REPORT: LOCAL GOVERNMENT NEW ZEALAND – SUPERLOCAL 2026 CONFERENCE

Prepared for: Rangitīkei District Council
Conference: LGNZ SuperLocal 2026
Venue: Energy Events Centre, Rotorua
Dates: 14–15 October 2026

1. Purpose of the Report

Provide an overview of my attendance at the LGNZ SuperLocal 2026 Conference held in Rotorua on 14 and 15 October 2026, with particular attention to matters relevant to Rangitīkei District Council.

The conference took place during a significant period of change for local government. Councils are facing proposed structural reforms, financial pressures, infrastructure demands and changing expectations about how local government should operate and engage with communities.

The report also includes information from **Te Maruata**, the national network supporting Māori elected members, and the Tuia two-year rangatahi leadership programme. These matters are particularly relevant to Māori representation, local leadership development and the future relationship between councils, iwi, hapū and communities.

2. Conference Overview

SuperLocal is LGNZ's annual conference for elected members, council leaders and people involved in local government. The 2026 conference provided an opportunity to consider the direction of local government in Aotearoa, hear from political representatives and sector leaders, and share practical approaches to the challenges facing councils.

The programme included plenary presentations, political discussion, specialist workshops and breakout sessions. Key themes included:

- The future structure and role of local government.
- Local government reform and regional reorganisation.
- Financial sustainability, rates and alternative funding arrangements.
- Infrastructure, transport and climate resilience.
- Relationships between central and local government.
- Māori representation, iwi relationships and community participation.
- Leadership, productivity and service delivery.

The conference was particularly timely given the Government's Head Start programme and the wider reform agenda affecting councils.

3. Opening Welcome and Pōwhiri (picture attached)

The conference opened with a pōwhiri hosted by Te Arawa, providing an opportunity to acknowledge mana whenua and the significance of Rotorua as the host location.

The welcome established an appropriate cultural foundation for the conference and recognised the importance of local identity, tikanga and relationships with tangata whenua. It was a reminder that local government operates within communities with established histories, whakapapa and connections to place.

Consolidating our council views on future arrangements that recognise the role of iwi and hapū and ensure that engagement is meaningful and ongoing.

4. Plenary Presentations and Conference Themes

The conference programme included presentations addressing the forces shaping local government and the challenges associated with leading through change.

The opening plenary, *Reimagine Reset & Refocus– The Forces Shaping Local Government*, considered the effects of population change, economic pressures, climate challenges, ageing infrastructure and government reform.

Presenters included Carl Davidson of The Curiosity Company, Traci Houpapa of Te Arawa Group Holdings, Robin Campbell of the New Zealand Climate Change Commission and Ben Hayward of Fulton Hogan New Zealand.

These sessions reinforced the need for councils to remain adaptable while maintaining a clear focus on their communities, essential services and long-term responsibilities.

4.1 Local Government Reform and Regional Reorganisation

A central theme throughout the conference was the scale of change being considered for local government.

The discussions reflected uncertainty about future council structures, regional functions, service delivery and the relationship between local and central government.

The Government's Head Start programme and the wider reform agenda have required councils to consider possible changes to existing arrangements. These discussions raise important questions about the future role of district and regional councils, the delivery of services and the retention of local decision-making.

For Rangitīkei, these matters are directly relevant to the work already underway through Head Start. Any future structural changes need to consider the district's rural character,

geographical size, communities of interest, existing relationships and the ability of local communities to influence decisions affecting them.

4.2 Financial Sustainability and Rates

Financial sustainability was another major theme.

Councils are experiencing increasing costs associated with infrastructure renewal, maintenance, growth, regulatory requirements and service delivery. At the same time, communities are concerned about affordability and the impact of rates increases.

The conference considered rates capping, alternative revenue sources and the need for councils to have sustainable funding tools.

A recurring issue was the difference between limiting rates increases and ensuring councils retain sufficient resources to maintain essential infrastructure and services. Financial constraints can affect the ability to respond to community needs and may result in deferred maintenance or increased charges elsewhere.

For Rangitīkei, the challenge is to balance affordability with the long-term costs of maintaining roads, water infrastructure and other essential services across a geographically large and predominantly rural district. As we see whilst we are working through our long term plan.

4.3 Infrastructure, Climate and Regional Functions

The programme addressed infrastructure pressures, climate risk, insurance and council liability, regional transport planning and the future of regional functions.

These discussions were relevant to councils managing ageing assets, extreme weather events and the costs of maintaining infrastructure across diverse communities.

The conference also considered how regional functions might be organised under future local government structures, including the implications for planning, transport, land use and relationships with iwi Māori.

For Rangitīkei, these matters reinforce the importance of making sure that rural infrastructure needs and local knowledge, are not overlooked in any regional or structural changes.

4.4 Leadership, Productivity and Service Delivery

Sessions also considered how councils can improve productivity and make better use of existing resources.

The programme included workshops on crisis response, **financial resilience***, (which I attended*), data and intelligence, productivity under constraint and practical approaches to delivering better outcomes.

Financial Resilience and Sustainability. Presented by Brett Moffat, Russell Investments. Key points: Councils should review existing assets and investment portfolios, rather than relying only on rates, to generate sustainable income, balance investment risk, returns, and liquidity, and strengthen long-term financial planning to protect future ratepayers. The related session by Martin Jenkins highlighted three practical levers: cost discipline, service level choices, and revenue options.

For Rangitīkei, these points support careful stewardship of assets and balanced financial decisions that don't load future ratepayers with avoidable pressure.

5. Political Panel Discussion – Kingmakers

The opening day included a political panel discussion titled *Kingmakers*. The panel brought together representatives from ACT, New Zealand First, Te Pāti Māori, the Green Party and The Opportunities Party to discuss the future direction of local government.

The discussion covered proposed local government reforms, the Government's Head Start programme, rates capping, council funding and the relationship between central and local government.

The panel members presented differing political perspectives:

- **Sarah Lucas – The Opportunities Party:** Opposed proposed rates caps, describing them as central government control over local government. She stated that her party would abolish rates caps.
- **Mike Davidson – Green Party:** Also opposed rates capping, describing it as a blunt approach that could lead to increased user charges and deferred investment in essential infrastructure.
- **Simon Court – ACT:** Acknowledged the financial pressures facing councils but argued that seeking additional funding could not be the only response.
- **Andy Foster – New Zealand First:** Raised concerns about the timeframe councils had been given to develop their Head Start proposals, arguing that it did not allow sufficient opportunity for proper community consultation.
- **Rawiri Waititi – Te Pāti Māori:** Emphasised the importance of Māori voices being included in local government reform and decision-making. He argued that Māori should be represented at the council table and involved in shaping decisions, rather than being left outside the process.

Despite their differences on rates capping and the approach to reform, the panel identified council funding as an area of common concern. Alternative revenue-sharing arrangements were discussed, including returning a portion of GST generated through growth and development to local councils.

For Rangitīkei, the discussion was particularly relevant given the work underway through the Head Start programme and the wider uncertainty surrounding future council structures and responsibilities. It reinforced the importance of meaningful community consultation, sustainable funding arrangements and ensuring that iwi, hapū and Māori communities retain an effective voice in local government decision-making.

The panel provided an opportunity to hear differing political positions on the future of local government. It demonstrated that, while there was no single view on how reform should proceed, there was broad recognition of the financial and structural challenges facing councils.

6. Te Maruata – Māori Representation, Leadership and Support

Te Maruata was an important part of the conference programme and provided an opportunity to consider the history, purpose and ongoing role of the national network supporting Māori in local government.

The presentations covered the origins of Te Maruata, the development of Māori representation within local government and the support available to Māori elected members.

6.1 History and Development

The history presented traced the development of Māori participation and representation in local government back to the establishment of Ngā Mana Kōkiri, identified as the first local government Māori committee during the 1995–2000 period.

Ngā Mana Kōkiri worked alongside Ministers and contributed to discussions that helped shape the Local Government Act 2002. The presentations also referred to advocacy for the inclusion of Te Tiriti o Waitangi considerations in the Resource Management Act.

The name Te Maruata was gifted by Rotorua District Councillor Maureen Waaka, providing the network with an identity grounded in its kaupapa and purpose.

This history demonstrated that Māori representation in local government has developed through sustained advocacy, relationship-building and the work of Māori elected members over many years.

6.2 Te Maruata Services and Support

Te Maruata provides a range of support to Māori elected members, including:

- **Te Ahuru Mōwai:** A mentoring programme available to members on request.
- **Confidential support:** Assistance for elected members dealing with personal, professional or governance-related matters.

- **Support for deputations:** Assistance with preparing for and presenting matters to councils and other decision-making bodies.
- **Māori wards and representation:** Support for matters affecting Māori representation and participation in local government.
- **Manaaki Collective:** Support relating to abuse, threats, personal security and wellbeing for Māori elected members.

These services recognise the challenges that can arise for Māori elected members and the importance of having a network that provides practical, confidential and culturally appropriate support.

6.3 Te Maruata Wall of Fame

The conference also acknowledged individuals who have made significant contributions to local government.

Councillor Trevor Maxwell was recognised for his long service, having first been elected to Rotorua District Council in 1977. His contribution over several decades was acknowledged as an important part of the history of local government and Te Maruata.

Councillor Peter Moeahu was also recognised for more than three decades of service in Taranaki local government, including his involvement in iwi claimant negotiations and his advocacy through council deputations.

These acknowledgements highlighted the value of long-term commitment, experience and advocacy in strengthening Māori participation in local government.

7. Tuia – Two-Year Rangatahi Leadership Programme (Pictures attached)

A significant component of the Te Maruata discussions was the Tuia two-year rangatahi leadership kaupapa.

The presentation outlined the development of the programme over approximately 16 years. Its origins were traced to a 2010 hui at Kōkiri Marae, where a collective view emerged that rangatahi Māori deserved a national leadership kaupapa of their own.

The programme developed through several stages:

- **2010:** Initial concept and foundations.
- **2012–2016:** Growth and development.
- **2017–2022:** Programme maturity.
- **2023–2026:** Expansion to more than 10 wānanga annually, involving approximately 700 rangatahi.

7.1 Three Foundations of the Programme

The programme is built around three key Pou.

Mentoring

Each rangatahi is supported by a matua or mentor who provides guidance during the foundational year. Mentors may include community leaders, iwi representatives and experienced tuakana.

The mentoring relationship helps rangatahi develop leadership capability, understand civic responsibilities, build networks and connect Te Ao Māori with local government.

Wānanga

The programme includes five national marae-based wānanga across Aotearoa. These provide immersive experiences in tikanga, kawa, te reo Māori, leadership and identity.

Further opportunities include wānanga and activities focused on Matariki, taiao, waka ama, wāhine, tāne and other areas of personal and leadership development. The presentation also referred to more than 18 additional events each year.

Community Contribution

Rangatahi identify opportunities to contribute within their own communities. These contributions may relate to cultural activities, hauora, education, environmental projects or rangatahi development.

Importantly, the contribution is identified by the rangatahi themselves, allowing them to respond to the priorities and needs of their own communities.

7.2 Programme Activities and Outcomes

The presentation described a wider programme of learning and community engagement, including financial literacy, māra kai, Matariki and other cultural and practical learning opportunities.

Hononga Hui provide opportunities for rangatahi to visit and engage with different iwi, kaupapa and community organisations throughout the year. These experiences strengthen relationships, broaden understanding and expose participants to different models of leadership and community contribution.

The programme's reported investment outcomes for 2020–2026 included:

- 374 rangatahi engaged during the six-year funding period.
- 125 wānanga and events held across Aotearoa.
- More than 85 councils and other mentoring organisations involved.

- Graduates living and leading in 99 locations across Aotearoa.

The presentation also reported that more than 95 per cent of teams delivering Tuia wānanga are volunteers. Experienced Graduates return to contribute their knowledge and expertise.

The estimated volunteer contribution was more than 5,000 hours annually and over 30,000 hours across six years, with an estimated value of $1.5 million at the applicable sector rate.

The annual funder investment was reported at approximately $150,000–$200,000. The presentation also indicated that 89.6 per cent of Graduates wanted to continue contributing as mentors, tuakana or through governance.

7.3 Participant Feedback

The programme presented survey findings from 134 rangatahi across the 2011–2024 cohorts.

The reported results included:

- 95.5 per cent rated the programme's impact on their lives at four or five out of five.
- 93.3 per cent strongly or somewhat agreed that Tuia had made their lives better.
- 82.1 per cent said they contributed more to their communities as a result of the two-year journey.
- 93.3 per cent reported a positive impact on themselves.
- 86.6 per cent reported a positive impact on their communities.
- 79.1 per cent reported a positive impact on their whānau.
- 76.9 per cent reported a positive impact on their hapū and iwi.

One participant's comment captured the personal impact of the programme:

“I know how important and powerful I am just being Māori. Tuia was the beginning of the rest of my life.”

Relevance to Rangitikei

The Tuia programme provides a practical model for developing future Māori leaders and strengthening the connection between rangatahi, iwi, hapū, marae and local government.

For Rangitikei, we have utilised this programme, with the most current Tuia candidates, from Rātana, who presented to us in Public Forum Explaining to us their experience with

elected members, community leaders and iwi representatives and how the programme-built confidence, capability and an understanding of local government.

The reported volunteer contribution and Graduates commitment demonstrate the value of community ownership. However, the longer-term sustainability of the programme will depend on maintaining appropriate support and investment.

8. Creative New Zealand – Supporting Local Arts and Creativity

A further presentation was delivered by representatives of Creative New Zealand / Toi Aotearoa, including Chief Executive Gretchen La Roche and Haniko Te Kurapa, Senior Manager, Kaupapa Toi Aotearoa.

The presentation focused on the role councils play in supporting local arts and creative communities, particularly through the Creative Communities Scheme.

The presenters highlighted the importance of councils retaining an appropriate funding allocation for this purpose. With councils reviewing budgets and considering reductions to discretionary expenditure, Creative New Zealand was encouraging local authorities to recognise the value of maintaining their role in supporting local creative activity.

The Creative Communities Scheme supports more than 1,800 projects each year nationally. It provides an accessible way for local communities to develop and deliver arts activities that reflect their identity, culture and interests.

For Rangitīkei, local arts and cultural initiatives contribute to community identity, participation, heritage and social connection. Support for Māori arts and cultural expression is also important in recognising and strengthening the district's cultural foundations.

The presentation reinforced that arts funding should not automatically be viewed as a non-essential expense. It can contribute to community wellbeing, local participation, cultural preservation and the vitality of towns and rural communities.

The continued relationship between councils and Creative New Zealand provides an opportunity to support local creativity while ensuring that funding is directed to community-led projects. I suggested that they come and present at our Public Forum.

9. Women's Breakfast – Fireside Chat (picture attached)

The Women's Breakfast programme included a fireside chat featuring Andrea Vance, National Affairs Editor for *The Post* and *Sunday Star-Times*, interviewed by Tracy Cotter Martin of Datacom. *Attached to this report is a recording of the full interview with Andrea, which has also been converted to text.*

Overall, the conference reinforced that successful local government reform must be more than a change to organisational structures. It must result in effective services,

sustainable funding, strong local relationships and genuine representation for the communities councils serve.

For Rangitīkei, the challenge is to remain actively involved in the reform process and ensure that the district's interests, communities and future are properly represented.

I would like to thank the Council for allowing me to attend both conferences for Te Maruata and Super Local.

Nga manaakitanga

Cr Coral Raukawa

Summary – Andrea's Reflections on Journalism, Leadership and Local Government

The discussion explores the role of journalism in holding power to account, the qualities of effective leadership, the importance of public trust, and how local government can navigate significant reform and uncertainty.

1. The importance of journalism and accountability

Andrea describes her early introduction to journalism through her father, who was an editor. Her first experience of reporting came during a turbulent period in 1996, when riots and violence provided an unexpected introduction to investigative journalism.

Her career reinforced three fundamental principles:

- The public's right to know: Transparency is essential because political decisions have a direct impact on people's lives and communities.
- Holding power to account: Scrutiny is a fundamental pillar of democracy.
- Giving people a voice: Journalism provides a platform for people who are overlooked, disadvantaged or left behind by the system.

She emphasises that journalists must remain independent, fair and prepared to ask difficult questions, regardless of whether those questions are popular.

2. Trust, independence and professional integrity

Andrea reflects on the differences between journalism in the United Kingdom and New Zealand. New Zealand's smaller and more connected political environment means journalists frequently encounter the people they challenge in everyday life.

She argues that journalists must maintain professional distance from those in power while remaining respectful and fair.

Two principles underpin her approach:

- Trust – ensuring people receive a fair hearing.
- Respect – listening carefully, accurately representing responses and being prepared to challenge.

She believes seeking approval can compromise professional independence. Maintaining credibility requires constantly questioning personal assumptions, motivations and potential bias.

3. What makes an effective leader?

Andrea identifies leadership as something most clearly demonstrated under pressure.

She suggests that effective leaders:

- Front up to difficult questions rather than hiding behind communications teams.
- Accept accountability and acknowledge mistakes.
- Explain constraints honestly, including what they know and what they do not know.
- Listen to criticism without automatically interpreting it as an attack.
- Surround themselves with people who challenge their thinking rather than simply agree.
- Make difficult decisions and accept that not everyone will agree.

A particularly important observation was that avoiding journalists is not avoiding the journalist; it is avoiding the ratepayers, constituents and communities those journalists represent.

She argues that if leadership cannot withstand robust questioning, it may not be strong leadership in the first place.

4. Women in leadership and equal scrutiny

Andrea discusses her experiences working in a traditionally male-dominated journalism environment, including exclusion and gender-based treatment early in her career.

She acknowledges that women in leadership continue to face disproportionate criticism relating to their appearance, communication style and personal characteristics.

However, she makes an important distinction: equality does not mean lowering expectations or providing women with a free pass.

Women in positions of authority should be subjected to the same rigorous scrutiny of their policies, decisions, performance and outcomes as men.

She also highlights that influence does not depend on holding the most powerful position. Even someone with limited authority can make a meaningful difference through courage, persistence and asking the right questions.

5. Human connection in an increasingly digital world

Andrea questions whether social media is becoming less influential as a tool for political engagement, suggesting that people are increasingly fatigued by political messaging, online hostility and polarised debate.

She believes genuine human connection remains essential.

Direct engagement, door-knocking, community conversations and trusted relationships provide opportunities to understand what people actually think, rather than relying on the often distorted picture presented through social media.

Her view is that personal connection and trust will become increasingly important as society moves further into the digital and AI age.

6. Local government reform and leading through uncertainty

Andrea expresses considerable sympathy for local government, recognising the pressures of reform, climate resilience, rising costs, shrinking budgets and increasing public criticism.

She makes several observations relevant to local government leaders:

- Local government is often undervalued despite its direct influence on people's everyday lives.
- Reform should be viewed as an opportunity to shape future structures rather than simply react to change.
- Local government has an important advantage through its direct relationships with communities.
- Regional leadership and collaboration may create opportunities for stronger local influence in dealings with central government.

She suggests that local government needs to focus on rebuilding public confidence through consistent actions rather than public relations campaigns and slogans.

Trust cannot be demanded. It must be earned through behaviour, honesty and delivery.

Importantly, communities are more likely to forgive uncertainty or failure when leaders are upfront about what has happened and what remains unknown.

7. Making space for quieter voices and future generations

In the final discussion, Andrea challenges the assumption that the loudest voices represent the majority.

She observes that social media can amplify extreme, polarised and often unrepresentative opinions.

Most people, she suggests, are reasonable, decent and concerned about their communities.

Leaders should therefore avoid allowing the loudest voices to dominate decision-making and instead create opportunities for quieter and less powerful people to contribute.

She reinforces the importance of recognising that the person with the least authority in the room may have the most valuable perspective or question.

Key messages for local government leadership

The discussion provides several important lessons for elected members, chief executives and local government organisations:

1. Trust is earned through actions, not words. Consistency, transparency and delivery matter more than public messaging.

2. Accountability strengthens leadership. Difficult questions should be welcomed as part of democratic responsibility.

3. Honesty builds confidence. Leaders should acknowledge mistakes, constraints and uncertainty rather than attempting to manage perceptions.

4. Human connection matters. Direct engagement with communities is essential, particularly during periods of significant change.

5. Leadership requires courage. Leaders must be prepared to make difficult decisions, accept criticism and sometimes stand alone.

6. Make room for different voices. Effective leadership requires listening beyond the loudest and most influential people.

7. Change presents opportunity. Local government should actively shape reform and use its community relationships to strengthen its position.

Overall conclusion

Andrea's central message is that effective leadership is built on trust, courage, accountability and genuine human connection. In a period of significant institutional change, local government has an opportunity to demonstrate its value by remaining accessible to communities, being honest about uncertainty, accepting scrutiny and consistently delivering on its commitments.


Tuia Kaupapa
Trevor Waikawa // Councillor, Wairoa District Council
Benita Cairns // Councillor, Wairoa District Council




DEEP DIVE INTO THE FORCES
SHAPING LOCAL GOVERNMEN
Carl Davidson/ Chief Curiosity Officer and Critical Thinking
Champion, The Curiosity Company
Traci Houpapa/ Chair, Te Arawa Group Holdings
Robin Campbell/ General Manager, Climate Change Commissi
Ben Hayward/ Chief Executive, Fulton Hogan New Zealand





