



OFFICE OF THE MAYOR
HAMILTON

29 January 2026

Hon Simon Watts, Minister of Local Government,
Hon Chris Bishop, Minister Responsible for RMA Reform,
Parliament Buildings
Wellington 6160

Tēnā kōrua Minister Watts and Minister Bishop,

Local Government Reform – Waikato Mayoral Forum

Thank you for the opportunity to engage constructively with the Government's local government reform programme. The Waikato Mayoral Forum sees this reform as a once-in-a-generation opportunity to address long-standing systemic issues, strengthen local democracy, and ensure local government can continue to deliver for its communities into the future.

The Forum would like to highlight the following matters in relation to our region.

The Waikato region is central to New Zealand's economic performance and long-term resilience.

Projected rapid population growth across Hamilton, Waikato and Waipa, peri-urban settlements, rural towns and villages, and coastal communities will require coordinated and well-funded long-term planning. The region's location as a critical national transport, freight, and logistics corridor supports a diverse economy spanning agriculture, advanced manufacturing, technology, renewable energy, aquaculture, tourism, healthcare, and forestry. Waikato also manages significant natural resources, including river catchments, geothermal assets, 10,000 km² of coastal marine area, 1,200 km of coastline, and \$1.1B in flood protection infrastructure. Our strengths are further supported by a growing Māori economic base and the longstanding cultural and regional leadership of the Kingitanga.

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A focus on partnerships, relationships and collaboration support the current complexity of the region's governance.

The region's governance environment comprises 12 local authorities, over 40 iwi including six large iwi groups, and more than 200 hapū. Waikato has demonstrated an enduring desire and ability to work collaboratively with central government, including through the Future Proof partnership. We are demonstrating leadership through the formation of two water service entities in response to Local Waters Done Well legislation. Existing regional governance structures such as the Waikato Mayoral Forum, the CE Forum and the Iwi Governance Forum, illustrate proven leadership and implementation capability.

The Forum urges you to consider the following critical points as you progress with this programme of reform.

Waikato is ready to partner on nationally aligned, enduring reform.

The government's reform agenda requires a whole-of-government approach with clear alignment across legislative changes, clarity of functions at all levels, and localised decision-making preserved where it best serves communities. Long-term planning for growth, infrastructure, and climate adaptation must be supported.

The Waikato CE Forum has already initiated work on the unique value proposition of local government, its' form and function, and how this can best support communities within an aligned national system.

Effective reform requires genuine partnership.

Recent reform processes have at times, minimised local government's role. A bipartisan national vision, shared governance responsibilities, and recognition of the value of local government assets are essential. The Waikato seeks a reset based on trust, shared outcomes, and an equitable partnership.

Effective reform requires a whole of system approach

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Reform will only succeed if it is considered as a whole system and not as individual parts. The reform programme will have a significant impact on local government and communities, however it is not clear that a whole of systems approach is being adopted. We urge the government to reconsider the timing, varied decision-making models and funding and financing impacts associated with each element of the reform programme so local government can implement reforms effectively. We also urge the government to consider the overall financial impact on communities as the reform programme includes additional responsibilities for local government, and any move away from LGFA funding is likely to increase the financial burden on communities.

Transition costs will be significant.

To ensure successful implementation, central government will need to provide additional funding, enable new financing tools, and allow councils to pause major statutory processes such as long-term plans, audits, and representation reviews, to be able to meet the costs of reform. DIA (Ministry of Cities, Environment, Regions and Transport – MCERT) will also need to be adequately resourced to work closely with the regions on this reform.

Transitioning to a new system for local government and resource management will be complex and resource intensive. Transitional support will be required to assist the sector to deliver transformation at scale. Any changes to form and functions should be aligned and well sequenced, with implementation timing coordinated so benefits can be realised. Transition timeframes should also take account of significant events such as local and national elections and be clearly communicated so communities and ratepayers understand when changes will occur. Ideally the timeframe would ensure that the reorganisation is concluded within the next triennium, to avoid the risk of re-litigation and re-education of new elected members.

Longstanding issues on funding of local government must be addressed.

The purpose of local councils is to do the things that their communities want them to do and are prepared to pay for. Councils should be accountable to those affected by their decisions and from whom they can require funds. Where legislation (including statutory

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national direction) creates functions of national benefit, those mandates should be recognised and funded by central government.

Unfunded mandates, the absence of GST on rates being returned to councils, the lack of Development Contributions/Levies and rates paid by central government on Crown property, needs addressing so there is equitable Crown contribution to local government activity from which it directly benefits.

Reform should also enable a wider set of financial levers and tools, in addition to rates, to improve transparency, efficiency and affordability while maintaining strong local accountability. Without new tools and equitable Crown support, councils will face unsustainable pressures, especially for infrastructure essential to supporting regional and national growth.

Iwi partnership is fundamental to current and future governance, and decision-making must occur at scales that strengthen democratic practice.

Te Tiriti obligations must be embedded consistently across the reform programme. Te Tiriti settlements have marked a new era in relationships between the Crown, Mana Whenua and iwi. These relationships, supporting statutory obligations, and Te Ture Whaimana o Te Awa o Waikato are integral to local government in the Waikato and must be given effect to in the new system.

Nationally supported tools for participatory and deliberative democracy will help ensure communities remain engaged and represented and allow room for a community voice in decision-making. This is an opportunity to improve community engagement, enable a strong local voice, and lift efficiency and transparency across the system.

Protecting and restoring the natural environment is a long-term investment.

Resource management must reflect rural and urban interests, catchment-scale needs, and Treaty settlement arrangements. Durable, evidence-based, and integrated decision-making frameworks are required.

Protecting and restoring the natural environment is not a cost; it is an investment in New Zealand's long-term economic resilience and prosperity, human health, and international

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standing. Ensuring local government is equipped to safeguard these assets is essential for maintaining prosperity and cultural identity that are inseparable from the natural world. Resource management decisions involve competing demands and must enable local solutions within a nationally consistent framework. Consideration of appropriate catchment management needs to be made, as the legislation is progressed.

Investment in national standards and systems would reduce fragmentation and inefficiency.

Central government can materially improve system performance through national technical standards, methodologies, and consistent systems—particularly in consenting.

Under-investment in standards has also increased litigation risk for local decision makers. National standardisation does not automatically mean operational delivery must shift to a national agency; rather it can enable more efficient and consistent local delivery.

To enable more efficient delivery, and therefore better value for ratepayers, standardised tools across the local government sector are essential. Nationally consistent system-design tools – such as shared templates, digital platforms, and standardised operational models would ensure all councils are working from the same foundations, reduce variability, and streamline the transition process.

Shared national systems such as common asset-management platforms, consistent financial and rating system templates, and unified customer-service or digital engagement tools would substantially reduce duplication and improve accuracy and productivity. Sector-wide standardisation is a practical and high-impact way to lift efficiency, lower system costs, and support councils to deliver core services more effectively

Crown and iwi representation on the Combined Territory Boards is essential.

The Forum supports Crown representation on the Combined Territories Board through Commissioners with expertise in both local and central government. To uphold a genuine partnership, Commissioners should hold voting rights consistent with other members. Iwi representation on the Board and involvement of the Regional Council Chair will also be essential.

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The Waikato region is committed to working constructively with central government to achieve a resilient, connected Waikato that underpins national prosperity. The Forum is keen to get started.

Nāku iti noa, nā

On behalf of the Waikato Mayoral Forum / Waikato Region

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Tim Macindoe'.

Hon Tim Macindoe
Mayor of Hamilton
Chair Waikato Mayoral Forum

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