clearer, agreed definitions of which decisions would sit where.
- Community involvement and communication: Close to half of respondents said the approach will only work with clear, honest communication as changes happen. Smaller numbers specifically named costs or timelines, and some also wanted early, genuine opportunities to influence decisions.
- Concerns and challenges: The most frequently raised concerns were cost and bureaucracy (a notable minority of respondents) and duplication with existing structures (a smaller minority), followed by a modest number raising the risk of unfair funding and unequal influence across communities, and smaller numbers still raising unclear delegated powers or low trust in decision-makers.
- Advice for councils during the Head Start process: Advice centred on transparency about costs and trade-offs and early, genuine engagement with communities, each raised by a modest number of respondents, with smaller numbers wanting easier participation and more time.

Research objectives - detailed summary

Initial thoughts on Community Councils

- Just over half of the respondents supported the concept of Community Councils as a way to keep decision-making close to residents. A modest number specifically framed this as local representatives being more aware of day-to-day realities and community needs.
- A smaller minority of respondents questioned whether the proposal is meaningfully different from the current system, describing it as duplication of workers/services, or an extra layer of governance rather than genuine reform.
- Cost was a recurring concern for a notable minority of respondents. Most expressed this in general terms, simply flagging worry about extra cost or the risk of rates rising, while smaller numbers pointed to specific drivers: new salaries and staffing, concern about wasteful spending, and affordability given the current cost of living.
- A small number of respondents raised trust and credibility, questioning whether local bodies would have real authority or would simply be ignored or overruled, and whether new structures would change outcomes if the same patterns of decision-making continue.

Effectiveness and changes needed

- Defining "community" and boundaries: A small number of respondents raised questions about how communities would be defined, including where boundaries should sit and how big an area should be. Individual respondent suggestions included making areas somewhat smaller than current wards, and ensuring areas aren't so small they exclude distinct populations or become narrow interest groups.
- Early community involvement: A small number of respondents mentioned communities should be involved from the start of decision processes rather than being consulted after key decisions appear to have already been made.
- Democratic robustness and accessibility: A couple of respondents called for strictly democratic processes and fair elections, and a small number separately wanted participation options that do not rely solely on digital access.
- Representation and capability: A couple of respondents raised diverse representation (for example, a mix of backgrounds and life experience), and one raised independence from party politics and political bias. A small number separately questioned capability and called for strong governance, oversight, and clear accountability for performance of Community Councils or their elected members.

- Real influence, not symbolic roles: A couple of respondents linked confidence to Community Councils having meaningful delegation, including on spending priorities, rather than being consultative-only.
- Other one-off suggestions: A small number of respondents raised single, isolated ideas, including capped or preset budgets, shared "back office" functions, a small dedicated budget for local projects, and explicit parameters on what Community Councils can and cannot decide. Though none of these were repeated across multiple respondents.

Decision-making at different levels

- A slight majority of respondents supported the general principle that decisions should be made at the level where they have the greatest impact, though a small number were sceptical, mainly on cost or fairness grounds, and a couple specifically wanted exceptions for water to stay local regardless.
- Typically seen as regional: Transport and public transport, major roading, and core infrastructure were the most commonly cited examples; long-term planning was raised by a few respondents, climate and environmental preparation by a small number, and housing zoning by just one respondent.
- Typically seen as local: Parks and playgrounds were raised by a handful of respondents as examples of place-based services, alongside an isolated mention from one respondent of community events and markets.
- Water attracted mixed views, raised by a distinct minority of respondents. Some supported a regional approach given cross-boundary impacts and scale, while others argued for local control based on perceived better local performance, fairness of charging, or concern that regional decision-makers do not reflect local conditions.
- A couple of respondents said clear delineation (what is local versus regional), using practical criteria such as who is impacted and where impacts fall, was an important supporting condition.

Balance between regional and local decision-making

- The balance between regional and local decision-making felt right to a slight majority of the respondents, though their reasoning varied. Respondents cited things like local knowledge, cost savings, reduced bureaucracy, or simply not trusting regional bodies to reflect local needs, with no single reason standing out as dominant. A small number however said outright that it does not create the right balance.
- A modest number of respondents raised a concern that it could replicate what already exists (local councils plus a regional council), with a couple specifically calling it over-engineered or warning of "double work."

- A modest number of respondents highlighted the importance of fairness across communities, particularly how funding and resources would be allocated between areas.

Confidence during changes and communication

- Close to half of respondents said clear, honest communication as changes happen would help them feel confident, though most described this in general terms rather than naming specific content.
- Transparent costs and budgets: A small number of respondents wanted transparent reporting on costs and on where rates or funds are going, including regular breakdowns.
- Timelines and milestones: A small number of respondents wanted clear timelines, step-by-step implementation plans, and measurable milestones, including acknowledgement that delays can occur.
- Communication channels: A small group of respondents named one or more specific channels, including social media, email, radio, newspapers, and public meetings; no single channel came up notably more than another.
- Honesty and accountability: A modest number of respondents expected frank communication about trade-offs and impacts, and wanted accountability where commitments are not met.

Advice for councils during the Head Start process

- Listen to and communicate honestly with communities: Close to half of respondents' advice came down to some version of genuinely listening to and being honest with the community, rather than treating consultation as a formality or a box-ticking exercise.
- Engage early and meaningfully: A small number of respondents said councils should seek input at the start of major decisions, not after a direction appears set.
- Make participation easier and broader: One respondent wanted accessible tools, including online and non-digital participation options. A handful of other respondents wanted well-advertised public meetings with adequate time for attendees to speak.
- Be transparent about benefits, trade-offs, and costs: A few respondents wanted councils to clearly set out what will improve, what will change, and what it will cost.

A selection of respondent quotes

- *"I think it sounds great, having people who live locally represent the community"*
- *"I like the idea. It gives more focus on a smaller group therefore more productive outcomes. Do it!"*
- *"Yes I agree with that, people from Island Bay don't know what's going on locally in Stokes Valley"*
- *"I think it is a brilliant idea. This way all councils get equal involvement."*
- *"Good idea, as local person knows local needs to base decisions about local matters on."*
- *"I definitely think we do need something like a community council. People who do not live or in fact know the local area cannot possibly make decisions on things they do not know. A community council would then be able to address things that matter to their local community."*
- *"The secret is timely and accurate communications. No hidden agendas, and if promises are made but not kept, individuals need to be held accountable."*
- *"I like this concept because at least there is autonomy at a regional level"*
- *"I think it is always good for the Council to ask feedback from its Rate Payers as well as the Community for any changes in the City"*
- *"I think it just recreates the same situation we have now with duplication. I can see the benefit but wonder how it is any different from the current arrangement"*
- *"I don't see how that's any different from having separate councils - seems like extra bureaucracy"*
- *"I do not like this idea because it will increase the cost of running the country by establishing so many Community Councils. The taxpayers' money should be spent wisely and carefully."*
- *"We already have community councils as part of the structure in Kapiti Coast - they are ineffective and parochial - so why would they work in the city - a BIG NO from me"*
- *"It may work but I need more detail before making a commitment"*
- *"I think talk is cheap and actions speak far louder. Even progress on small things can be effective. Eg more rubbish bins and collected regularly, or stormwater drains not clogged with leaves and rubbish and never cleared or regular inspections by local council staff on facilities and their condition ... say in children's playgrounds"*
- *"I think it's a good balance the smaller issues communities face can be dealt with by people in the community but bigger regional issues can require people with a greater level of expertise"*
- *"Far better communication, real involvement and discussion, and consultation, with decisions only made after community agreement."*
- *"I like the idea of community councils, but I'd want to make sure that they have sufficient delegation to make local decisions"*
- *"Genuinely listen. Previous consultations have just been box ticking exercises."*
- *"I don't like this idea, another layer of authority and how will it be funded."*

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A large, solid orange wave graphic that starts on the left, rises to a peak, and then falls towards the right, creating a smooth, flowing shape.

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