

# Rural and Provincial Meeting

National Library, 6&7 August 2026

It was my privilege to represent Rangitikei District Council at this meeting, and I am grateful for the opportunity to attend. Following HWTM's example, *my comments and analysis are in italics*.

## Executive (AI) summary

The Rural and Provincial Meeting highlighted intense, politically charged discussions surrounding council amalgamations, with significant concerns regarding the handling of Regional Council functions and fragmented community representation. Key takeaways included a tense environment, the challenge of navigating tight timelines for restructuring, and lessons from the Dorset experience emphasizing staff culture over purely administrative models. The session also featured political commentary on the need for local, democratic service delivery and a "carrot rather than stick" approach from officials regarding future reforms.

## Around the regions

As the meeting was brought forward due to Head Start (HS)/Back Stop (BS) (and I suspect the impending elections), *naturally* most of the discussion revolved around amalgamation.

While most Councils had already officially decided what they intended to do, some were still to formally decide.

Most consulted/engaged with their districts, and Morrison and Lowe seem to have been included in a LOT of discussion. However, outcomes have been mixed.

Several amalgamations appear both obvious and likely, but/and acknowledge the difficulty in bringing their community along.

We are not the only District with multiple undecided options, and others have similarly spent a lot of time (and money?) and not reached agreement/HS. Representation and identity remain common elements. Interactions ranged from participation to observation.

Other matters which have complicated decisions included existing Government Commissions, acknowledging rural unitaries needing a strong metro, and Districts with existing divisions.

*Some options will require splitting Regional Council (RC) responsibilities, but very few acknowledged consideration of these responsibilities in their deliberations.* The RC actually present wanted to engage, *but it is reasonable to suspect those absent weren't.* There were reports of openly uncooperative and antagonistic RC behaviour.

*What concerned me was the lack of consideration of RC duties. Given that central government's (CG) initial shot was to remove/reduce RC governance, few seemed to have factored that into their negotiations. Some amalgamations make good people/relationship sense, but cross/split rather than follow water catchments, regional transport routes and pest management boundaries.*

What's next?

- Focus on the vision, not division
- Working together toward future structure

- Identifying and moving lines of responsibility
- Poly-centric governance
- Managing multiple political changes: rates capping, water entities etc
- Some kind of problem definition statement

*The tone of the meeting was quite different from Zone 3 meetings – rather than good natured, there was some antagonism leaking in.*

*The current environment is “wicked”... many inter-dependent and rapidly changing moving parts. A small tweak here or a major change there can totally skew just so many outcomes.*

#### Political panel discussion

*No surprises here. When asked whether regional councils were in or out, most obfuscated.*

#### Cameron Luxton, ACT local government spokesperson

Services and regulatory functions need to be delivered locally and democratically

#### Mike Davidson, Green

1980's amalgamations showed that moving too fast went wrong. It is important to reform with not to LG. Reforms are not addressing funding issues.

RMA? Worse than the current. Too partisan. Reduces Environmental protection. Seem to have forgotten the lessons from 3 waters by not working with LG

#### Tangi Utikere, Labour local government spokesperson

Current government not valuing the local government (LG) sector. 90 days for HS will not deliver great outcomes His vision is for local/central partnerships.

RMA? Second reading worse than the first, wondering about amendments to come. Needs to focus on RC functionality

#### Kayla Kingdon-Bebb, TOP Wellington Bays candidate

Looking for cross-party consensus, and a different, partnership relationship with LG. Looking for evidence-based localism, not unfunded mandate or rates caps

RMA? Current suite not fit for purpose and fetters development;

Proposed not respectful of Maori agreements

#### Andrew Foster, NZ1st LG spokesperson (former Wellington Mayor)

History does not show a respectful relationship between CG and LG

There is a need to think through what does work, subject it to engagement, financial analysis, and present options.

#### Ministry for Cities, Environment, Regions and Transport (MCERT)

Jeremy Lightfoot (CE) and Hemi Smiler (GM LG reform and deals)

Emphasised they were government servants, irrespective of colour

There will be an announcement before the house rises of who's submitted what.

Still need to work on/clarify

- harmonising debt,
- conditions of proposals
- off-ramps
- role of CG in dispute resolution
- smooth transition processes

The assessment process will be based on the 5 factors requested:

- level of detail,
- alignment
- proposition for managing RC functions – their own and resulting orphans
- no pass/fail

If they are contested, their role is to provide ministerial advice

Acknowledged staff job insecurity (twice), and potential loss of skill in less understood roles.

### Regulatory relief

regarding LTP with no future, representational review. They cited the key challenge will be legislative program clash and understand the sequencing challenges. It is to be delivered with the new RMA laws etc: it's a package.

Aiming for a carrot rather than stick approach

One delegate asked on how much LG non-compliance might be allowed... *naturally* they would never encourage anyone to act unlawfully, but to consider legal "outs".

There is not current intent to change the local government act, but there will need to be bespoke acts to enable the new structures, with clear signals.

Current work was concentrating on advising and serving in the context of elections. They are preparing to brief incoming ministers, which will depend on incoming government.

### Is the advice still 2-3 unitary authorities per region?

Acknowledged some mixed messaging between MCERT and minister re what is permissible...

A cabinet paper explored whether more than 3 would provide integrity. More might be seriously considered if proposals were well laid out.

The Local Government Commission importance and future needs clear function.

### MCERT: A (government funded) amalgamation.

Reflected on the principles used to enact the amalgamation, and the learning for Territorial Authorities:

- permission given for connection of mission
- it takes time (*surprise surprise*)
- the system needs guardrails
- adaption needs community connection, a sense of "who we are, else it won't work.
- Actual engagement necessary, not just a desktop exercise

Messaging on progress is to be expected

### Simplifying Local Government: the Dorset experience

Matt Prosser, current CE Wellington City Council

*I recommend councillors to seek a recording of this – a lot of sensible observations and advice, but he went VERY fast.*

### Why

Combined 6 councils into 2, utilised a “cabinet”, actively sought a rural voice. Legislation lagged reality and it took 13 months.

There was no plan, and financial sustainability was the hope. It was response to rates capping (MUCH more draconian than our proposal). There was no recognised process, CG resource and increasing CG requirements

Unlike us, they were responsible for social care.

At the lowest level, LG leaders were entrenched, lack of nominations so few actual elections, and it was difficult getting people to stand.

### Aim

- was not to reduce rates, but to reinvest, lift the level of service
- to provide a single voice to CG
- leverage scale and efficiency
- easier for business
- collaboration with military bases
- “no services cut”
- Improve youth opportunities

### General process

Financial and business cases were prepared and community engagement (self and “open”) conducted.

Staff were asked what they loved and wanted to retain, and conversely hate and get rid of. This enabled a system developed by and for the organisation. Actively asked how can we do this better.

They had to make decisions with enough not all information, in an environment of CG change.

Cleansing data: they chose the system of the biggest (not best) compatibility/capability as it was safe and legal. Then circled back to improve efficiency.

Compared customer service experiences to other local organisations

### Major learning: it’s about culture and systems

Rather than

- details and models established before day 1
- quantifiable cost reduction

Change is difficult, especially cultural change. “Culture eats strategy for breakfast”

“Under one roof” does not mean on one site.

### Challenges

Getting sub-regional:

- making sure local voices not lost
- staying connected
- deeply rooted in context

The price was the effort of lifelong opposition to change for good.

### Outcomes and learnings

Efficiencies can be achieved in the medium term.

Covid actually assisted

The power of simplifying processes

Engage with bottom up to achieve top-down change.

### Low down on the Economy

Jarrold Kerr, Kiwibank

*When did economists decide they needed to be comedians?*

China is hoarding crude (now at max. capacity) – good for our trade, but bad for Taiwan.

Our diesel coming out of Korea, who may be cutting exports

Current gold prices reflect a mistrust in the US, but USD still the global currency... there is an interesting correlation between Trump’s tweets and S&P performance

Tariffs made people, and don’t kill trade

With NZ softer demand, he questioned whether there was a need for interest rate increases.

NZD lower than both USD and AUD... good for exporters

Banks are lending again... competitively

The intention to invest varies considerably NI/SI even WN/AK.

### SLG: next steps for LGNZ advocacy

What will underpin manawhenua relations?

- Genuine partnerships and agreement, not signoffs
- Manawhakahono?
- Settled vs non-settled
- Iwi and spatial planners

Risk of TA and RC in a Unitary Council: Challenges...

- Gamekeeping
- Weighing priorities for scarce resources “Don’t have the money and therefore have to think” (Lord Rutherford)

- Added complications
- Regional scale decisions vs local impacts
- Community working groups providing working, practical planning

There was an interesting wee discussion about post-civil emergency power to act outside the RMA... and the value of (and priority of!) maintaining 30 day extensions.

Councillor Diana Baird