Simplifying Local Government for Northland

Survey and Community Feedback Report

June 2026

Te Kaunihera o Te Hiku o te Ika
Far North District Council

KAIPARA DISTRICT

Northland REGIONAL COUNCIL
Te Kaunihera ā rohe o Te Taitokerau

Whangarei District Council

Contents

1. Introduction....3
2. Methodology and comparability....3
3. Who we heard from....4
4. Community preferences for future council models....5
5. Potential benefits of local government reorganisation....10
6. Concerns about local government reorganisation....14
7. Protecting local voices....19
8. What matters most to communities....20
9. Additional questions....22
10. What we heard from Māori....26
11. Conclusion....28

1. Introduction

Across May and June 2026, all four Northland councils invited their communities to share their views on the future of local government in the region. The surveys were designed to help shape the evidence base for exploring potential options for local government reorganisation under the Head Start for Simplifying Local Government pathway.

This report presents a snapshot of community feedback – it is not intended to be a statistically representative picture of Northland's population. What it provides is meaningful evidence, drawn from a substantial number of responses across all four councils, to be considered alongside other information when looking at the options for the future of local government in Northland.

2. Methodology and comparability

Far North District Council ran two separate surveys – the first across two periods, opening in May and reopening in June, and the second running in June only. All other councils ran one survey each, all closing on 24 June.

Council	Open	Close
Far North District Council Survey 1 (Period 1)	21 May	31 May
Far North District Council Survey 1 (Period 2)	16 June	24 June
Far North District Council Survey 2	16 June	24 June
Kaipara District Council	10 June	24 June
Whangarei District Council	11 June	24 June
Northland Regional Council	11 June	24 June

The surveys were available online through each council's website. A small number of responses were also collected through printed surveys submitted in written form or via email.

Each survey was built from a shared foundation of questions covering the same core topics: community preferences for future council structures and the potential benefits and concerns of local government reorganisation. Each council then tailored its survey to reflect the needs and priorities of its own community, which included both adapting the wording of shared questions and adding new questions unique to that council. This means there was some variation across surveys, including in the way questions were worded, the options people were given to choose from, and the topics covered.

Where these differences allow a genuine comparison, it is shown in the relevant sections of this report. Where they don't, each council's results are presented on their own. Despite these variations, the surveys produced strong comparability across several key themes, and where direct comparison isn't possible, the results still offer meaningful and complementary insights when read alongside each other.

Several questions across the surveys also invited people to write in their own words – either through open-ended questions or through an "Other" option. These responses have been read and grouped into themes, and the key patterns are surfaced throughout this report. Together, the survey responses and written commentary provide a rich picture of community views from across the region.

3. Who we heard from

Across the four councils, 2,305 survey responses were received. Whangarei District Council received 673 responses, Far North District Council received 611 responses to its first survey and 472 to its second survey, Kaipara District Council received 263 responses, and Northland Regional Council received 286 responses.

Both Far North District Council's and Kaipara District Council's surveys included a way for respondents to identify as responding on behalf of an organisation.

Across these surveys, 110 organisations were identified, of which 43 were Māori organisations, including marae, hapū, iwi, and Māori trusts.

Chart 1

2,305 responses

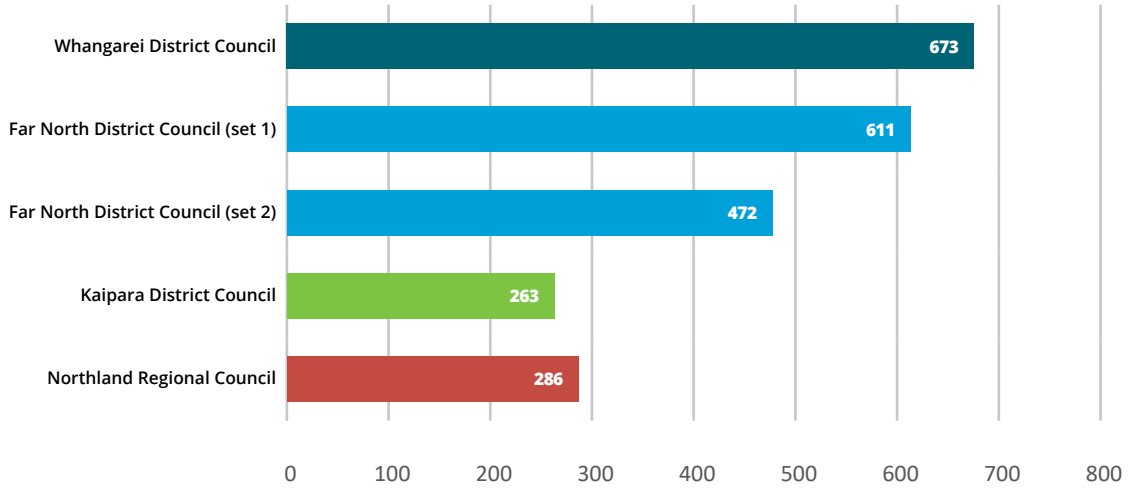


Chart 2

110 responses

4. Community preferences for future council models

The three district councils asked their communities about their preference for the future shape of local government in Northland, though they went about it differently.

Whangarei District Council asked one question about preferences for future council arrangements. Far North District Council asked two separate questions – the first asking whether respondents supported or opposed councils changing or combining, and the second asking people to choose between specific models. Kaipara District Council also took a broader approach, asking three separate questions that together build a picture of where its community stands.

The way each council framed its question varied – both in wording and in the number of options people could choose. Kaipara District Council's main question allowed people to choose more than one option, while Whangarei District Council's and Far North District Council's equivalent questions allowed only one choice each. Because of these differences, this section looks at each council's results first, then identifies where a like-for-like comparison can be made across councils.

Northland Regional Council didn't ask people about the specific structure of any future local government reorganisation.

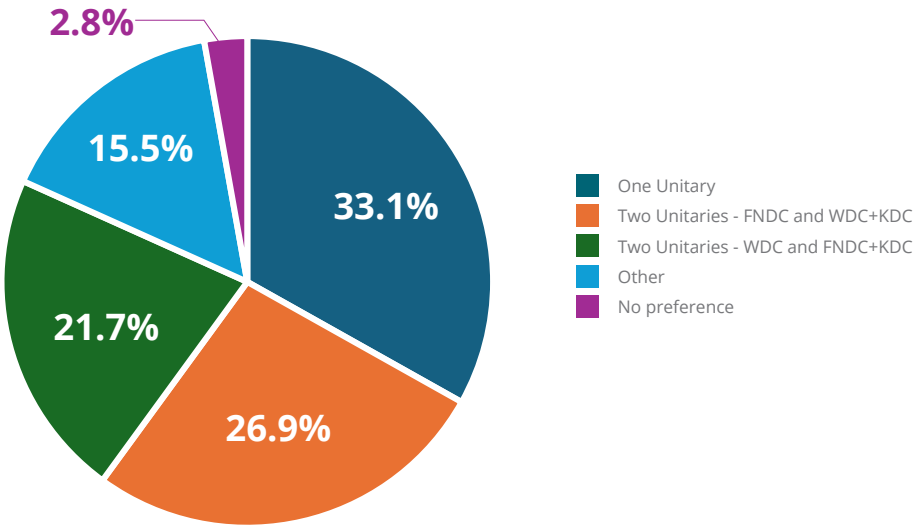
Individual council results

Whangarei District Council

Do you have a preference for the number of councils in Northland?

Chart 3

673 responses

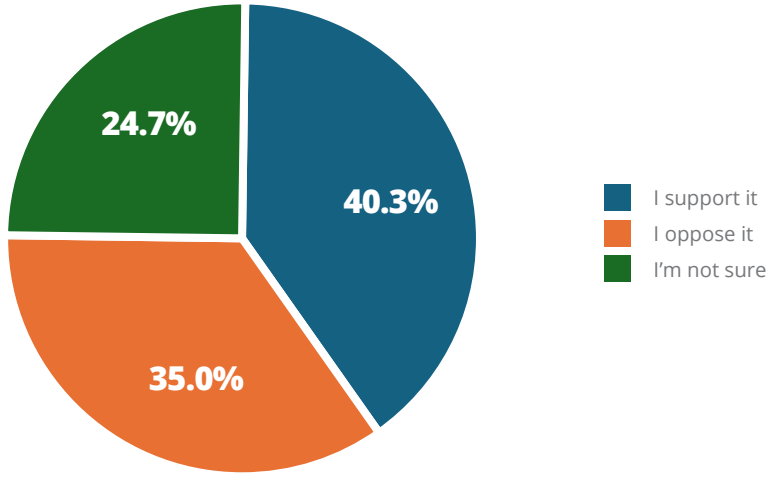


Far North District Council survey 1

What do you think of Government plans to change or combine Northland councils?

Chart 4

611 responses

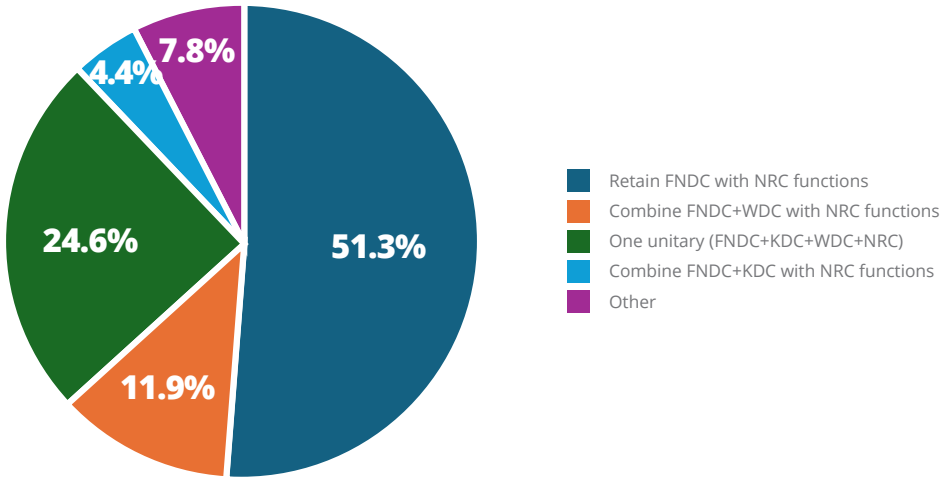


Far North District Council survey 2

If councils combine in Northland, which would you prefer?

Chart 5

472 responses

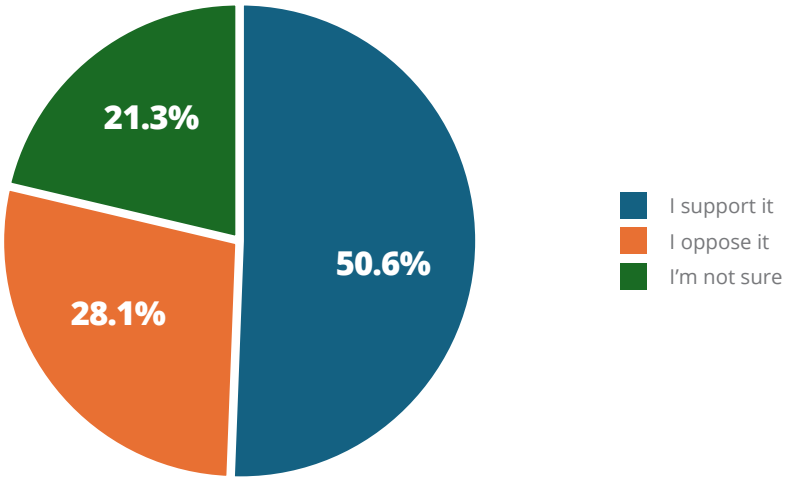


Kaipara District Council

Do you support the removal of regional councils?

Chart 6

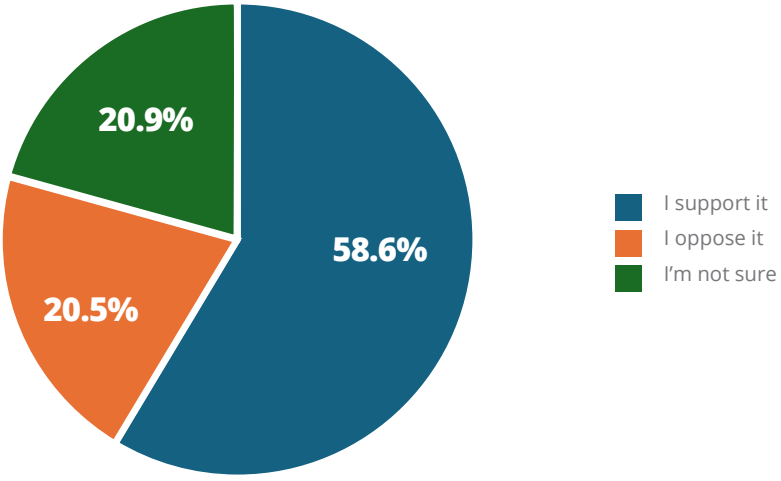
263 responses



Do you support transferring regional council functions to the district councils (making them into unitary authorities)?

Chart 7

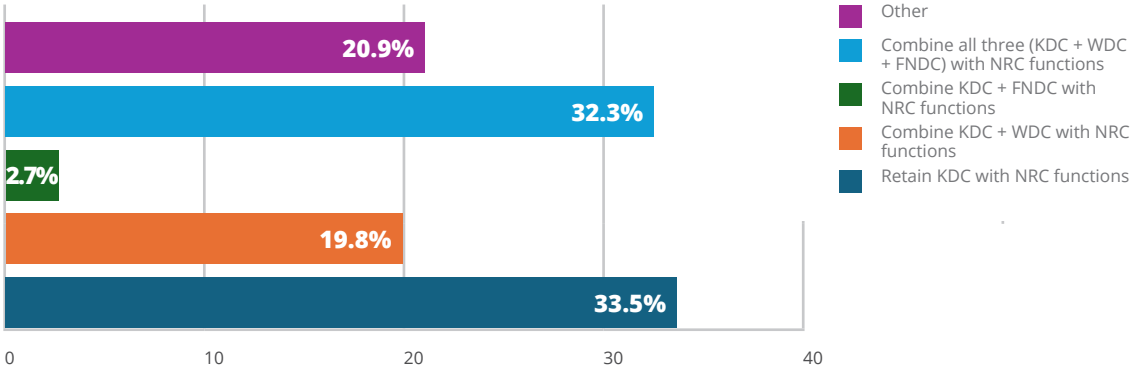
263 responses



*If councils change in Northland, which scenario would you prefer?**

Chart 8

263 responses



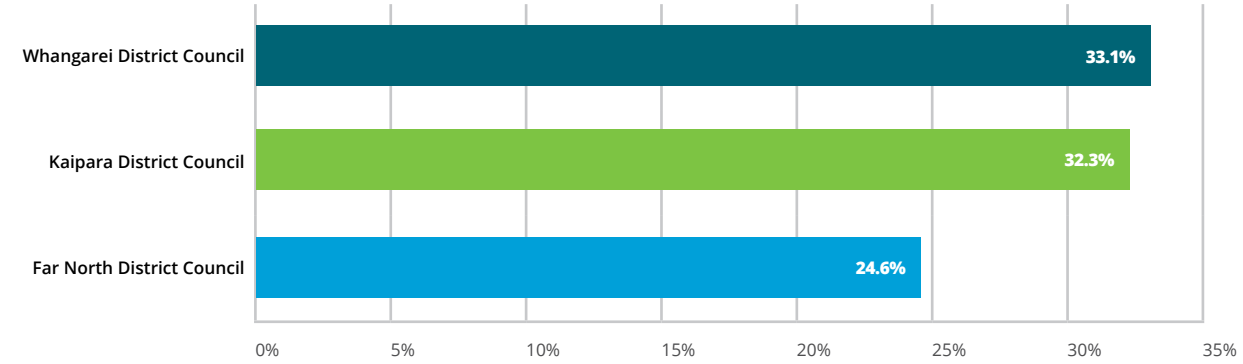
*Respondents could select more than one option on this question. Because of this, percentages do not sum to 100%.

Comparing across councils

Because each council used different wording in their questions about future council options, an exact like-for-like comparison across all questions isn't possible. Where a useful comparison can be made, it is set out below. Charts 9-13 show the percentage of responses that supported that option.

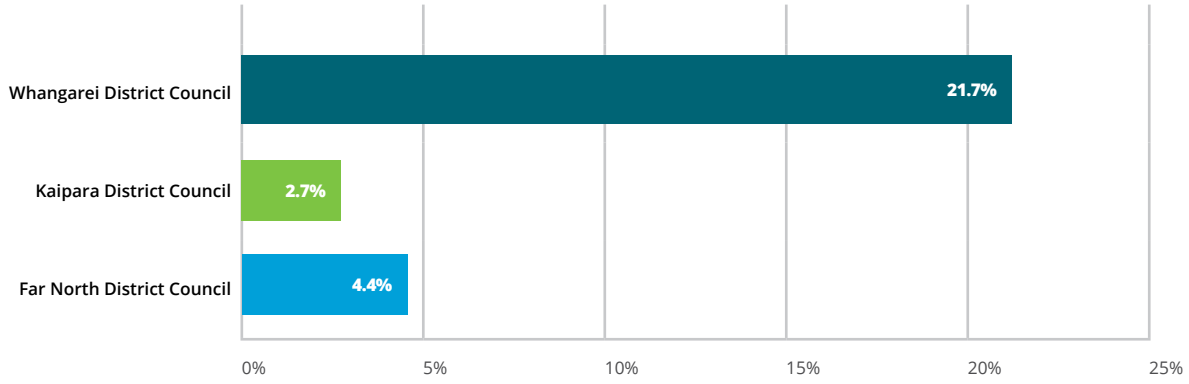
Percentage of responses that support a single Northland-wide unitary authority

Chart 9



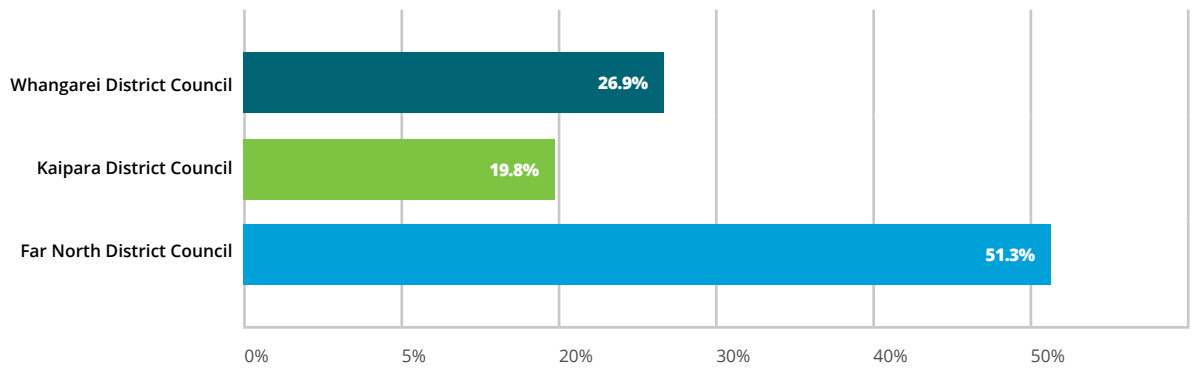
Percentage of responses that support WDC alone; FNDC and KDC combined

Chart 10



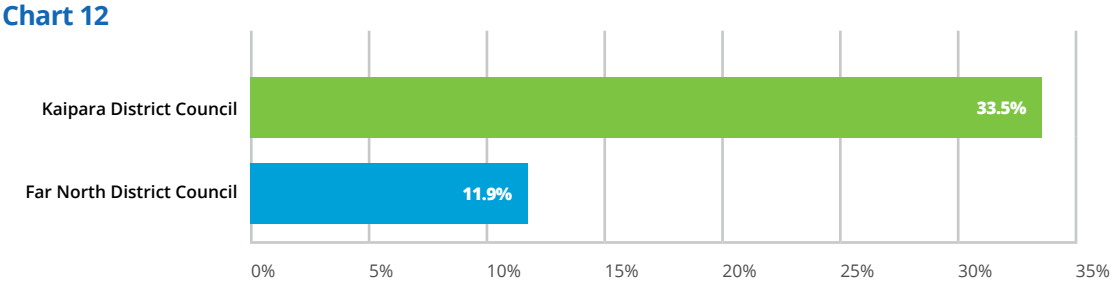
Percentage of responses that support FNDC alone; WDC and KDC combined

Chart 11



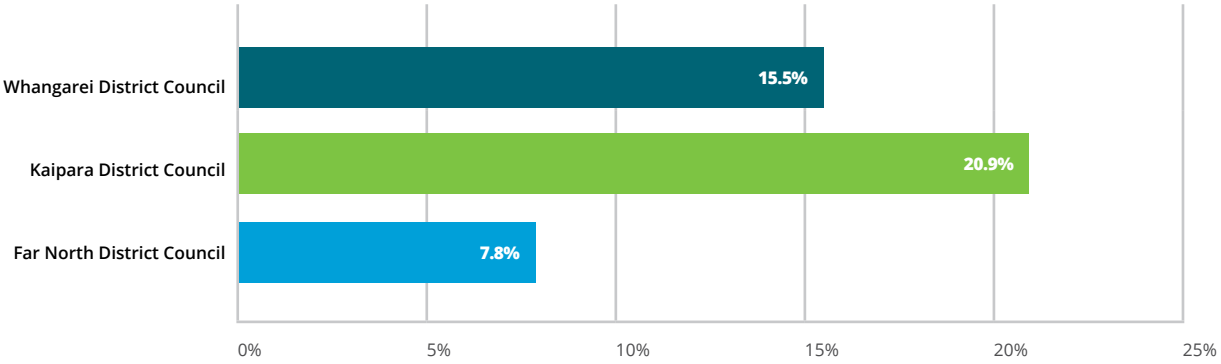
Percentage of responses that support KDC alone; WDC and FNDC combined

Chart 12



"Other" response rate by council

Chart 13



What people wrote in their own words

Among Whangarei District Council respondents who selected "Other" (15.5%), the most consistent message was a preference for no change at all, expressed by over half of this group. A smaller number proposed combinations of councils not offered in the survey's option list, and a handful argued for retaining all three district councils separately while folding Northland Regional Council's functions into each.

Far North District Council's "Other" responses (7.8%) were more evenly spread. The largest single theme was a preference for no change.

Kaipara District Council's "Other" responses (20.9%) included a distinct theme not seen elsewhere: a number of Mangawhai and Kaiwaka residents expressing a preference to join Auckland or the former Rodney district. A small number of respondents also argued for retaining all three district councils separately while folding Northland Regional Council's functions into each.

Key findings

1. In every council, more people support some form of two-council arrangement than support one single council covering all of Northland – even though respondents don't agree on which two councils should pair up.
2. Across all three councils, only one option cleared 50%: Far North District Council residents backing Far North District Council staying on its own and taking over Northland Regional Council's regional functions, at 51.3%.
3. Support for a single council covering all of Northland is fairly consistent across the region, sitting between roughly a quarter and a third of respondents in every council. (Far North District Council 24.6%, Kaipara District Council 32.3%, Whangarei District Council 33.1%)
4. Kaipara District Council respondents are almost evenly split between staying on its own and joining a single council for Northland, at 33.5% and 32.3% respectively.

5. Potential benefits of local government reorganisation

Across all four councils, respondents were asked about the potential benefits of local government reorganisation, though each council framed the question differently and offered different options to choose from. Despite this, several genuine areas of shared priority emerge, particularly around cost savings, simplicity, and reduced duplication.

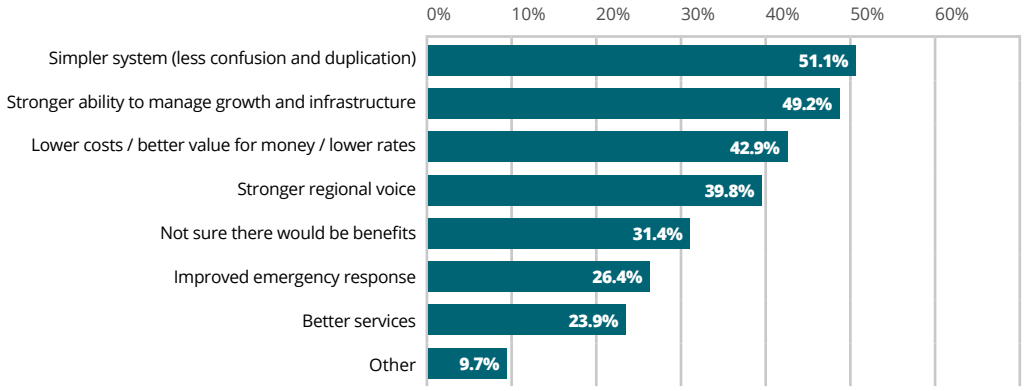
Individual council results

Whangarei District Council

What do you think would be the benefits of having one or two councils for Northland / Te Tai Tokerau?

Chart 14

673 responses

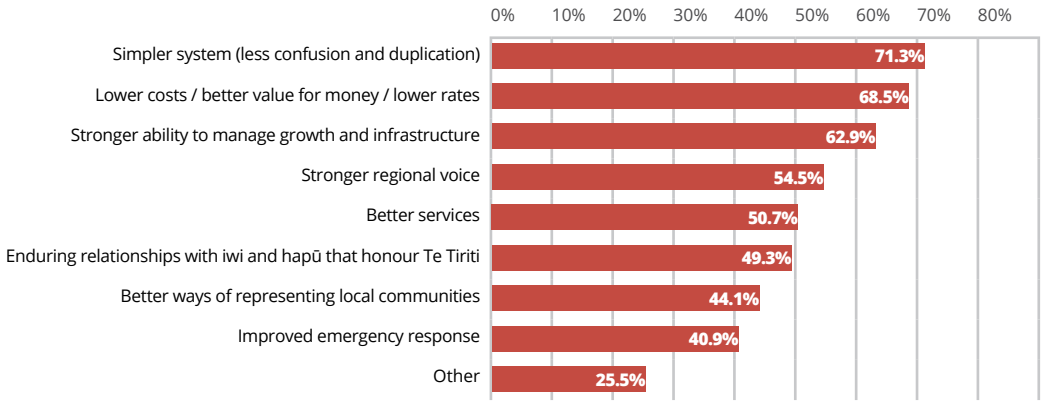


Northland Regional Council

What benefits would you like to see from having fewer councils in Northland / Taitokerau?

Chart 15

286 responses

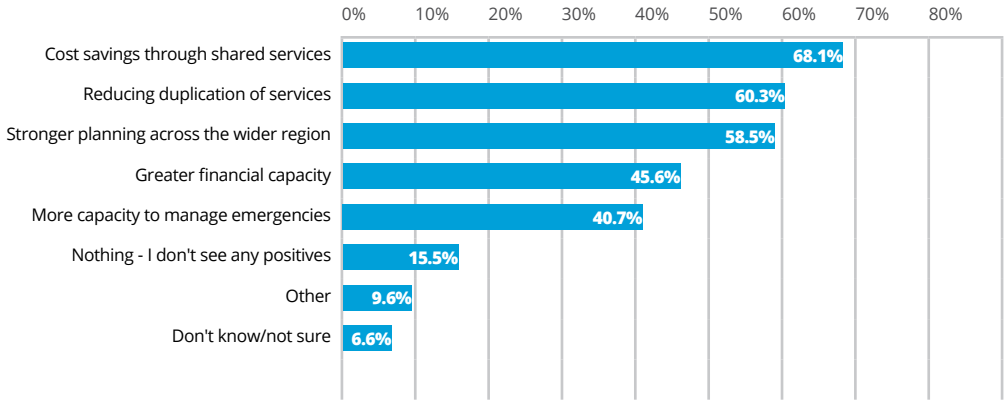


Far North District Council

What positive changes or opportunities could come from councils working differently across Northland?

Chart 16

605 responses

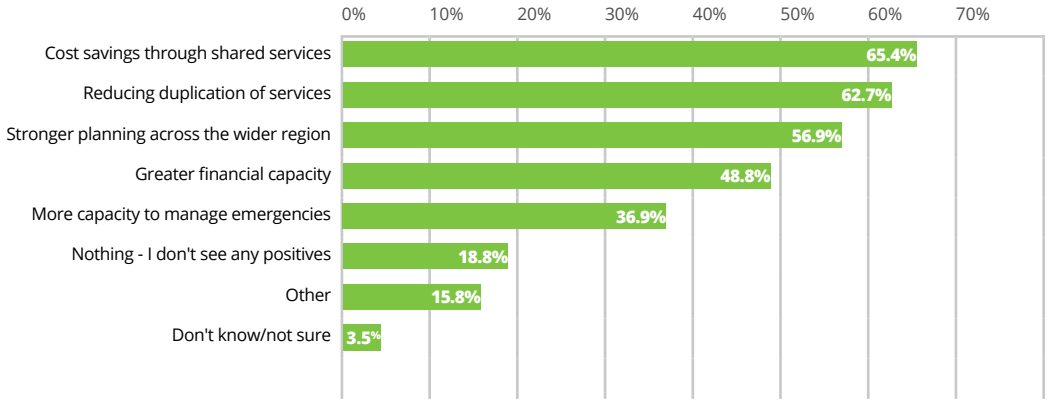


Kaipara District Council

What positive changes or opportunities could come from councils working differently across Northland?

Chart 17

260 responses

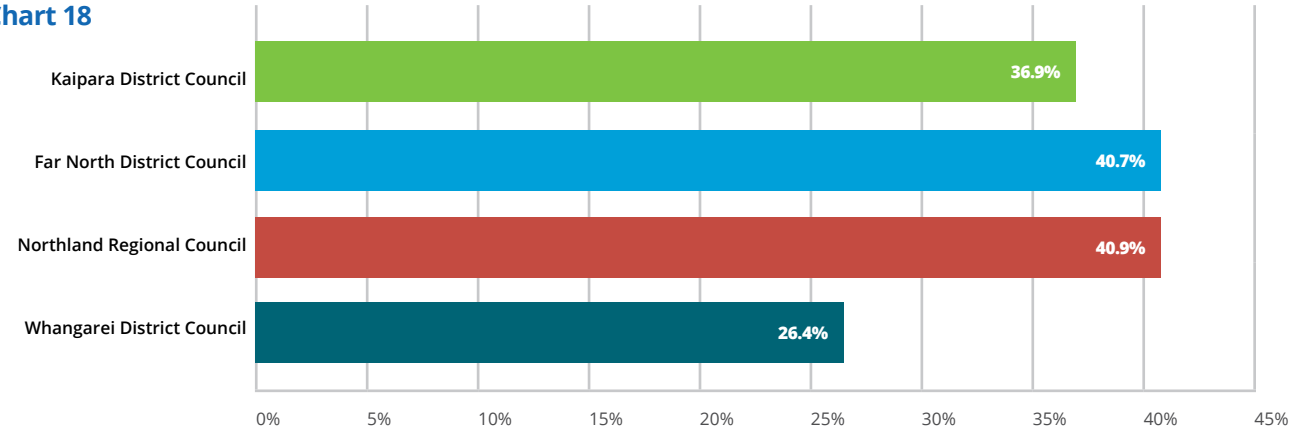


Comparing across councils

Because councils used different wording in their questions about potential benefits, a true comparison across all questions isn't possible. Where it is, these are set out below.

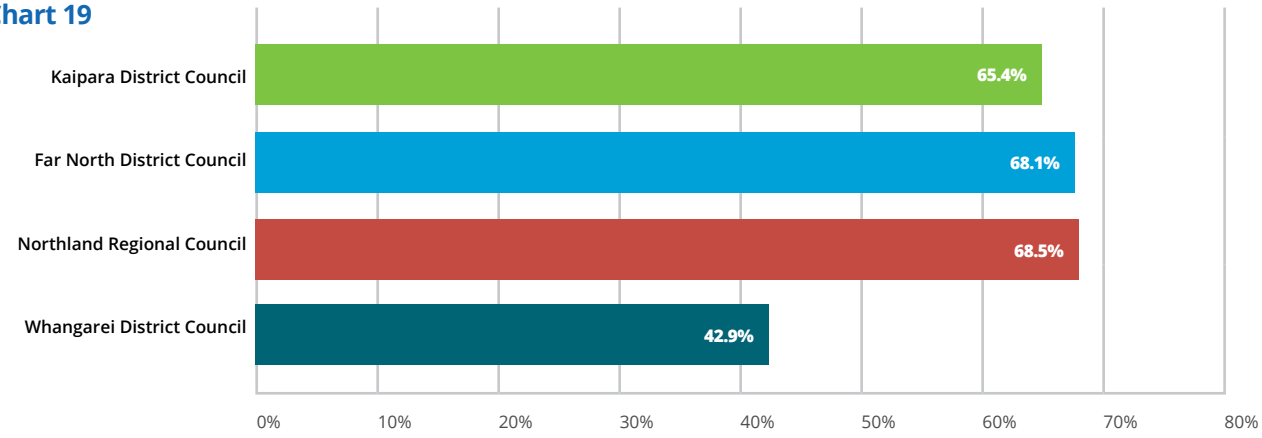
Responses that identified emergency response and capacity as benefits

Chart 18



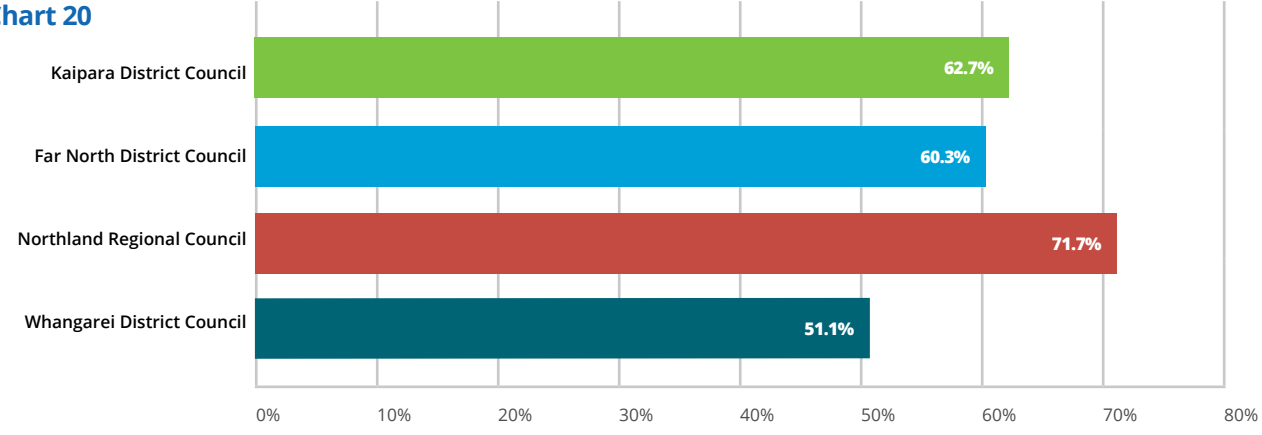
Responses that identified lower costs and savings as benefits

Chart 19



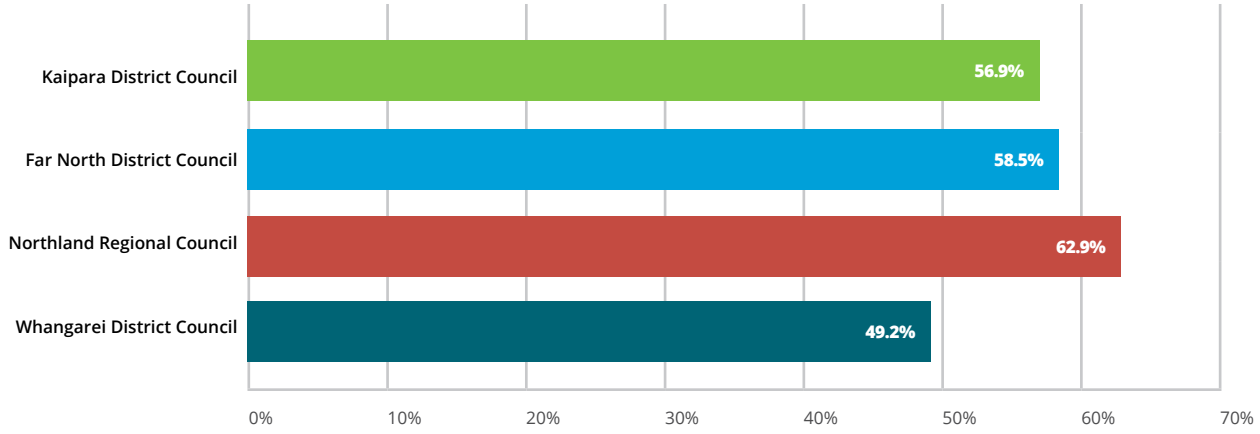
Responses that identified a simpler system and less duplication as benefits

Chart 20



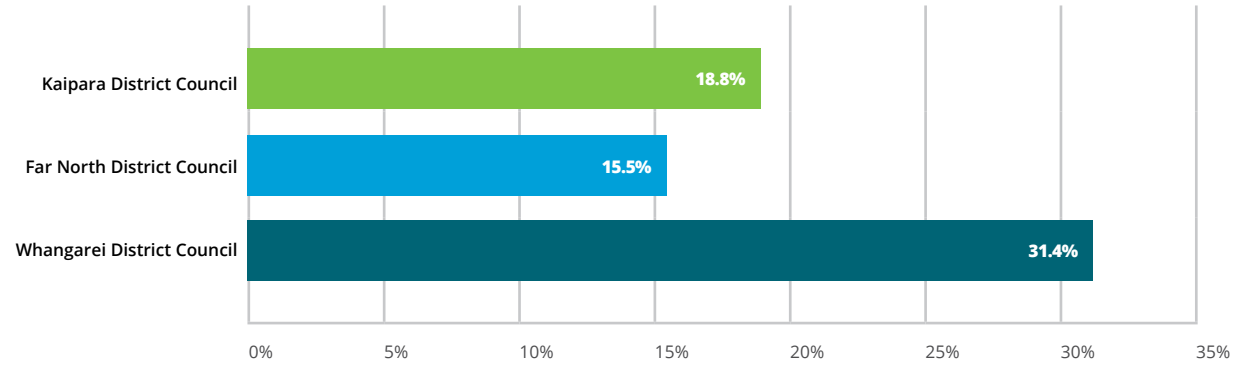
Responses that identified growth, infrastructure and planning as benefits

Chart 21



Responses that did not identify or were not sure if there would be any benefits

Chart 22



What people wrote in their own words

Among Whangarei District Council respondents who chose "Other" (9.7%), almost half did not believe any benefit would result at all. Cost and rates concerns, including fears about subsidising other parts of the region, were the next most common theme.

Far North District Council's responses (9.6%) were more varied, with uncertainty about whether changes would deliver real benefits, calls for better staffing and leadership, and cost concerns all featuring. Some welcomed stronger iwi and hapū involvement as a genuine benefit.

Kaipara District Council's responses (15.8%) raised similar themes around uncertainty that changes would deliver real benefits, and calls for greater consistency, standardisation, and stronger leadership.

Northland Regional Council's responses were higher than the other three councils, with almost a fifth of respondents (17.1%) writing in their own answer. Environmental protection and cost concerns featured strongly, alongside substantial commentary on the benefits of enduring iwi and hapū relationships that honour the Treaty of Waitangi.

Key findings

1. Cost savings and a simpler, less duplicated system are the two perceived benefits ranked most highly across all four councils. Stronger ability to manage growth, infrastructure, and regional planning is consistently the next priority across all four.
2. A stronger regional voice and better services were rated highly by respondents in both Whangarei District Council (39.8%) and Northland Regional Council (54.5%), where they were offered as options.
3. Enduring relationships with iwi and hapū that honour the Treaty of Waitangi is a genuine, standalone benefit identified by Northland Regional Council respondents, and echoed in written responses from Far North District Council respondents as well.
4. Uncertainty about whether any benefit will be delivered is itself a significant finding, most pronounced in Whangarei District Council, where close to a third of respondents said they weren't sure there would be any benefit at all.

6. Concerns about local government reorganisation

All four councils asked their communities about their concerns, though each framed the question in its own way. Despite these differences, several genuine areas of shared concern emerge across all four councils, particularly around local voice, access to elected representatives, and doubts about whether promised cost savings will materialise.

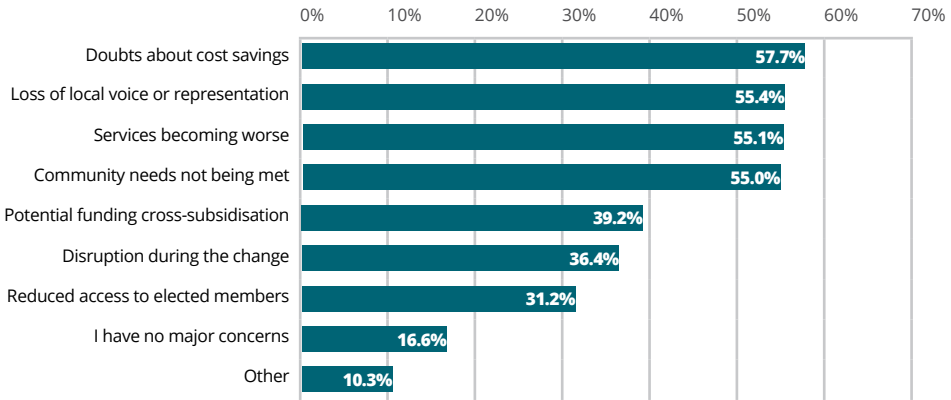
Individual council results

Whangarei District Council

What concerns do you have about moving to one or two councils?

Chart 23

673 responses

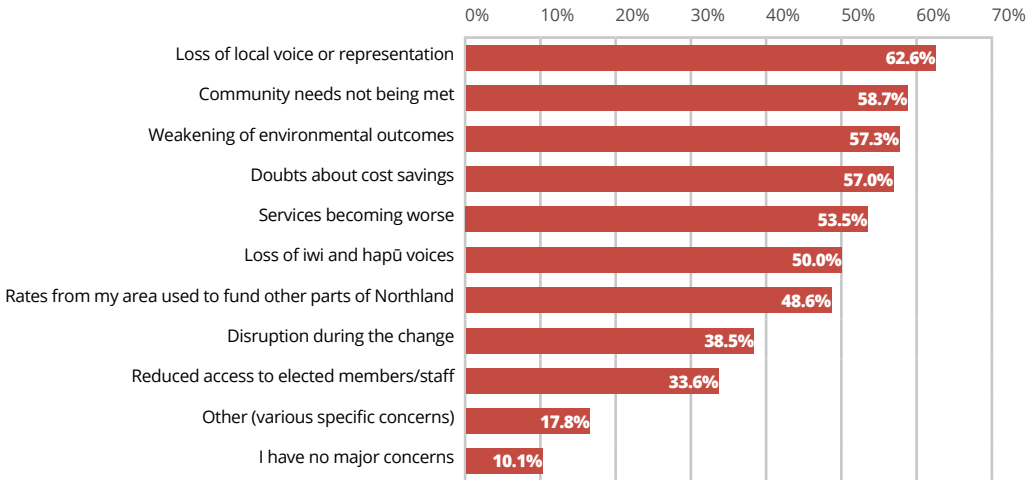


Northland Regional Council

What concerns do you have about having fewer councils?

Chart 24

286 responses

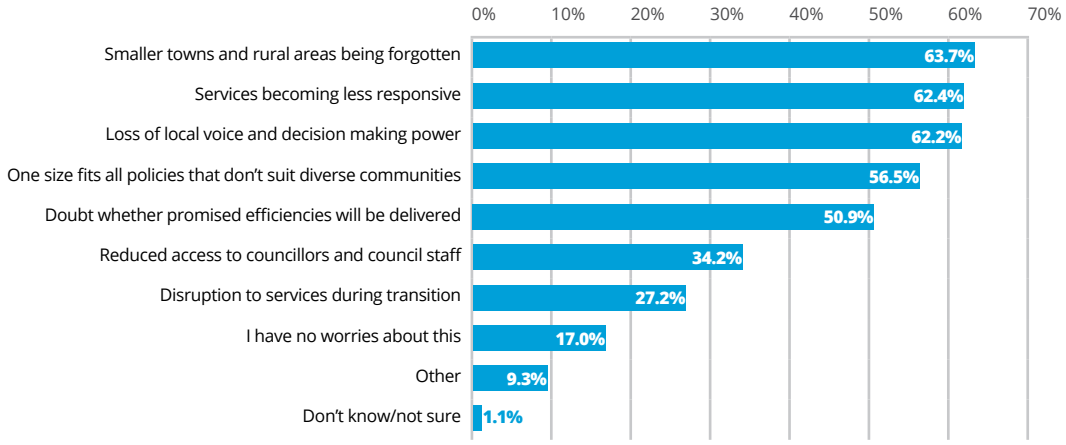


Far North District Council

What worries or concerns do you have about councils changing or combining in Northland?

Chart 25

611 responses

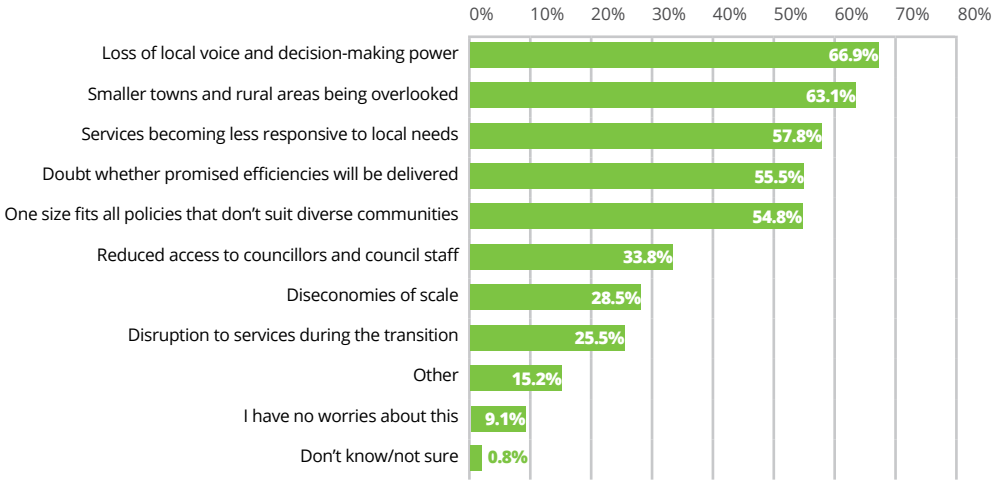


Kaipara District Council

What worries or concerns do you have about councils changing or combining in Northland?

Chart 26

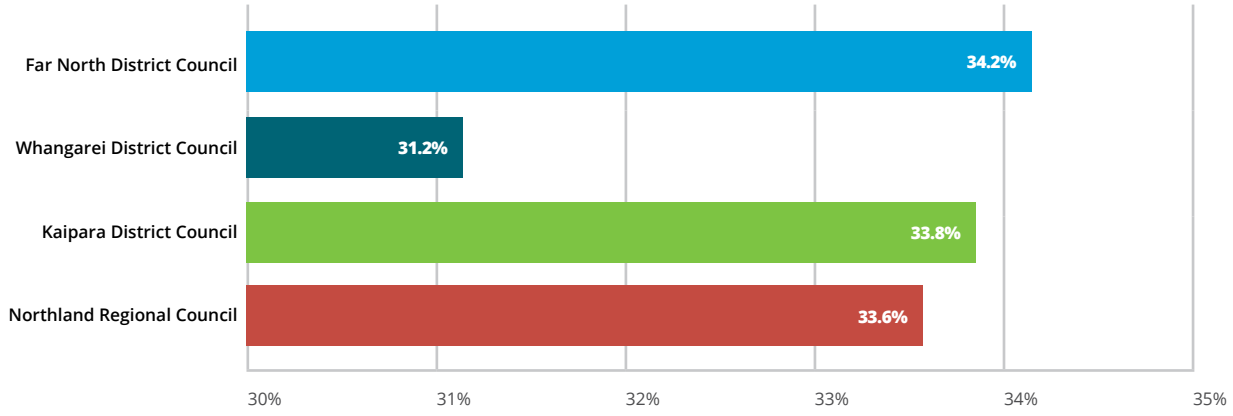
263 responses



Comparing across councils

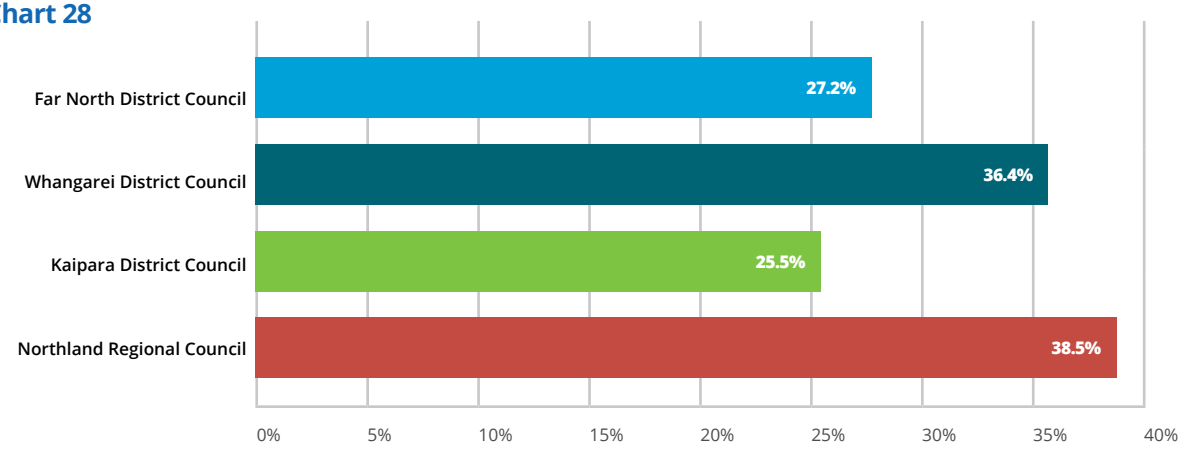
Responses that identified reduced access to councillors and council staff as a concern

Chart 27



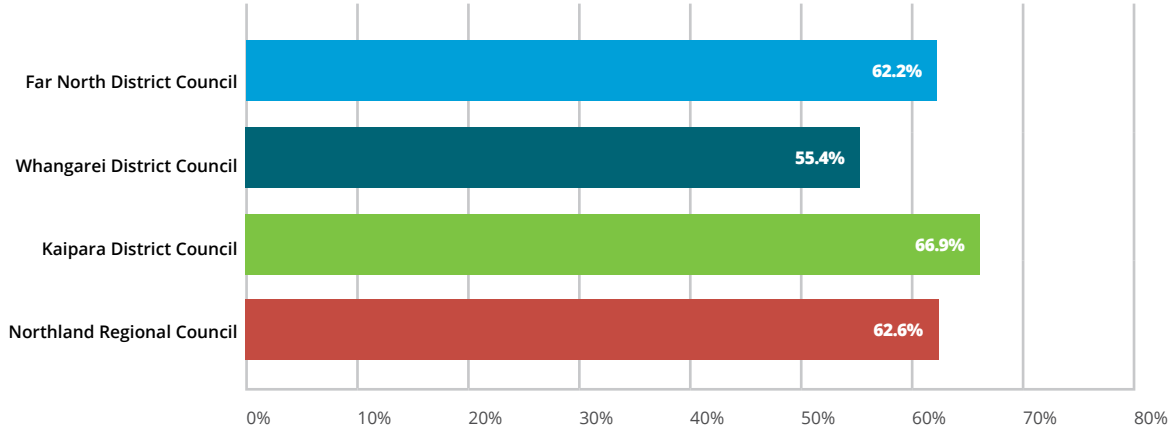
Responses that identified disruption duruing the transition as a concern

Chart 28



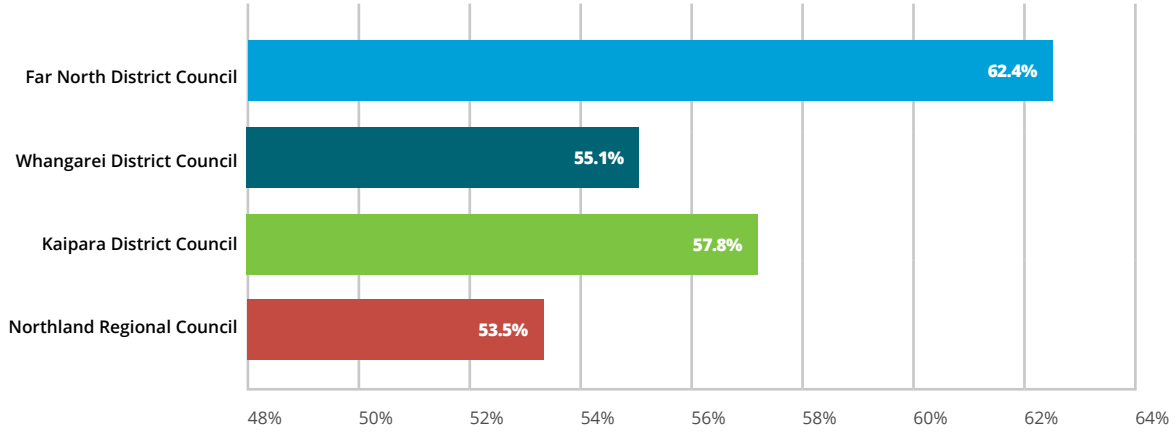
Responses that identified loss of local voice and decision-making power as a concern

Chart 29



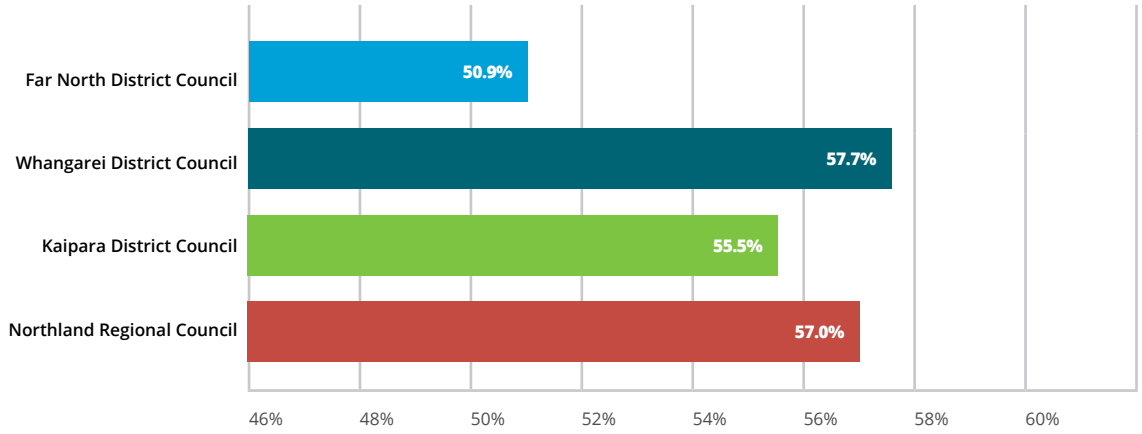
Responses that identified services become less responsive or worse as a concern

Chart 30



Responses that identified doubts about whether promised efficiencies and cost savings will be delivered as a concern

Chart 31



What people wrote in their own words

Among Whangarei District Council respondents who chose "Other" (10.3%), the most distinctive theme was a fear that ratepayers in one part of Northland could end up funding the costs or shortfalls of another. Smaller numbers raised concerns about the role of the Treaty of Waitangi, merging IT and administrative systems, and job losses.

Far North District Council's written responses (9.3%) were dominated by concern that rural and smaller communities would be overlooked in a larger structure. Alongside this, a similarly sized group raised concerns about the protection of Māori, iwi, and hapū voices and the honouring of the Treaty of Waitangi in any new structure.

Kaipara District Council's written responses (15.2%) raised concerns broadly similar to Far North District Council's around rural and smaller communities being overlooked, though in smaller numbers. Views on Māori and iwi involvement in council decision-making were also present, with most expressing a preference for elected-only representation.

Northland Regional Council's written responses (17.8%) raised concerns about smaller communities being overlooked, alongside concerns about cost and rates equity across the region.

Key findings

1. Doubts about whether promised cost savings or efficiencies will actually materialise are consistently high across all four councils, reflecting a widespread concern about the financial case for local government reorganisation.
2. Loss of local voice or decision-making power is consistently one of the highest-ranked concerns across all four councils, reflecting a strong and shared unease about what changes to local government could mean for communities' ability to influence decisions that affect them.
3. Small town and rural areas being overlooked is among the highest-ranked concerns in both Far North District Council and Kaipara District Council, the two councils whose surveys included it as an option.

7. Protecting local voices

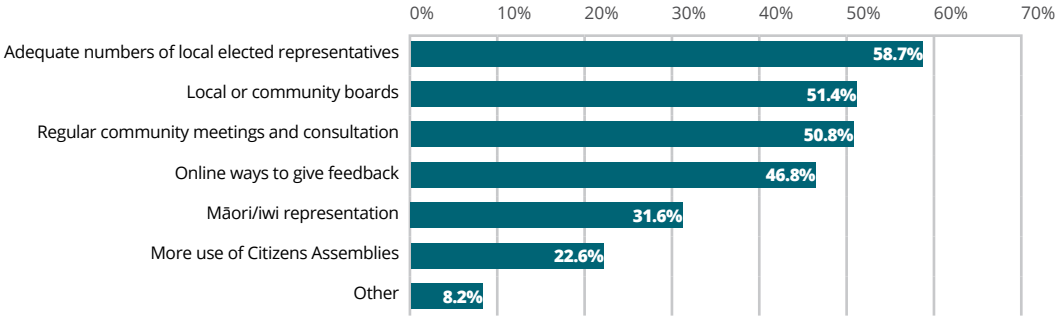
Whangarei District Council and Northland Regional Council each asked their communities directly how local voices should be protected if Northland moves to fewer councils.

Whangarei District Council

If Northland moves to one or two councils, how should local voices be protected?

Chart 32

673 responses

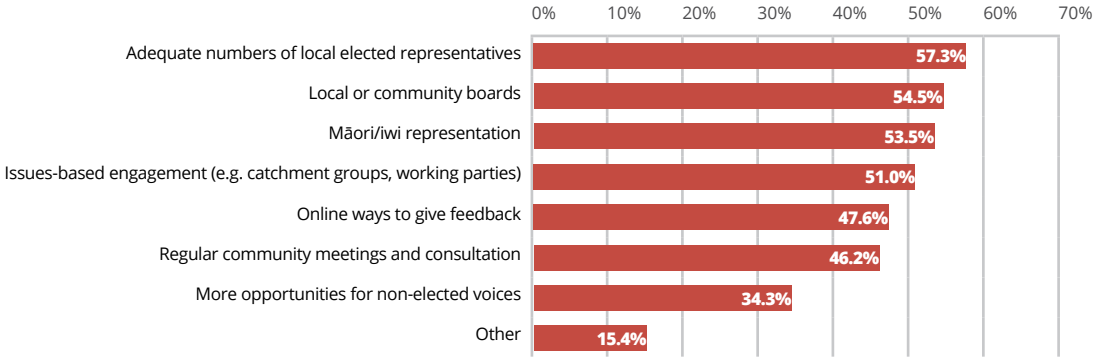


Northland Regional Council

If Northland has fewer councils, how should local voices be protected?

Chart 33

286 responses



Key findings

1. Across both councils, adequate numbers of elected members and local or community boards were the most favoured ways of protecting local voices.
2. The clearest difference between the two councils is on Māori and iwi representation. Northland Regional Council respondents rated it considerably more highly as a protection mechanism, at 53.5%, compared to 31.6% in Whangarei District Council.

8. What matters most to communities

All four councils asked their communities what matters most if local government in Northland changes. Far North District Council and Kaipara District Council offered a list of options to choose from, while Whangarei District Council and Northland Regional Council asked the question as open-ended free text.

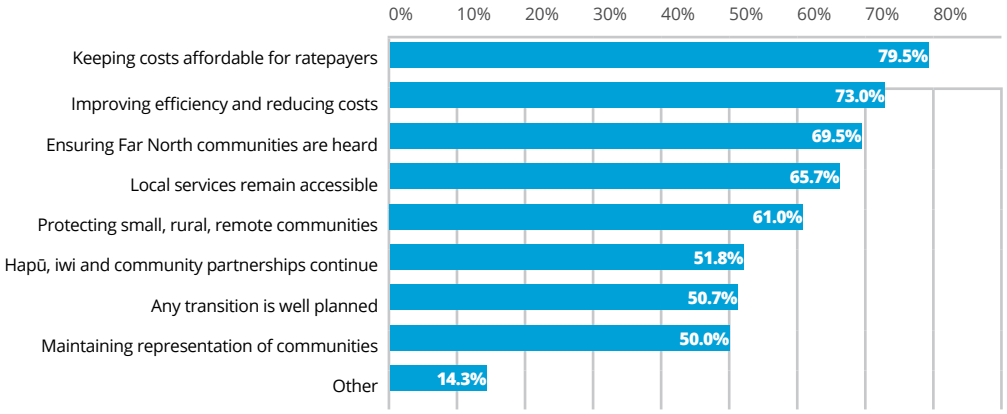
Individual council results

Far North District Council

If these plans go ahead, what are the most important things that should be protected or focused on?

Chart 34

610 responses

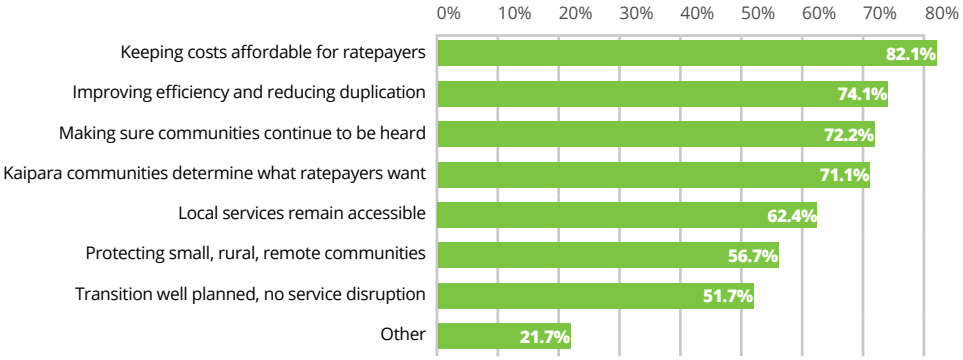


Kaipara District Council

If plans to reform local government go ahead, what are the most important things that should be protected or focused on?

Chart 35

263 responses



What people wrote in their own words

Far North District Council's written responses (14.3%) featured environmental protection as a strong theme, with respondents raising biosecurity, biodiversity, coastal management, and natural hazards. Views on Māori and Treaty-related representation also appeared, with most calling for Māori wards and hapū and iwi voice to be protected in any new structure, and a small number expressing a preference for representation based solely on election.

Kaipara District Council's responses (21.7%) were dominated by environmental protection concerns – particularly freshwater management, pest control, and ensuring environmental mandates are not weakened. Debt and rates anxiety ran alongside this, with a number of respondents specifically worried about inheriting other councils' debt.

Whangarei District Council's 669 written responses were threaded through with cost, rates, and value for money concerns – many respondents specifically worried about ending up paying for other parts of the region's costs or debts. Maintaining local services and infrastructure without disruption was a recurring theme, alongside a strong desire for decisions to remain with elected representatives. A small number of responses touched on Māori and Treaty-related representation, with some calling for it to be strengthened and others preferring representation based solely on election.

Northland Regional Council's 286 written responses were notably focused on environmental protection, with many concerned that a merged structure could weaken environmental monitoring, climate resilience, and natural resource management. Cost and rates featured strongly, often tied to concerns about one district's ratepayers subsidising another, and community representation – particularly for rural, remote, and Māori communities – ran as a consistent thread throughout.

Key findings

1. Costs and rates are the single most consistent finding across all four councils, appearing as a top priority whether respondents chose from a list or wrote in their own words.
2. Environmental protection emerges as a significant and distinct priority, most strongly in Northland Regional Council, but present across all four councils.
3. Local voice and community representation runs through every council's results – as a top priority in both Far North District Council and Kaipara District Council's results, and a recurring theme in Whangarei District Council and Northland Regional Council's responses, particularly around concerns that smaller and rural communities could be left with less of a say.
4. Hapū, iwi and community partnerships appeared as a listed answer in Far North District Council's survey at 51.8%, and featured in written responses across all four councils. Across the region, views ranged from strong calls for Māori and hapū voice to be protected and embedded in any new structure, to a preference for representation based solely on election.

9. Additional questions

This section covers questions asked by individual councils that weren't part of the earlier sections of this report. Where two councils asked the same question, their results are shown together.

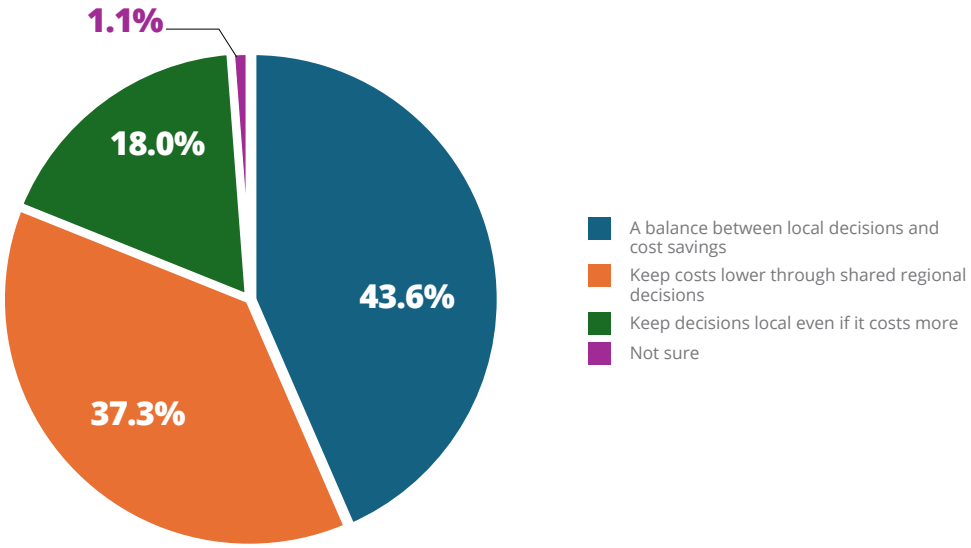
Far North District Council

Far North District Council asked its community two further questions about how to balance local decision-making against cost and regional efficiency.

If keeping decisions local costs more, what would you prefer?

Chart 36

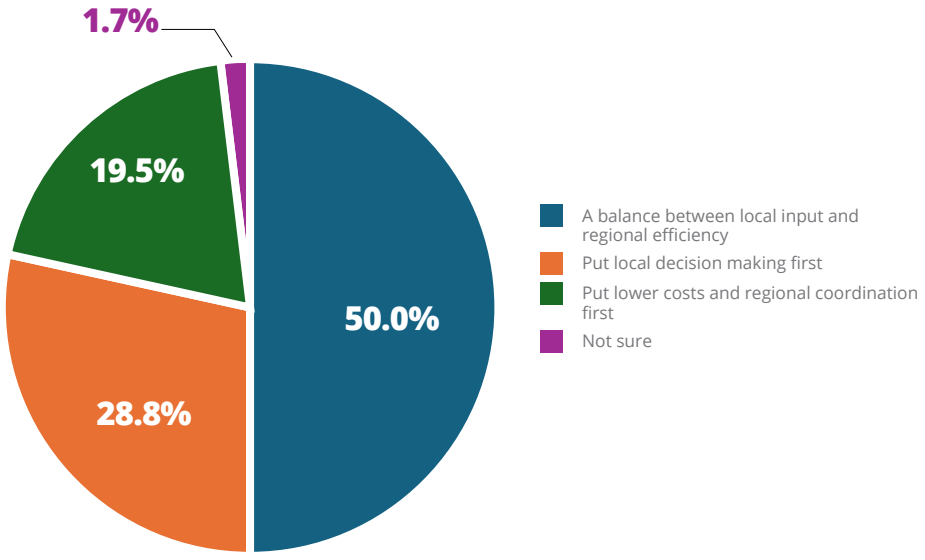
472 responses



If working across the region gives your community less say, what would you prefer?

Chart 37

472 responses



Kaipara District Council – transition priorities and what must stay the same

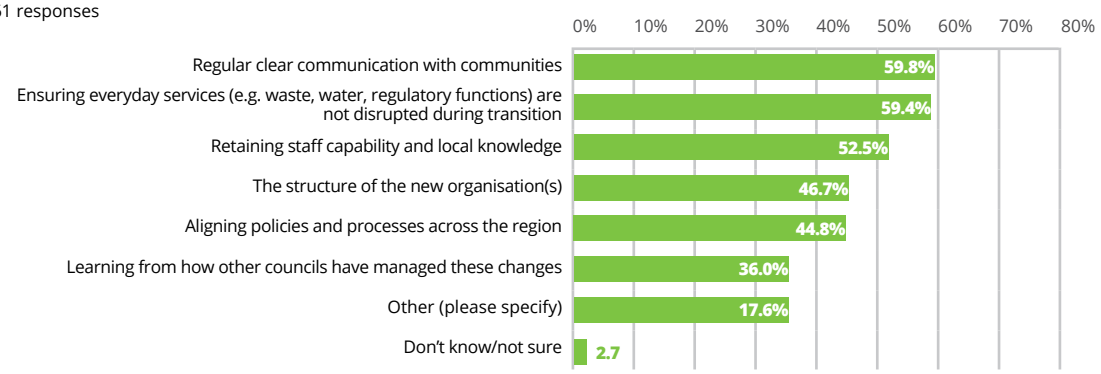
Far North District Council and Kaipara District Council asked the same two questions about what should be prioritised during any transition, and what must stay the same if councils change.

If councils in Northland were combined, what should be prioritised first to help the change to work well for your community?

If reform goes ahead, what should be prioritised during the transition?

Chart 38

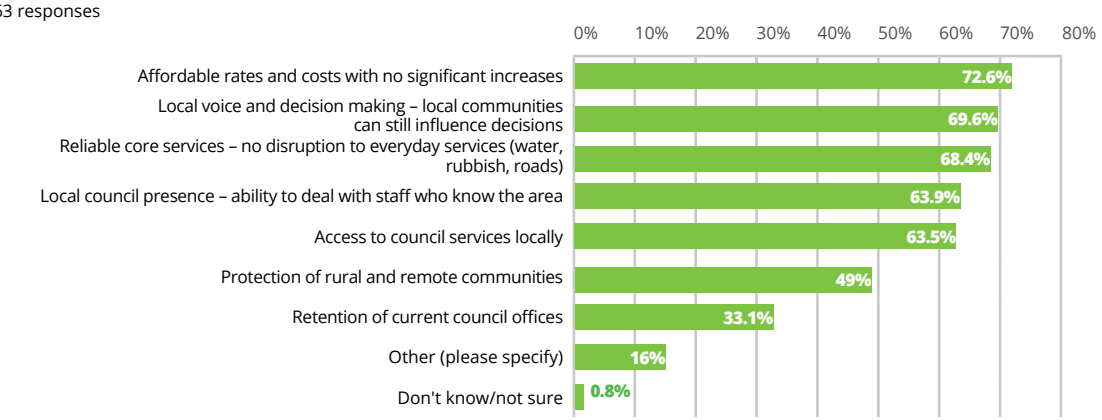
261 responses



What must stay the same?

Chart 39

263 responses

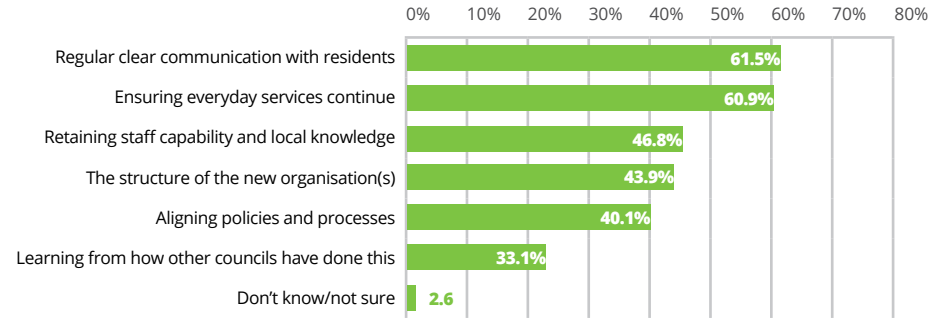


Far North District Council – transition priorities and what must stay the same

If councils in Northland were combined, what should be prioritised first to help the change work well for your community?

Chart 40

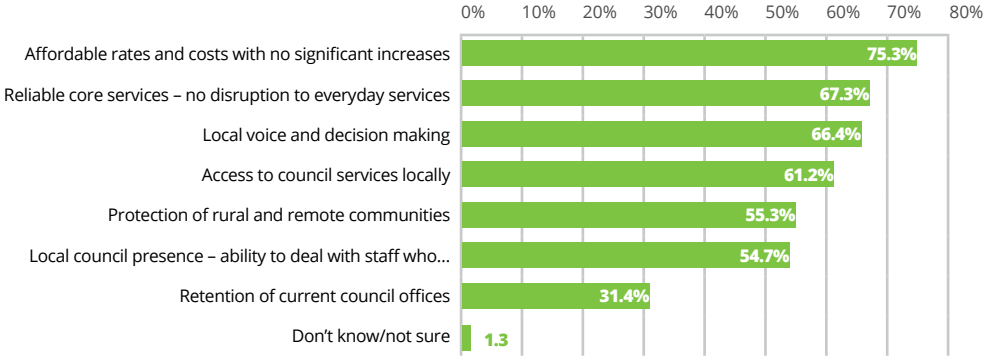
472 responses



If councils change in the Far North, what must stay the same to make sure your community continues to be well supported?

Chart 41

472 responses



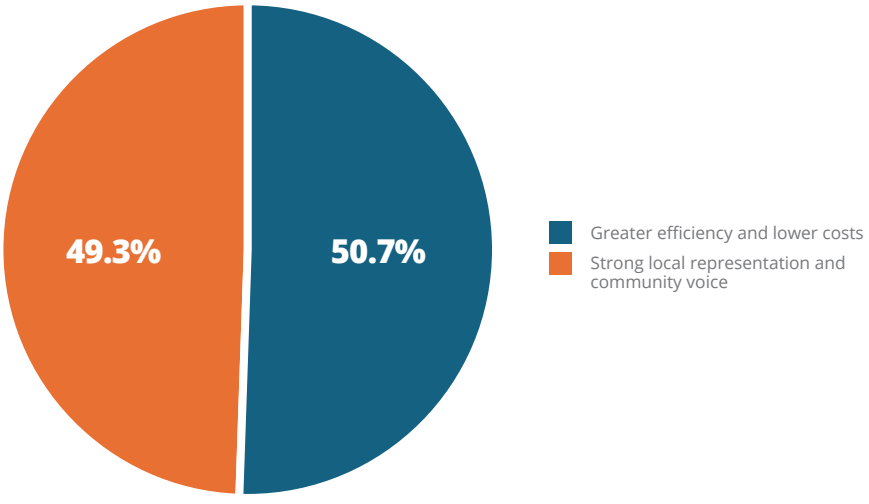
Northland Regional Council

Northland Regional Council asked its community a direct trade-off question about what matters more when thinking about the future shape of councils.

Thinking about how councils could be organised in the future, what matters more to you?

Chart 42

286 respondents



Key findings

1. Affordable rates with no significant increases is the single most important thing both Far North District Council and Kaipara District Council communities want protected if change goes ahead.
2. When asked what should be prioritised during any transition, Far North District Council and Kaipara District Council respondents gave almost identical answers – regular clear communication with communities and ensuring everyday services are not disrupted were the top two priorities in both councils, by a wide margin over every other option.
3. Northland Regional Council's community was almost perfectly split on the question of efficiency versus local representation.

10. What we heard from Māori

Methodology note for this section

Ethnicity data was only collected by Whangarei District Council and Northland Regional Council, so the demographic Māori cohort in this section is drawn from those two surveys only. Māori organisations were identified through the organisation fields included in Far North District Council's and Kaipara District Council's surveys. Whangarei District Council and Northland Regional Council did not include an organisation field, so Māori organisational voices from those two councils cannot be identified. The Māori cohort used in this section therefore combines:

- 142 Māori-identifying respondents from Whangarei District Council
- 97 Māori-identifying respondents from Northland Regional Council
- 42 Māori organisations identified across Far North District Council's surveys
- 1 Māori organisation identified through Kaipara District Council's survey.

These groups are presented together where the data allows, and separately where it does not.

The section also draws on a formal submission made by Te Rūnanga ā Iwi ō Ngāpuhi, addressed directly to the Mayor of Far North District Council as part of this community feedback process.

Preferred options for future council structure

Among the Māori organisations that responded through Far North District Council's surveys, the most common position (31%) was a preference for Far North District Council to remain on its own with Northland Regional Council's functions absorbed. A further 26% opposed amalgamation outright.

A number of organisations supported some form of combining councils. Te Rūnanga ā Iwi ō Ngāpuhi supported a Northland unitary authority in principle, on the condition that strong, durable, and Treaty-consistent Māori representation is embedded in its governance, including entrenched Māori ward seats, a statutory co-governance committee, and protections built into the Ngāpuhi Treaty settlement. Te Rūnanga ā Iwi ō Ngāpuhi was explicit that a unitary authority which replicated or worsened the current state would be actively opposed.

Te Uri o Hau Settlement Trust expressed uncertainty, citing its February 2026 submission opposing the Government's directive to reorganise local government in Northland and concern about the impact of councils changing or combining on existing Treaty settlement arrangements and iwi–council relationships.

Potential benefits

Whangarei District Council's Māori-identifying respondents selected a stronger ability to manage growth and infrastructure (49.3%), a simpler system with less confusion and duplication (46.5%), and a stronger regional voice (40.1%) as their top three benefits – tracking closely with Whangarei District Council's overall results.

In Northland Regional Council's survey, enduring relationships with iwi and hapū that honour the Treaty of Waitangi was rated a benefit by 71.1% of Māori respondents – significantly higher than the overall Northland Regional Council figure of 49.3%. A simpler system (72%) and lower costs (68%) also featured strongly.

The 20 Far North District Council Māori organisations that answered the benefits question selected cost savings through shared services and stronger regional planning most frequently, each chosen by 60%, followed by greater financial capacity (50%) and more capacity to manage emergencies (45%).

Concerns

Whangarei District Council's Māori-identifying respondents named community needs not being met (62.7%), loss of local voice or representation (62.0%), and services becoming worse (62.0%) as their top three concerns. The first of these ranks notably higher among Māori respondents than in the overall Whangarei District Council result of 54.9%.

For Northland Regional Council's Māori respondents, loss of iwi and hapū voices was raised as a concern by 77.3% – the highest-rated concern among this group, and significantly higher than the Northland Regional Council overall figure of 50.0%. Weakening of environmental outcomes also featured strongly at 72.2%.

The picture from the 20 Māori organisations that responded to Far North District Council's first survey was striking: loss of local voice and decision-making power was selected by every single organisation (100%), services becoming less responsive and one-size-fits-all policies were each selected by 95%, and smaller towns and rural areas being overlooked was selected by 90%.

What people wrote in their own words

The written responses from Māori respondents across all four councils were among the most substantive in this entire report, with several themes emerging consistently.

Cost, rates, and services featured across both Whangarei District Council and Northland Regional Council's Māori responses. Whangarei District Council's Māori respondents were particularly concerned about rates equity and the risk of one part of Northland subsidising another. Northland Regional Council's Māori respondents connected cost concerns more directly to environmental funding and service continuity in rural areas.

Environmental protection ran more strongly through Northland Regional Council's Māori responses than anywhere else in this section. Responses drew on kaitiakitanga values, raising specific concerns about freshwater, biosecurity, coastal management, and climate resilience being weakened. One respondent highlighted the role of marae as existing nodes for environmental monitoring and community resilience, questioning why this network was not being drawn on more actively rather than creating new governance structures.

Local voice and representation was a consistent concern across both Whangarei District Council and Northland Regional Council's Māori responses – particularly that rural, remote, and smaller communities, including Māori communities, would be overlooked in a larger structure.

Views on Treaty-related representation appeared from Māori voices across the region. Northland Regional Council's Māori respondents in particular offered detailed positions on Te Tiriti o Waitangi obligations, the importance of hapū and mana whenua participation in decision-making, and the risk that Treaty responsibilities could be diluted or transferred without preserving the relationships and institutional knowledge behind them.

Far North District Council's Māori organisations' written responses reinforced the same concerns – loss of local voice, rural communities being overlooked, and the importance of maintaining accessible, locally connected governance. Several responses were in te reo Māori, reflecting the linguistic and cultural depth of engagement with this question.

Key findings

1. Loss of iwi and hapū voices ranked as the highest concern among Northland Regional Council's Māori respondents at 77.3%, well above the overall Northland Regional Council figure of 50.0%. Enduring relationships with iwi and hapū that honour the Treaty of Waitangi was the highest-rated benefit among the same group at 71.1%, against an overall Northland Regional Council figure of 49.3%.
2. Among Far North District Council's Māori organisational respondents, loss of local voice and decision-making power was selected as a concern by every single organisation. Their structural preference leaned strongly toward Far North District Council remaining on its own.
3. Environmental protection and kaitiakitanga emerged as a distinct and substantive theme in Northland Regional Council's Māori written responses, with several respondents connecting environmental stewardship directly to Treaty of Waitangi obligations and the role of marae, hapū, and community-based kaitiaki in local governance.
4. Māori respondents across both Whangarei District Council and Northland Regional Council broadly shared the same top concerns as the overall population – cost, local voice, and services – but with meaningful differences in emphasis, particularly around iwi and hapū voice, Treaty of Waitangi obligations, and environmental protection.

11. Conclusion

More than 2,300 responses were received from communities across Northland's diverse and geographically spread region, representing a wide range of views on the future of local government.

The clearest finding across the entire report is not about structure – it is about conditions. Regardless of which council they live in, and regardless of which option they prefer, communities across Northland have been remarkably consistent about what they need any new model to deliver.

Costs must come down, and that must be proven – not promised. Local voice, particularly for smaller, rural, and remote communities, must be genuinely protected. Environmental stewardship must not be weakened. The transition must be carefully managed.

Relationships with hapū and iwi will require careful consideration in any new model. Views on this varied significantly both within and across councils – from strong calls for Māori and hapū voice to be protected and embedded in any new structure, to a preference for representation based solely on election. Any option taken forward will need to grapple seriously with this range of perspectives.

Across all three district councils, more people supported some form of two-council model than a single council for all of Northland – but they do not agree on which two. Far North District Council's community showed the clearest preference, with a majority backing Far North District Council staying on its own. Whangarei District Council showed the strongest support for a single Northland-wide authority. Kaipara District Council was almost evenly split between staying on its own and a single Northland-wide authority.

A significant share of respondents across all four councils are doubtful that any change will deliver what it promises. That is a signal that the credibility of any option put forward will depend as much on how it is designed, communicated, and implemented as on its merits.

This report does not point to a single answer. It points to what communities across Northland have said – clearly, seriously, and in substantial numbers – about what matters to them when it comes to the future of local government in their region.