

Submission by Environment Network Manawatū on the Simplifying Local Government Proposal (V2 – following discussion held on 27 Jan 2026)

ENM is the environment hub for the Manawatū region, connecting and inspiring communities to take environmental action.

We provide sector leadership, build capacity and capability, and create community.

We're motivated by our responsibility to care for the earth and each other; becoming better Te Tiriti partners; collaboration and inclusivity; and a belief that small actions can have a big impact.

As a member-led group, we work alongside our network to share ideas, get things done, and push for positive change. We lead by example, supporting everyone in their mahi and making sure they have what they need to achieve their goals.

We believe in bringing people together. We help strengthen community connections, provide opportunities to meet others, and create spaces where people can talk about what's needed and work together to find solutions.

We're passionate about protecting the environment, and we know that to make a real difference, we need to stay strong ourselves. We focus on getting the right resources for the community and helping our network groups and locals build their skills. By encouraging learning, working together, and supporting volunteers, we help everyone make a positive impact.

Our Pou

ENM focuses on supporting activities in these four pou to achieve our vision:

1. Climate Action

We raise awareness about climate change and support community actions that encourage reduced carbon emissions, waste, and overconsumption, while promoting clean air and sustainable cities. Through advocacy and collaboration, we push for climate-friendly policies and hold local and central government accountable for meaningful action.

2. Biodiversity Protection & Enhancement

We protect and restore native species and improve water quality by supporting initiatives like Manawatū River Source to Sea, with a focus on preserving ecosystems and strengthening regional biodiversity for a healthier environment.

3. Community Food Sovereignty

We strive to ensure access to healthy, locally grown, sustainable and culturally appropriate food. By supporting networks like Manawatū Food Action Network, we help communities to grow their own food, make healthy food more accessible, reduce food waste, and provide free or affordable food to people.

4. Circular Economy

We aim for a thriving planet that sustains future generations by fostering a circular economy where resources are reused and valued. We connect and support community

groups, provide education, and build strong networks to improve local practices. Through shared initiatives and upskilling, we empower people to make informed choices and contribute to sustainable change

Environment Network Manawatū (ENM) strongly opposes the Simplifying Local Government proposal in its current form.

Environment Network Manawatū (ENM) supports constructive reform, continuous improvement, and the pursuit of efficiencies where they genuinely improve outcomes for communities and the environment. We are not opposed to change. However, we are deeply concerned about the *process, speed, and substance* of the Simplifying Local Government proposal.

This reform has been advanced rapidly, with limited early engagement with the public, local government, iwi, or the organisations that work daily at the interface between communities and environmental systems. There has been no clear articulation of the problem this reform is intended to solve, nor evidence that the proposed structural changes are the most effective or proportionate response. Without a well-defined problem statement, it is difficult to assess whether the solution is appropriate, necessary, or sustainable.

Good reform takes time. It requires early collaboration, shared understanding, and careful testing of assumptions. In our view, this proposal falls short on all three.

1. Undermining Independent Regional Environmental Governance

Regional councils exist because environmental systems operate at regional scales. Rivers, aquifers, air sheds, biodiversity corridors, and climate risks do not align neatly with district boundaries. Independent, regionally focused governance has proven essential for setting limits, enforcing standards, and maintaining a long-term perspective.

Replacing directly elected regional councillors with Combined Territorial Authority Boards (CTBs) made up of mayors risks significantly weakening that independence. Mayors are elected to advocate for their own communities, not their neighbours, and not for the environment as a system in its own right. They already carry substantial responsibilities and are subject to strong local political pressures.

Of particular concern is the blurring of roles between decision-making, delivery, and enforcement. The proposed structure risks eroding the separation of powers that underpins good governance. Even if unintended, this creates real risks of reduced independence, weakened checks and balances, increased political influence over enforcement decisions, and, in worst cases, conflicts of interest. Environmental regulation is most vulnerable when those responsible for setting priorities are also those under pressure to enable development.

2. Loss of Democratic Accountability and Participation

Direct election provides legitimacy and accountability, particularly for difficult environmental decisions that require saying “no” or enforcing limits. Removing directly elected regional representation reduces transparency and narrows the pathways for communities to influence decisions that affect their land, water, and health.

Centralised or indirect governance structures also reduce access for community groups, iwi, and smaller organisations. ENM is concerned that this will further marginalise voices that are already under-represented, including Māori, women, disabled people, and rural communities.

The messiness of democracy is not a flaw; it is how trust, capability, and shared stewardship are built over time.

3. Centralisation Disguised as Simplification

The proposal represents a significant centralisation of power, despite publicly declared commitments to localism. Decisions appear increasingly driven by assumed “national priorities”— housing, infrastructure, and economic growth — with environmental wellbeing notably absent as a core objective.

Nature is complex. Environmental problems are complex. Simplifying governance structures does not simplify ecological reality. Treating local government as a business to be streamlined ignores the social, cultural, and environmental systems it exists to serve. Evidence from environmental science consistently shows that simplistic, centralised, engineering-led solutions are inadequate for nature-based challenges.

4. Loss of Expertise, Partnerships, and Proven Outcomes

ENM works closely with regional council staff and elected members in a genuine partnership for environmental stewardship. Over decades, this has enabled projects such as long-term bush restoration, freshwater improvement initiatives, estuary management, biodiversity corridors, and community-led conservation programmes.

Without regional expertise, funding mechanisms, and institutional support, many of these initiatives would not exist. The proposal provides no assurance that community-led projects — such as Ruahine Kiwi, Green Corridors, freshwater restoration, plastic pollution reduction, or local food resilience initiatives — will continue to be funded or supported.

This is not abstract risk. It is the dismantling of systems that currently work.

5. Collaboration Is a Legitimate Goal — This Is Not the Way to Achieve It

We acknowledge that the intent to improve regional collaboration between councils is reasonable. Many regional challenges require collective action. However, collaboration does not require dismantling democratic representation or weakening independent environmental governance.

Better coordination, shared strategies, and joint problem-solving can be achieved through existing structures or incremental reform. Consolidating power in CTBs is a blunt instrument that creates more risk than benefit.

Conclusion

This proposal represents a generation-scale restructuring undertaken with undue haste, insufficient engagement, and no clear problem definition. It risks weakening environmental protection, democratic accountability, local expertise, and community trust while offering uncertain efficiency gains.

Environment Network Manawatū urges the government to pause, clearly articulate the problem it is seeking to address, and engage meaningfully with communities, local government, iwi, and

environmental practitioners to design reforms that strengthen rather than hollow out environmental stewardship and local democracy.

More will be lost than gained if this proposal proceeds as drafted.

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