Simplifying Local Government - Regional Voice Survey results

Executive Summary

Bay of Plenty Regional Council undertook a Regional Voice Survey between 29 June and 12 July 2026 to understand community perspectives on the potential implications of local government reform for regional functions and services. Although regional councils cannot make a Head Start proposal, it was important that regional community views were available to inform decisions by territorial authorities.

A total of 278 responses were received from across the region. This report analyses these responses.

A key finding from the survey is that respondents tended to evaluate governance structures through the lens of outcomes and functions, rather than organisational design itself.

Key insights from community responses:

1. Environmental protection was ranked first by the community, when considering what outcome they wanted prioritised.
2. There is a preference to keep regional services joined-up to benefit the whole region, if changing the structure of local government means some communities pay more for services they rely on.
3. The one regional unitary authority model received the most positive feedback.

Overall, the survey suggests communities are primarily concerned with whether future arrangements can deliver effective services, protect environmental outcomes, provide value for money and maintain meaningful community influence. Respondents to the survey most strongly supported a Regional Unitary Authority model, with cost efficiency, effective delivery of regional services and local voice and representation arising as themes when considering this model. These themes may provide a useful framework for local authorities as they consider potential Head Start proposals and future governance arrangements.

Introduction

The purpose of this survey was to understand the regional community perspective on the potential impact to regional functions under the Simplifying Local Government reform, to provide to local authorities considering making a proposal under the Head Start Pathway.

Methodology, design and engagement

The Regional Voice Survey was conducted between 29 June and 12 July 2026 to understand community perspectives on the potential implications of local government reform for regional functions.

The survey was available online, in hard copy and at community events held across the Bay of Plenty. The survey was promoted through a range of channels including Council communications, digital and print advertising, social media and community engagement events.

As participation was voluntary and self-selecting, the survey should be considered indicative of community views rather than statistically representative of the regional population. A detailed description of survey design, promotion, demographics, methodology, assumptions and limitations is provided in Appendix A.

Engagement with Māori

Hui with iwi authorities, co-governance entities and other Māori leaders were scheduled for the survey period. The purpose of the hui was to strengthen relationships, discuss how Council can support Māori respond to and navigate the proposed local government and resource management reforms, and to receive feedback on this survey.

Māori Councillors met with iwi leaders and representatives in Rotorua on Tuesday 7 July 2026. Appreciation was expressed for Council's rangatira ki te rangatira engagement approach, as well as the collaborative mahi undertaken in partnership with iwi to deliver services and outcomes for the region. Key priorities highlighted by iwi included:

- upholding Treaty settlement arrangements
- regional scale environmental management
- genuine partnerships and Māori representation throughout the reform process

Further hui are scheduled to be held in Tauranga and Whakatāne over the coming weeks. Feedback from iwi and hapū leaders will be shared once all hui have been completed.

Further work

This interim report has been prepared rapidly to provide information to Bay of Plenty territorial authorities within the short timeframes of the Head Start process. Further engagement is being undertaken with Iwi/Māori and other stakeholders.

Summary of Survey Results

Survey findings should be considered as indicative community feedback only rather than a statistically representative sample. A total of 267 responses were received by 12 July, plus a further eleven postal and email responses received in the following days, providing both quantitative data and qualitative feedback. Together, these results offer insight into the priorities, perceived benefits, and concerns associated with each of the potential models for consideration. Detailed demographic information is provided in Appendix A.

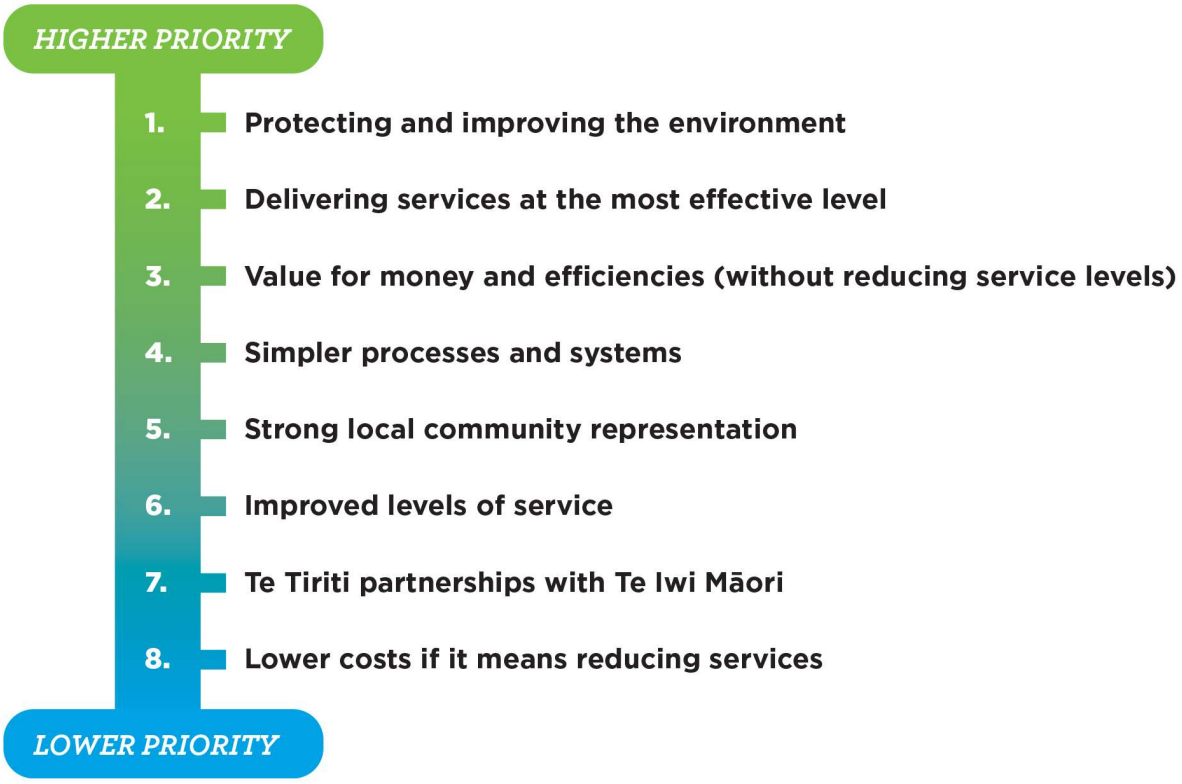
Community priorities

Question 1

We asked: When you think about changes to local government, which outcomes matter most to you?

Respondents were asked to rank a range of potential outcomes from local government reform.

The community said: Protecting and improving the environment was the highest-ranked outcome overall. Delivering services at the most effective level, value for money, and simpler systems and processes were also ranked highly by respondents. Although not ranked as highly, strong local representation was also identified as important. Further details are available in Appendix B: Outcomes and Priorities.



We heard:
These findings suggest that respondents generally viewed effective service delivery, environmental outcomes, simplification, efficiency, and local representation as complementary objectives rather than competing priorities.

Question 2

We asked: If changing the structure of local government means some communities may pay more for services, they rely on, what should councils prioritise?

The community said: The most commonly selected response was maintaining joined-up service delivery across the region. Responses relating to keeping local costs low, sharing costs across the region, and retaining local control received lower levels of support. Further details are available in Appendix B: Outcomes and Priorities.



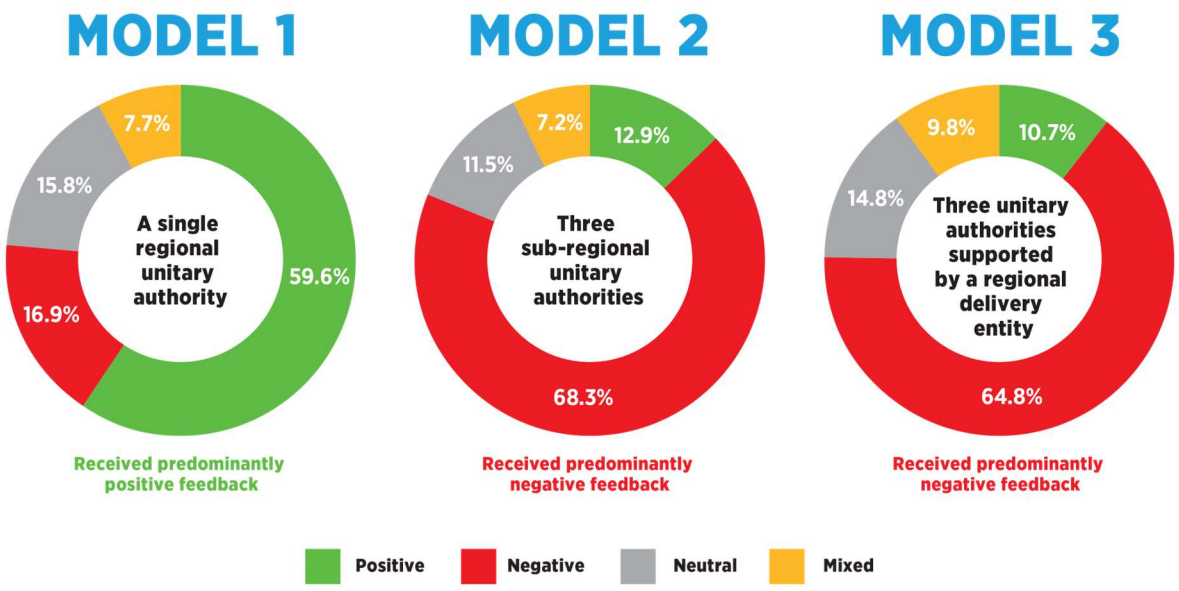
What councils should prioritise (n=260)

We heard: These results suggest respondents placed a high value on maintaining coordinated service delivery while also recognising the importance of affordability and local decision-making.

Views on potential governance models

Three potential governance models were presented to respondents for comment. **The single regional unitary authority model received the most positive feedback.**

The below table presents a high-level summary of sentiment of the comments received through a free text option, and what topics those comments focused on.



Most frequent topics arising relating to each model		
Model 1 Most comments referred to the model, cost and efficiency, regional services, and local voice and representation.	Model 2 Most comments referred to concerns about cost and efficiency, the model, and the delivery of regional services.	Model 3 Most comments referred to the model, cost efficiency, and governance structure.

Further information on responses to potential models for the region is in Appendix C: Potential models for the region.

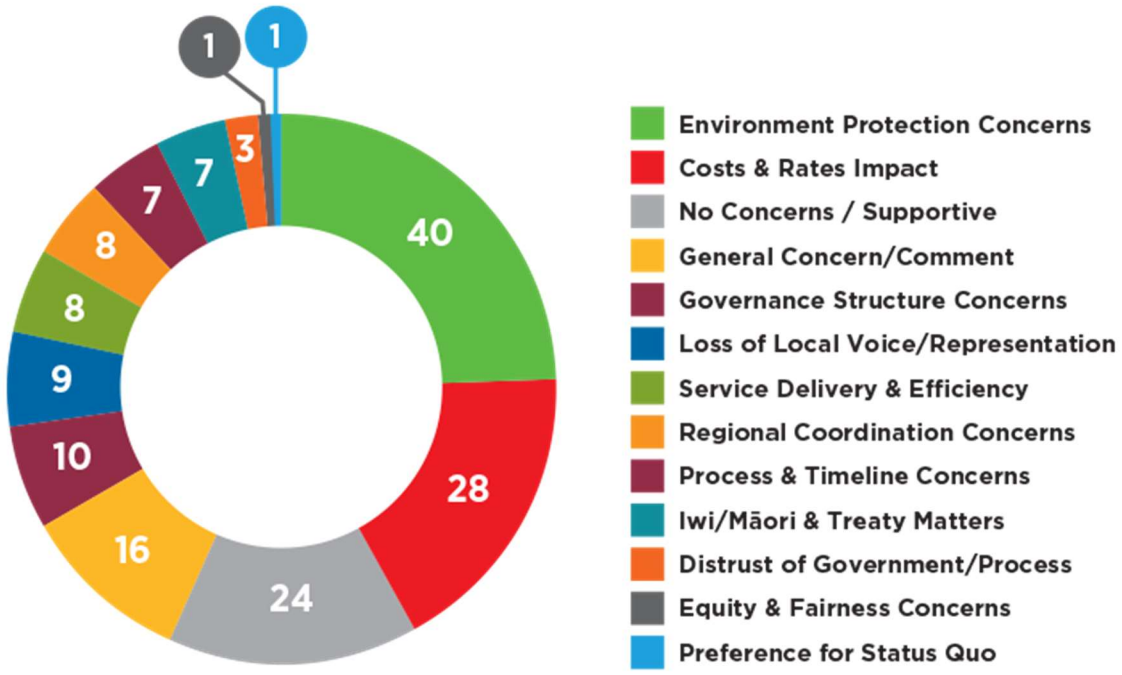
We heard: The respondents were more willing to share their views on model one than models two or three. There were varying comments from single words to multiple paragraphs suggesting a range of knowledge and interest on the issue by the respondents.

Many respondents are concerned about whether future arrangements would support effective, coordinated, and efficient delivery. Feedback frequently referred to avoiding duplication, and ensuring services continue to operate effectively across communities and geographical boundaries. Comments highlighted concern about the fragmentation of functions that rely on coordinated planning and investment. At the same time, some respondents emphasised the importance of ensuring local priorities and perspectives continue to influence decision-making.

Concerns about changes to Local Government

We asked: Do you have any concerns about the changes to local government and what it means for regional functions?

162 respondents provided a written response.



Themes from comments on concerns respondents see in local government change (n=162)

We heard: Respondents' concerns were primarily focused on the outcomes of reform rather than governance structures themselves.

Environmental protection was the most commonly raised concern, with many respondents expressing a desire to ensure that future local government arrangements continue to protect rivers, lakes, coastlines and the natural environment.

Cost and affordability were also recurring themes, with respondents seeking reassurance that any changes would not result in increased rates or reduced value for money.

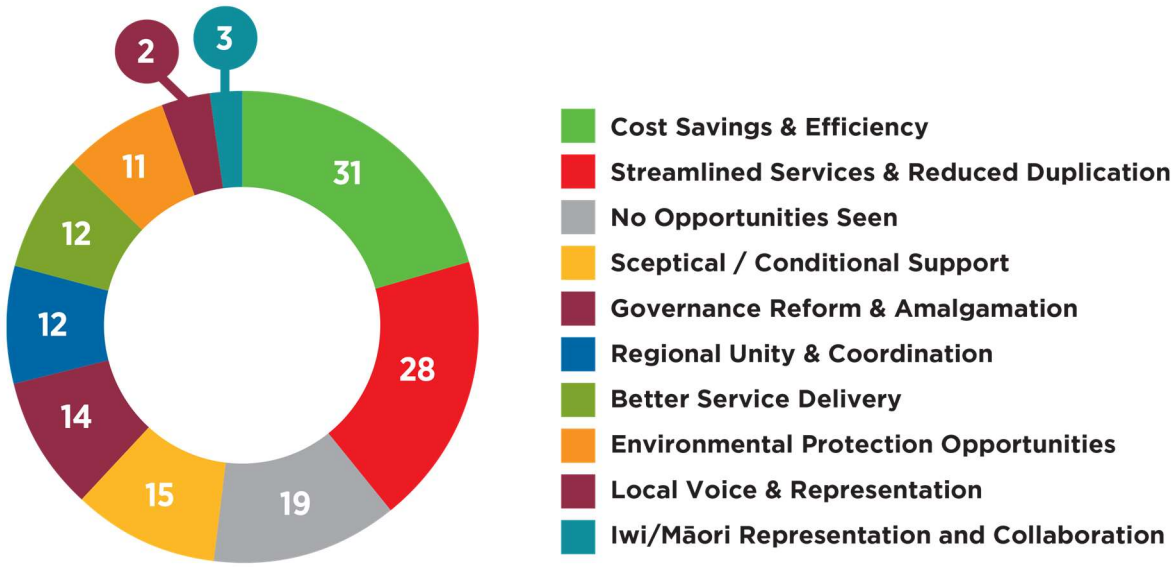
While some respondents expressed concerns about governance structures and the potential loss of local voice, others indicated they were supportive of reform or had no significant concerns provided services and outcomes were maintained.

Overall, responses suggest that communities are primarily concerned with ensuring future arrangements continue to deliver environmental outcomes, effective services and value for money.

Opportunities from Changes to Local Government

We asked: What opportunities do you see about the changes to local government and what it means for regional functions?

152 respondents provided a written response.



Themes from comments on opportunities respondents see in local government change (n=152)

We heard: The most commonly identified opportunities related to improved efficiency, reduced duplication and potential cost savings.

Many respondents saw opportunities to simplify local government structures, improve coordination between councils and deliver services more efficiently.

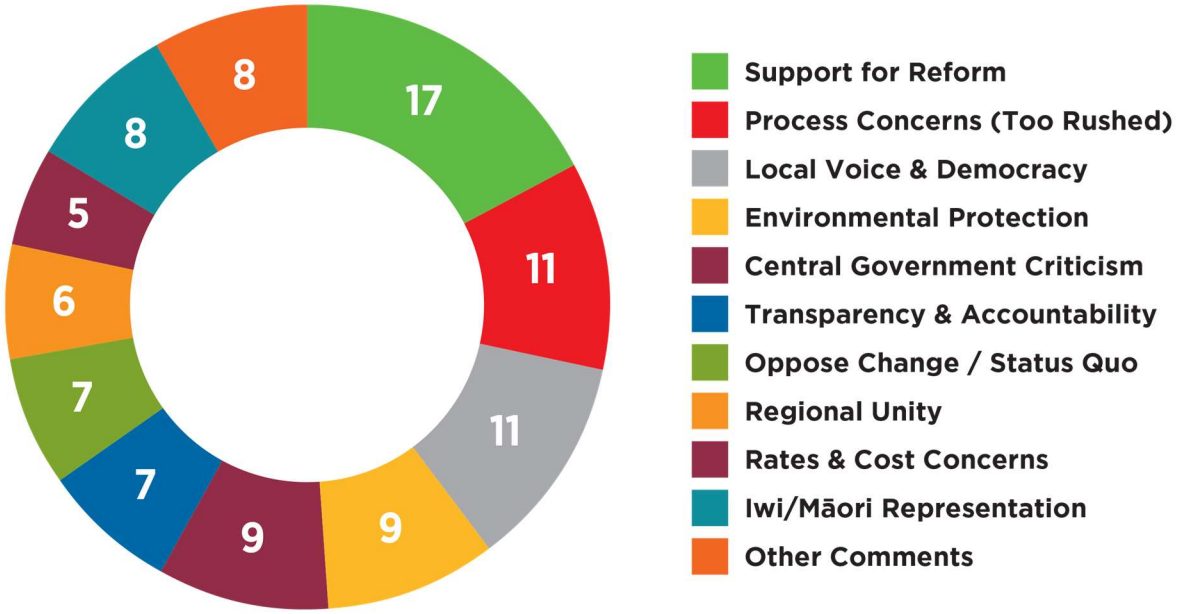
Respondents also noted potential benefits from more integrated decision-making and stronger regional coordination, particularly where issues extend beyond district boundaries.

While some respondents remained sceptical about whether these benefits would be realised, the responses indicate a willingness to consider change where it can demonstrate improved service delivery, reduced duplication and better value for money.

Further Feedback on Local Government Reform

We asked: Please share any further feedback you have about changes to local government.

98 respondents provided a written response.



Themes in further feedback on changes in local government (n=98)

We heard: Respondents expressed a diverse range of views, reflecting both support for reform and concerns about how the process is being undertaken.

Support for reform was the most common theme, with many respondents recognising potential opportunities to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of local government.

At the same time, respondents emphasised the importance of maintaining local voice, democratic representation and transparency throughout any reform process. Concerns were also raised about the pace of reform and whether adequate time was being provided for communities to understand and consider the implications of change.

Environmental protection continued to emerge as a recurring theme, reinforcing its importance to communities across the Bay of Plenty.

Overall, the responses suggest that while there is openness to reform, communities want confidence that future arrangements will maintain strong environmental stewardship, effective services, meaningful local representation and transparent decision-making.

Head Start considerations

While survey questions did not directly test the Head Start assessment criteria, several themes raised by respondents align with considerations local authorities are expected to examine through the Head Start pathway.

Effective service delivery featured strongly throughout the feedback. Some respondents emphasised the importance of services being delivered at the most appropriate and effective level.

Respondents also identified opportunities to reduce duplication, simplify systems, and improve coordination between organisations. Value for money and simpler processes were both ranked highly as desired outcomes of reform, suggesting efficiency and administrative simplicity remain important considerations for many respondents.

Another recurring theme was the importance of coordinated approaches to issues that extend beyond individual communities. Some responses referred to catchments, environmental systems, transport networks, and iwi/Māori relationships that operate across existing boundaries. This suggests respondents recognised the importance of maintaining effective coordination and delivery for regional functions that extend beyond a single community or district.

At the same time, strong local representation remained important for some. Some feedback emphasised the importance of local influence, responsiveness, and community identity, particularly within smaller communities and rural areas.

Next Steps

An early draft of this report was provided to Local Authorities to support their decision making regarding the Head Start Pathway. Further analysis was completed on the responses provided, and inclusion of late responses. (See Appendix 4: Concerns, opportunities and further comments)

A summary of the results will be made available to respondents and the public via our website.

Appendices

Appendix A: Methodology, limitations, and demographics

Appendix B: Outcomes and Priorities

Appendix C: Potential models for the region

Appendix D: Concerns, opportunities and further comments

Appendix A: Methodology, limitations, and demographics

Methodology

This survey was open to the public to complete from Monday 29 June to 11:59pm Sunday 12 July. Community could complete the online survey on their own device, at kiosks at each reception or on devices provided by council at events. Hard copies were also available from Toi Moana offices and at three community events (one in each Bay of Plenty sub-region) held on Saturday 12 July, and could be returned to any office or by a freepost address. The questions as they appeared on the printed survey can be viewed as a PDF; Printable Survey Form (170KB, PDF)

Survey Design

Where appropriate, options listed in the survey were randomised in the online survey to reduce order bias. Besides postal code, all questions were optional, allowing respondents to complete only questions they chose to. This approach was intended to encourage considered responses from as many respondents as possible. Other questions could be left blank.

Promotion

This survey was promoted through a variety of tools including:

- Web content
- Media release
- Print advertising i.e. Around the Rohe
- Digital advertising and social media
- Community events in each of the Bay of Plenty sub-regions on Saturday 12 July
- Direct email via Regional Council Kōrero and Participate subscribers

Assumptions and Limitations

This survey is a snapshot only of self-selecting participants. Demographics are reported for context; however, the survey is not demographically representative.

Participants completed the only questions they chose and could leave others blank. The interim report includes only data entered Participate by 11:59pm on Sunday 12 July. Late surveys will be added to the final reported figures.

Staff entered Forty hard copy responses, leaving blanks where text was Illegible. Initial sentiment was analysed using AI through the Open Point platform. Staff reviewed comments and sentiment focusing on low confidence results. Initial theming of comments in responses to models has been completed with Copilot and reviewed by staff to increase confidence in the accuracy of the theming.

Participants

Demographic data is requested in surveys to get an indicative understanding of the reach and representation of participants. Due to the small sample size (278), this has not been compared

to census data for representativeness. Apart from postcodes, all other personal information was optional.

Responses were received from across all three Bay of Plenty sub-regions. The distribution of responses broadly reflected the population distribution of the Western Bay of Plenty and Eastern Bay communities, while Rotorua residents were slightly under-represented.

Sub-region[1] n=278	**Ethnicity[2] n=267**	**Gender n=260**	**Age[3] n=214**	**Property Ownership N=259**	**Rural/ Urban n=255**
Western Bay of Plenty including Tauranga 66.2% 184	Māori 16.5% 44	Female 48% 125	Under 20 years 1.4% 3	own a property 85.1%% 229	Town or City 64.2% 170
Eastern Bay including Kawerau, Whakatāne and Ōpōtiki 19.1% 53	Pākeha/ NZ European 75.3% 201	Male 47.7% 124	21-30 years 3.8% 8	Does not own a property 6.0% 16	Rural 19.3%% 51
Rotorua 12.6% 35	Samoan 1.5% 4	Prefer not to say 4.2% 11	31-40 years 14.9% 31	Member of my household owns a property 5.6% 15	Semi-urban 16.6% 44
Other 2.2% 6	Indian 0.4% 1	Another gender 0% 0	41-50 years 19.7% 41	Prefer not to say 3.4%% 9	
	Other 9.4% 25		51-60 years 21.6% 45		
	Prefer not to say 7.5% 20		61-70 years 18.8% 39		
			71-80 years 14.4 30		
			81 years + 5.3% 11		

[1] Sub-regions are categorised by the postcode a respondent lives in.
[2] Ethnicity allows for multiple categories to be selected.
[3] Age is collected as Year of Birth

Appendix B: Outcomes and Priorities

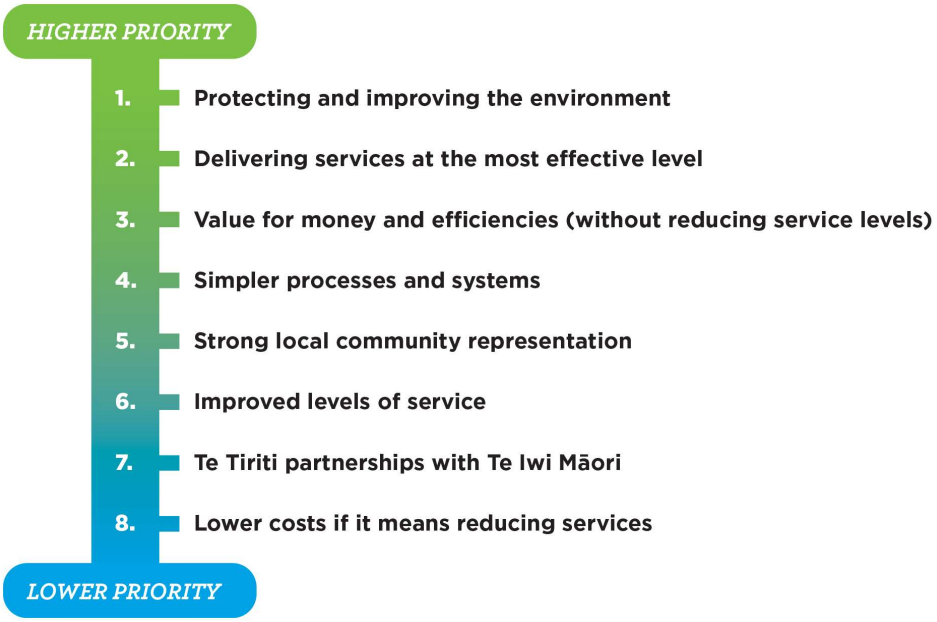
When you think about changes to local government, which outcomes matter most to you? Respondents were asked to rank eight outcomes from most important (1) to least important (8) and could rank as many or few outcomes as they wanted to. A low average ranking indicates the outcome was a high priority for respondents. Options were randomised in the online survey. 262 respondents completed this question.

Protecting and improving the environment was the outcome most frequently ranked first (77 respondents) and the lowest average ranking.

Priority outcomes of changes to Local Government	**Average Rank[4] (I.e. 1 = Most Important)**	***Frequency ranked as top priority***
Protecting and improving the environment	2.92	78
Delivering services at the most effective level (i.e. flood management regionally and community facilities locally)	3.13	36
Value for money and efficiencies but not reducing levels of service	3.43	40
Simpler processes and systems (less confusion and administrative replication)	3.87	39
Strong local community representation	4.17	17
Improved levels of service	4.68	16
Relationships that honour Te Tiriti o Waitangi through partnerships with Iwi/ Māori	5.04	14
Lower costs (which might mean reduced levels of service)	5.56	22

Priority outcomes of changes to Local Government (n=262)

[4] Outcomes are listed by average ranking: i.e. adding up all the individual ranking positions and dividing that sum by the total number of responses



Ranking of priority outcomes of changes to Local Government (n=262)

If changing the structure of local government means some communities may pay more for services they rely on, what should councils prioritise?

Respondents could select one of five options. These were randomised in the online survey. 260 respondents completed this question. "Keeping regional services joined up to benefit the whole region" was the most frequently selected priority (128 respondents, 50.39%). Responses to this question suggest that respondents generally placed greater value on maintaining joined-up service delivery than on maximising local control where trade-offs between the two might arise.

What councils should prioritise	Count	Percentage
Keeping regional services joined up to benefit the whole region	131	50.38%
Keeping costs low for each local area	47	18.08%
Sharing costs across the whole region	42	16.15%
Keeping local control, even if it costs more	31	11.92%
Improving service quality, even if costs increase	9	3.46%

What councils should prioritise (n=260)



What councils should prioritise (n=260)

Appendix C: Potential models for the region

Three potential models were presented in the survey, each with a brief description, diagram and key implications to consider. Model one was indicated as the preferred model at present by Bay of Plenty Regional Council.

Respondents were asked for any comments on each model i.e. any advantages or disadvantages. These free text responses have been coded for sentiment (Positive, Negative, Mixed or Neutral). Comments unrelated to the model were coded as neutral. These comments were initially coded by AI and reviewed for accuracy by staff.

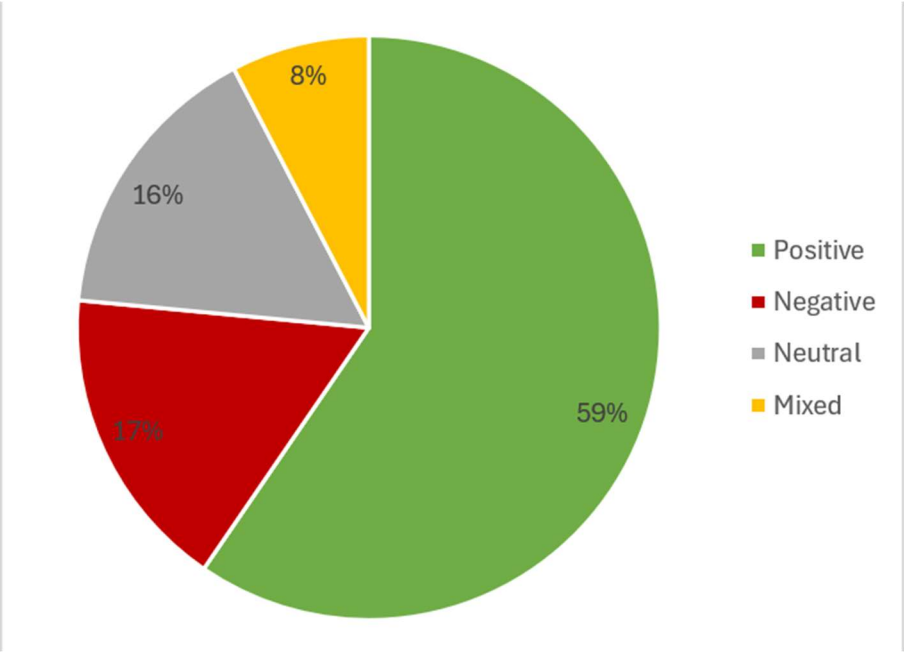
A secondary analysis on themes arising for each model was completed using Copilot and reviewed and validated by staff. General comments that were not material to the models are noted in the graphs for completeness, but not in the commentary. Some respondents gave lengthy answers which received multiple theme tags. These have not been weighted so should be considered indicative only.

Model One: one regional unitary authority

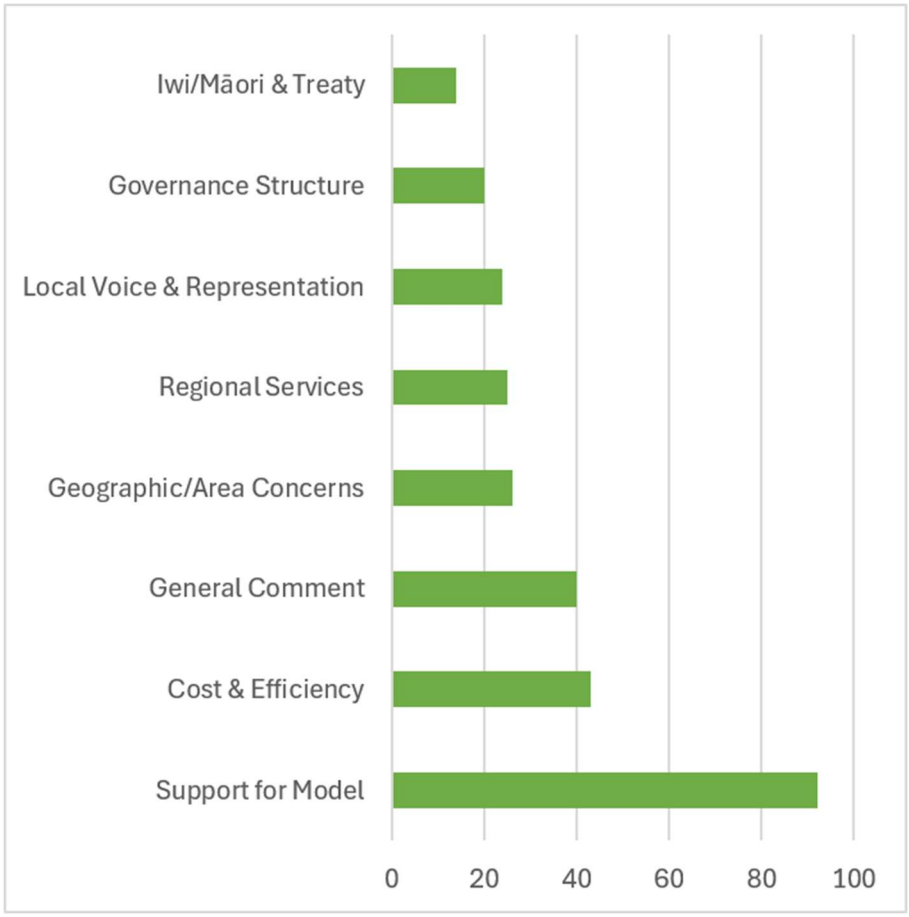
The response to Model One was predominantly positive (59.6% or 109 respondents) followed by negative (16.9% or 31 respondents), neutral (15.9% or 29 respondents) and Mixed (7.7% or 14 respondents).

The most frequent themes arising in response to Model One related to:

- Support for the model (92 comments)
- Cost and efficiency (43 comments)
- Geographic and Area concerns (26 comments)



Sentiment towards Model One (n=183)

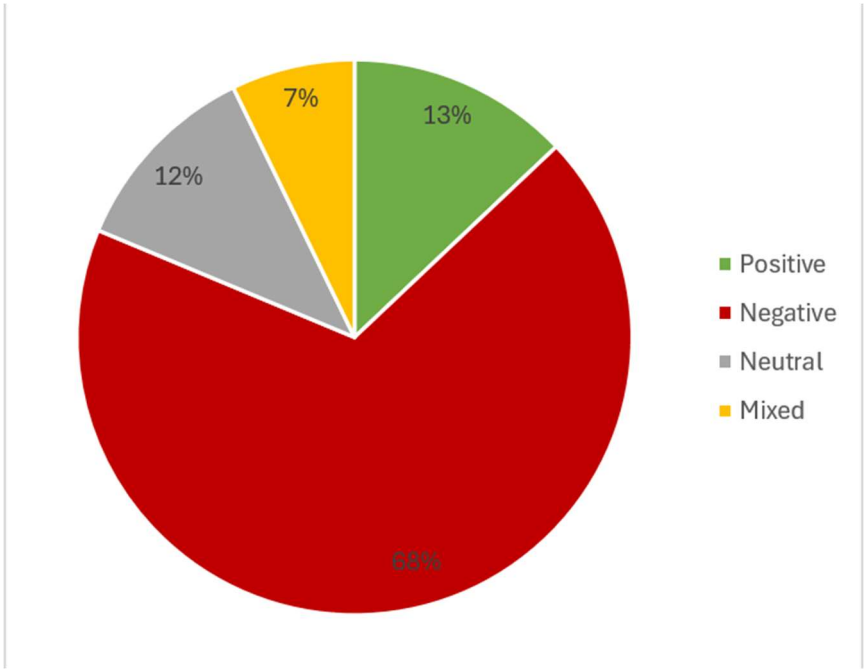


Themes mentioned in comments regarding Model One (n=183)

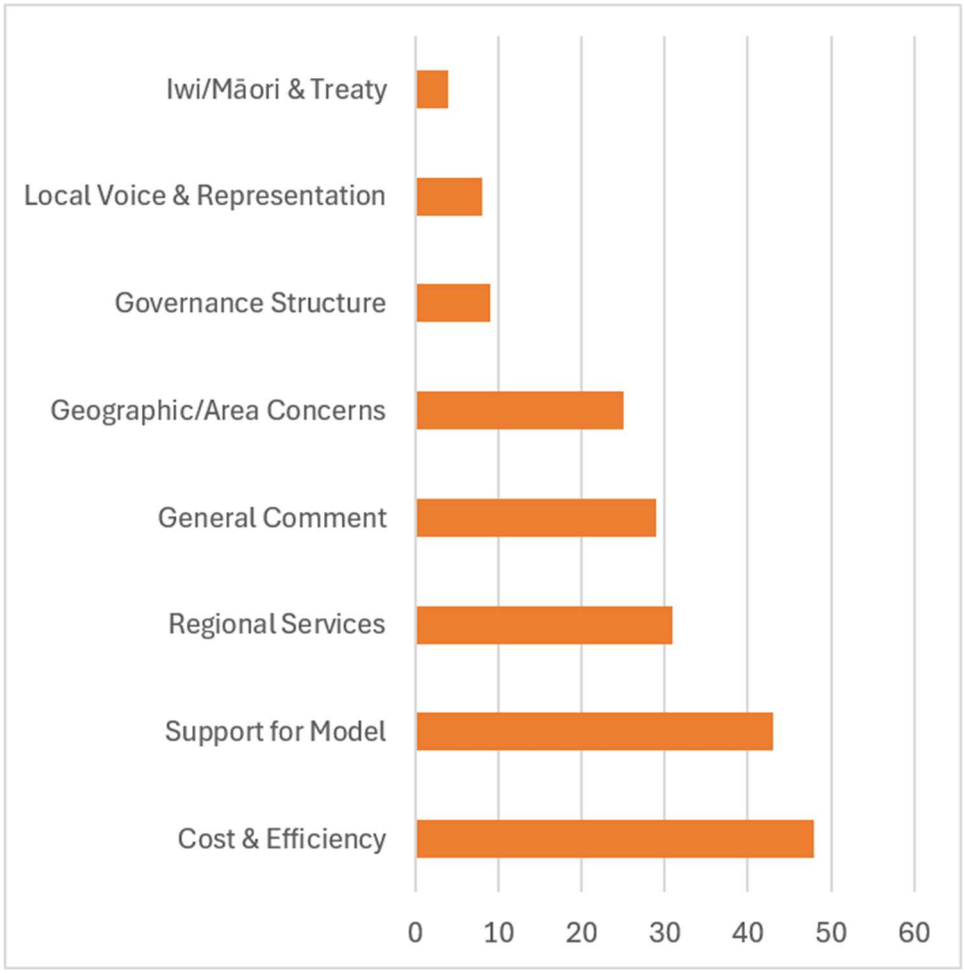
Model Two: three sub-regional unitary authorities

The response to Model Two was predominantly negative (68.4% or 95 respondents) followed by positive (13.0% or 18 respondents), neutral (11.5% or 16 respondents) and mixed (7.2% or ten respondents). The most frequent themes arising in response to Model Two related to:

- Cost and Efficiency (48 comments)
- Support for the model (43 comments)
- Regional Services (31 comments)



Sentiment towards Model Two (n=139)

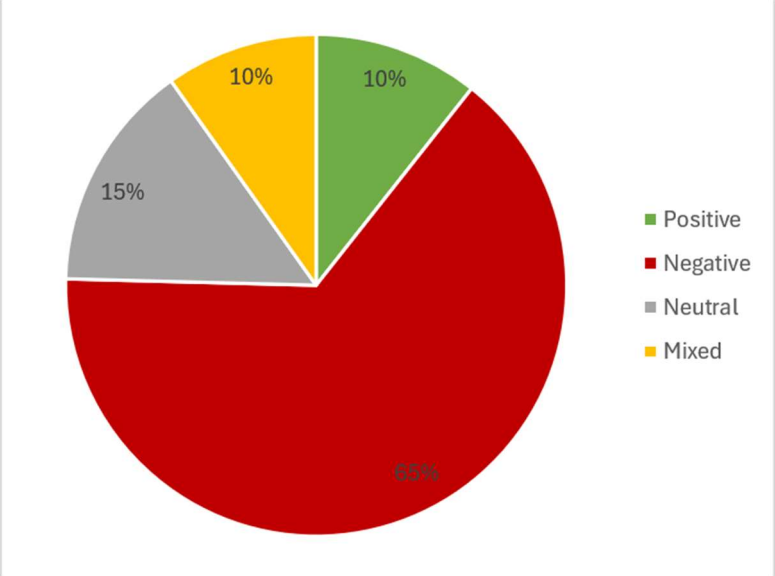


Themes mentioned in comments regarding Model Two (n=139)

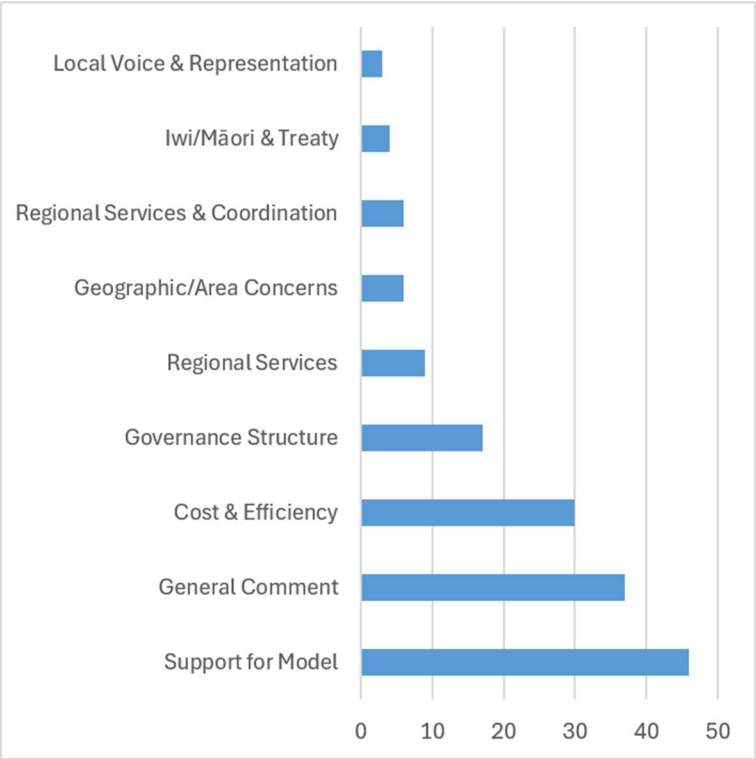
Model Three: three unitary authorities and one regional entity

The response to Model Three was predominantly negative (64.8% or 79 respondents) followed by neutral (14.8% or 18 respondents), positive (10.7% or 13 respondents), and mixed (9.8% or 12 respondents). The most frequent themes arising in response to Model Three related to:

- Support for the model (46 comments)
- Cost and Efficiency (30 comments)
- Governance Structure (17 comments)



Sentiment towards Model Three (n=122)



Themes mentioned in comments regarding Model Three (n=122)

Appendix D: Free text comment on concerns, opportunities and any other matters

The following questions were asked on any concerns, opportunities, or other feedback on the changes to Local Government. These have been analysed with Co-pilot to identify themes based on keywords and then reviewed by staff. While multiple themes could have been attributed to comments, to avoid giving individuals with longer comments more weight in the results, only one theme was attributed to each comment regarding concerns, opportunities and further comments.

Do you have any concerns about the changes to local government and what it means for the regional functions?

162 respondents chose to respond to this question with a comment. *Environmental Protection Concerns* was the most frequent theme (40 responses), followed by *Costs and Rate Impacts* (28) and *No concerns/ Supportive* (24).

Themes arising from concerns about the changes to local government and what it means for the regional functions	**Count**	**% of Responses**
Environment Protection Concerns	40	24.70%
Costs & Rates Impact	28	17.30%
No Concerns / Supportive	24	14.80%
General Concern/Comment	16	9.90%
Governance Structure Concerns	10	6.20%
Loss of Local Voice/Representation	9	5.60%
Service Delivery & Efficiency	8	4.90%
Regional Coordination Concerns	8	4.90%
Process & Timeline Concerns	7	4.30%
Iwi/Māori & Treaty Matters	7	4.30%
Distrust of Government/Process	3	1.90%
Equity & Fairness Concerns	1	0.60%
Preference for Status Quo	1	0.60%
Total	**162**	**100%**

What opportunities do you see about the changes to local government and what it means for the regional functions?

152 respondents chose to respond to this question with a comment. These have been analysed with Co-pilot to identify themes based on keywords and then reviewed by staff. While multiple themes could have been attributed to some comments, to avoid giving individuals with longer comments more weight in the results, only one theme was attributed to each comment

Cost Savings & Efficiency was the most frequent theme (31 responses), followed by *Streamlined Services & Reduced Duplication* (28) and *No Opportunities Seen* (24).

Theme	**Count**	**% of Responses**
Cost Savings & Efficiency	31	20.4%
Streamlined Services & Reduced Duplication	28	18.4%
No Opportunities Seen	19	12.5%
Sceptical / Conditional Support	15	9.9%
Governance Reform & Amalgamation	14	9.2%
Regional Unity & Coordination	12	7.9%
Better Service Delivery	12	7.9%
Environmental Protection Opportunities	11	7.2%
Local Voice & Representation	5	3.3%
Iwi/Māori Representation Concerns	35	3.3%
Total	152	100.0%

Please share any further feedback you have about changes to local government.

98 respondents chose to respond to this question with a comment. These have been analysed with Co-pilot to identify themes based on keywords and then reviewed by staff. While multiple themes could have been attributed to some comments, to avoid giving individuals with longer comments more weight in the results, only one theme was attributed to each comment

Support for Reform was the most frequent theme (17 responses), followed by *Process Concerns (Too Rushed)* and Local Voice & Democracy (11 responses each).

Theme	**Count**	**% of Responses**
Support for Reform	17	17.3%
Process Concerns (Too Rushed)	11	11.2%
Local Voice & Democracy	11	11.2%

Environmental Protection	9	9.2%
Central Government Criticism	9	9.2%
Transparency & Accountability	7	7.1%
Oppose Change / Status Quo	7	7.1%
Regional Unity	6	6.1%
Rates & Cost Concerns	5	5.1%
Iwi/Māori Representation [5]	8	8.2%
General Comments	8	8.2%
Total	**98**	**100.0%**

[5] Includes comments in support and opposition to Māori representation