



SOUTH WAIRARAPA  
DISTRICT COUNCIL  
*Kia Reretahi Tātau*

# Submission to the Department of Internal Affairs: Simplifying Local Government

20 February 2026

## Introduction

South Wairarapa District Council (SWDC) appreciates the opportunity to make a submission to the Department of Internal Affairs on the Simplifying Local Government (SLG) proposal.

We support the submissions from Local Government New Zealand (LGNZ) and Taituarā but feel that such a significant proposal warrants a separate submission from our council, even though (unlike larger councils) we do not have a dedicated in-house policy team and must balance strategic engagement on major national reforms along with delivering core services and meeting statutory obligations.

This submission recommends retaining regional councillors during the transition, as well as their inclusion on the Combined Territories Board. It opposes Ministerial approval of the governance model and any veto powers or replacement of the Combined Territories Board by Crown Commissioners due to democratic accountability concerns. It supports mayors having equal voting rights (one mayor, one vote) and raises concerns about piecemeal legislative change and insufficient funding for sustainable transformational reform.

## About South Wairarapa

The South Wairarapa District is a local authority within the Wellington Region, serving a population of 12,200 (as of June 2025). The district is part of the Wairarapa region (along with the Carterton and Masterton districts) and in terms of local government is part of the Greater Wellington Regional Council area. It is connected to Wellington City in particular through employment opportunities for residents. We have a longstanding heritage in farming, alongside growing tourism and a thriving viticulture sector.

The main settlements are Martinborough, Featherston, Greytown with rural settlements across the district. South Wairarapa District Council (SWDC) was formed by the amalgamation of those three towns which have distinct communities of interest and became our three wards - Martinborough, Featherston and Greytown. The amalgamation was part of the 1989 central government reforms.

In 2024, SWDC undertook a representation review, as a result of which it retained the three existing community boards and proposed introducing a Māori Ward, which was supported by voters at the last election. A key theme that emerged throughout the representation review was the community's desire for 1) stronger representation and 2) greater opportunities for input from our rural residents.

During the 2025 local government elections, SWDC recorded one of the highest voter turnouts in the country, with 59.13 percent of voters participating—significantly above the national local government average of 39.41 percent for that year. For the last four election cycles, South Wairarapa has maintained voter turnout rates exceeding 50%. This demonstrates the strength of our community's interest in local

democracy and civic engagement. Input into local decision-making (including representation) is important to our residents.



**SOUTH WAIRARAPA  
DISTRICT COUNCIL**  
*Kia Reretahi Tātau*

South Wairarapa District Council supports efforts to simplify and strengthen local government, while emphasising that change must be sector-led, principles-driven, well-resourced and coordinated to avoid piecemeal reform and ensure long-term sustainability for our community.

## Summary of Overall Position

1. SWDC welcomes the opportunity to improve local government and to provide simplification and the removal of duplication across governance. We strongly agree with the need for reform in general and agree with key features of the reform being simplification and the streamlining process.
2. We value conversations taking place that address the need for long-term vision and improvements, resilience and the need to deliver better value for ratepayers.
3. SWDC also understands the ongoing and growing challenges our communities face and believes strong collaboration is required to improve outcomes for everyone. This includes strong consensus at central government level and cross-party support on the reason for change and the policy direction.
4. Our position aligns with the comments from Taituarā that transformative change is required to respond to climate change, cost-of-living pressures, housing and infrastructure for our community, as well ongoing demographic changes and the need for greater social cohesion. However, any government review of regional council functions should be undertaken in partnership with the sector.
5. SWDC agrees that a first-principles review of local government structures—such as that proposed through the Regional Re-organisation Plan (RRP)—is necessary given the increasing pressures on the sector and the need to ensure long-term sustainability. We consider that the concept of the RRP is a constructive step toward meaningful change but we do not agree with all the elements of the current proposal.
6. We support the comments from LGNZ that Simplifying Local Government reform must be enduring and deliver better outcomes over the long term for our communities. This includes making sure the criteria for the RRP provide further elaboration and expansion if they are to be a useful guide and provide long-term benefits for the region.
7. We have significant concern that the cumulative impact of ongoing local government reforms is placing increasing pressure on councils and their resources. The scale of change currently underway—including rates capping, the Resource Management Act reforms and Local Water Done Well—



**SOUTH WAIRARAPA  
DISTRICT COUNCIL**  
*Kia Reretahi Tātau*

must be carefully considered. Councils require flexibility to respond in ways that best meet the needs of their particular communities, resources and budgets.

8. We support the Taituarā view that these reforms should not proceed on a piecemeal, case-by-case basis. Council encourages a clearly articulated, principles-based approach to reform, with well-defined objectives within a coherent reform programme.
9. Given the move to reorganise the sector and the combination of multiple reforms in the same timeframe, consideration needs to be given to allow a three-year LTP that are unaudited, similar to the councils impacted by Gabriel - Severe Weather Emergency Recovery (Local Government Act 2002 - Long Term Plan Order 2023).

## Details

10. SWDC does not support replacing elected regional councillors with mayors to govern regional councils. Regional councillors were elected by their communities with a clear mandate and those communities expect their elected representatives to serve out the full term. Allowing them to do so would provide other elected representatives with the time needed for a more meaningful and complete discussion on the future function and form of an efficient and effective local government system - including understanding the implications of any proposed changes. Thus our strong view is that rather than governing current regional councils, the function of Combined Territorial Boards (CTBs) should be deciding the future optimal governance arrangements for their regions.
11. We do support the appointments of mayors to CTBs - with voting rights. One of the core purposes of representation is ensuring our communities can choose who speaks on their behalf. Strong outcomes are achieved when communities are genuinely represented. SWDC covers a large territory but has a tiny population. It is a popular tourist destination and hosts many visitors on weekends and over summer. This means we have minimal financial resources, despite facing service demands similar to our larger neighbours. These factors need to be recognized in any re-organisation proposals, but also in the processes leading up to such proposals, including voting rights on the CTB. Because a population-based voting model would leave South Wairarapa disproportionately under-represented—particularly alongside larger neighbours such as Masterton and the massively bigger Wellington—we support “one mayor, one vote”.
12. As LGNZ points out, it is a real strength of the proposal that locally elected members in each region are developing the future of local governance arrangements for their own communities. However, the Remuneration Authority already considers mayors to be engaged in full-time work in their current elected roles. There are concerns about adding further responsibilities to this position, and careful consideration is needed to ensure there is flexibility for mayors in managing both roles concurrently.



**SOUTH WAIRARAPA  
DISTRICT COUNCIL**  
*Kia Reretahi Tātau*

13. We support the addition of regional councillors to the CTB. Regional councillors have important insight, knowledge and institutional knowledge regarding the challenges and opportunities across the rohe and their representation on CTBs would only strengthen the outcomes.
14. We disagree with the options proposed for Crown Commissioners to be appointed with veto power or majority vote, or the appointment of a Crown Commissioner instead of a CTB, because Commissioners are not democratically elected.
15. SWDC already has strong partnerships with mana whenua. The SLG reforms need to provide strong mechanisms to uphold Te Tiriti o Waitangi obligations and enhance meaningful mana whenua involvement in decision-making. This will enable enduring environmental protection, resilient communities and sustainable development, particularly if iwi are represented on the CTB. The absence of direct Māori involvement in the proposed SLG framework poses a significant risk to meeting our Te Tiriti obligations and also fails to capture the wide interest that local government also now has in partnering with post-settlement iwi on a long-term basis.
16. Consideration should also be given to expanding the options available to the CTB, including the ability to appoint its own chair and (as noted above) retain regional councillors and delegate responsibilities to other elected members. This would provide Councils with greater flexibility regarding CTB membership and governance structure.
17. Clear legislative criteria for the RRP are needed to ensure the CTB can operate in an outcomes-focused way and should consider all dimension of local government work, thereby ensuring the reorganisation plans are not too narrow in scope.
18. SWDC supports the suggestion of a set of legislative principles that, if met, would enable each region to develop its own bespoke governance model within an overall framework. This would allow future local government structure to reflect the population size and distribution of different communities, rather than shoe-horning the whole country into the current model prescribed in legislation designed for the large metropolitan area of Auckland.
19. The Wellington Region Mayoral Forum has already begun discussing re-organization and all the councils are engaged. The three Wairarapa councils (SWDC, Carterton District Council and Masterton District Council) are actively working together to formulate a proposal for some kind of amalgamation. The options currently available are one Wairarapa territorial authority, a Wairarapa unitary authority or a unitary authority with the Greater Wellington region. This work is not yet completed but it is clear that none of the available models is totally optimal for the nature, territorial size and small-ish population of the Wairarapa region.



**SOUTH WAIRARAPA  
DISTRICT COUNCIL**  
*Kia Reretahi Tātau*

20. Consultation may need to be wider and consider more than one proposal to allow for transparency and feedback from our community. We support LGNZ recommendation that there should be consultation requirements as part of the RRP, but more flexibility about when and how that consultation occurs.
21. Resourcing and funding methods will need careful consideration. We note and agree with LGNZ concerns that the current proposal risks a substantial unfunded mandate falling on ratepayers and suggest that central government provides some contribution to the resourcing of CTB and the re-organisation process. Many councils simply do not have the resources to move quickly on RRP plans and will need assistance so that hold-ups and delays can be pre-empted.
22. It is also important to note that the need for extra resourcing may include the DIA and Local Government Commission.
23. Finally, SWDC disagrees with the SLG proposal to allow the Minister power to alter and approve RRP, and hence the future of local government. The Local Government Commission, as an independent statutory body, is responsible for determining the structure of local government and should therefore review regional plans against the criteria, issuing determinations and returning plans for revision where required.

**For further information about matters covered by this submission, please contact Nicki Ansell, Lead Advisor Performance and Strategy, South Wairarapa District Council: [nicki.ansell@swdc.govt.nz](mailto:nicki.ansell@swdc.govt.nz)**

**Dame Fran Wilde**  
**Mayor South Wairarapa District Council**

**20 February 2026**