

19 February 2026

Hon Simon Watts, Minister of Local Government
Department of Internal Affairs
45 Pipitea Street, Wellington
simplifyinglocalgovernment@dia.govt.nz

Teena koe,

Thank you for the opportunity to provide feedback on the Government's *Simplifying Local Government* proposal. Waikato District Council (Council) is committed to providing constructive feedback; however, we are also clear that reform must be durable, coherent, and result in improved outcomes for our communities.

Council expresses its strong support for the positions outlined in the Waikato Mayoral Forum letter addressed to Minister Watts and Minister Bishop dated 29 January 2026 (attached). The matters raised in the letter represent essential conditions for any credible reform and must be embedded in any reorganisation of local government.

Council expects the following principles to be reflected explicitly in the reform programme:

- National alignment must not come at the expense of local democracy*
Reform must deliver clarity of roles, functions, and accountability across the system, but must not centralise decision-making in ways that weaken local voice or responsiveness. Local government must retain authority where communities are directly affected, supported by clear national direction and adequately funded mandates.
- Partnership is essential, not aspirational*
Council expects reform to reflect a genuine partnership between central and local government and iwi. Te Tiriti o Waitangi obligations must be consistently upheld across the system. Anything less risks undermining the legitimacy and durability of the reforms.
- Reform must be designed as an integrated system*
Council is concerned at the current fragmentation of reform components. A piecemeal approach will impose unnecessary costs, increase risk, and compromise service delivery. Government must ensure alignment, sequencing, and realistic implementation timeframes that allow councils to transition responsibly and without excessive burden on communities.
- Sustainable funding is non-negotiable*
Longstanding structural funding issues cannot remain unresolved. If councils are expected to carry national responsibilities, the Crown must contribute equitably. Reform must provide additional financial tools beyond rates and address

unfunded mandates, GST on rates, and Crown property contributions. Without this, the system will remain fiscally unsustainable and inequitable.

5. *National standards must support, not override, local delivery*

Council supports improved consistency and efficiency through shared national standards, tools, and digital platforms. These system-level improvements should streamline processes and reduce duplication, while still enabling local delivery that reflects community priorities and regional context.

6. *Embedding high-quality regional reorganisation planning*

Preparing a Regional Reorganisation Plan will require substantial time, expertise, and resources. Council believes it is essential that these costs are shared between central and local government. To make this feasible, councils will also need appropriate regulatory relief during the transition period so they can focus on producing a high-quality plan without compromising core services or economic development.

A key example is that Council has requested to the Department of Internal Affairs and the Local Government Commission to suspend the requirement for a Representation Review while the reorganisation plan is being developed. Both agencies have declined, citing a lack of legislative ability to enable this. Running both processes simultaneously would create unnecessary costs and confusion for communities. It would be inefficient given the significant structural and governance changes expected for local government, such as Maaori wards and the proposed Combined Territories Board. Conducting a Representation Review that does not reflect the reform changes would result in an expensive and ultimately redundant exercise.

Council is committed to working proactively with our neighbouring councils and with the Government to deliver a durable, nationally aligned reform that strengthens local democracy and improves outcomes for our communities. However, we emphasise that any reorganisation of local government must reflect the principles and expectations outlined above and, in the Waikato Mayoral Forum's letter. The success of this once-in-a-generation reform opportunity depends on it.

We look forward to continued engagement and expect to see these matters embedded clearly as the work progresses.

Should you have any questions related to the submission materials, please contact Maggie Ford, Strategy Manager, Waikato District Council maggie.ford@waidc.govt.nz

Ngaa mihi,



Mayor

Waikato District Council

This submission has been approved by the Submission Forum on the 19 February 2026