



Subject: **EASTERN BAY JOINT COMMITTEE – SUBMISISON ON SIMPLIFYING LOCAL GOVERNMENT**

To: **EASTERN BAY OF PLENTY JOINT COMMITTEE**

Meeting Date: **19 FEBRUARY 2026**

Written by: **MICHAEL FRYER, STRATEGY & POLICY MANAGER**

File Reference: **A3066414**

PURPOSE OF THIS REPORT

1. The purpose of this report is to present the draft Eastern Bay of Plenty submission on the Government's Simplifying Local Government policy proposal and seek the Joint Committee's approval to lodge the submission.

BACKGROUND

2. On 19 November, the government released a draft policy proposal for consultation titled *Simplifying Local Government*. The policy proposal seeks to achieve two key outcomes:
 - a) Replace the governance of regional councils with a Combined Territories Board (CTB), comprising Mayors or Mayors and Crown Commissioners.
 - b) Develop a regional reorganisation plan that sets out how each region will give effect to current regional council functions.
3. While this is not the final proposal, signals from central government indicate that elements of the reform may come into effect as early as 2027.

RELEVANCE TO EASTERN BAY OF PLENTY

4. On 19 December 2025, the Joint Committee considered a paper outlining a coordinated Eastern Bay approach to the reforms. The Committee endorsed a process to strengthen collaboration across councils, provide clarity and confidence to Eastern Bay communities, and ensure the subregion presents as a credible and coherent partner in discussions with central government.
5. A key action from that process was the development of a joint Eastern Bay submission.

DISCUSSION

Eastern Bay Submission:

6. A joint submission provides government and communities with transparency on areas of alignment across the Eastern Bay. It strengthens the subregion's credibility, demonstrates coherence across partner councils, and signals that the Eastern Bay is engaging from a shared foundation.
7. The submission addresses the following themes:
 - Support for the intent to create a system that is efficient, resilient, and easier for communities to understand.
 - Recognition that reform is not opposed, but must be deliberate, enduring, and well reasoned.
 - Concern that the proposed timeframes are aspirational and do not reflect the complexity of the changes proposed.
8. Based on these themes, the submission makes several recommendations, including:
 - Retaining regionally elected councillors to carry out as usual functions during the transition.
 - Including a Regional Councillor on the CTB with voting rights.
 - Providing greater clarity on how the CTB will give effect to Māori interests.
 - Ensuring voting arrangements reflect regional realities and acknowledging that appropriate models may differ between regions.
9. The submission represents an initial point of alignment across the Eastern Bay. It does not commit any council to a particular course of action, nor does it represent a final position on the policy proposal.

RECOMMENDATION

1. **RECEIVES** the report titled "Eastern Bay Joint Committee – Submission on Simplifying Local Government".
2. **APPROVES** the Eastern Bay Joint Committee submission on *Simplifying Local Government*.
3. **NOTES** that any amendments to the submission, along with any minor changes or corrections, will be incorporated before lodgement.

Attached to this report:

- Appendix 1 – Submission in response to the *Simplifying Local Government* policy proposal.

Report Authorisation

Report writer:	Michael Fryer	Strategy & Policy Manager
First Approval:	Antoinette Campbell	Strategy & Development Group Manager
Final Approval:	Stace Lewer	Chief Executive, Ōpōtiki District Council



Subject: **SIMPLIFYING LOCAL GOVERNMENT SUBMISSION**
To: **EASTERN BAY OF PLENTY JOINT COMMITTEE**
Date: **20 FEBRUARY 2026**

To the Department of Internal Affairs

OUR SUB-REGIONAL MANDATE AND PARTNERSHIP

1. The Eastern Bay of Plenty Joint Committee (the Joint Committee) was established to explore and make recommendations on strategic collaborative initiatives between partner councils:
 - Bay of Plenty Regional Council
 - Kawerau District Council
 - Ōpōtiki District Council
 - Whakatāne District Council
2. While the Joint Committee does not have the authority to commit any council to a particular course of action, it provides a forum for developing shared positions on matters of sub-regional significance. A joint submission signals areas of alignment across the Eastern Bay, strengthening the credibility and coherence of our advocacy and giving external agencies confidence that the sub-region is speaking from a common foundation.

OUR STRATEGIC POSITION ON THE SIMPLIFYING LOCAL GOVERNMENT REFORMS

3. The Committee welcomes the opportunity to comment on the Government's *Simplifying Local Government* proposal. We support the intent to create a system that is efficient, resilient, and easier for communities to understand.
4. As a sub-region with a large geographical area, low population density, and numerous iwi partners, we are acutely aware of the need for reforms that strengthen—rather than dilute—local voices. Reform must be deliberate, enduring, and well-reasoned, and not reactive.
5. The Joint Committee supports conversations that aim to improve efficiency and effectiveness. As a sub-region with a strong record of collaboration, we are committed to shaping a system that strengthens local democracy and delivers better outcomes for the communities we serve.

6. We consider the proposed timeframes to be aspirational and not reflective of the complexity of the changes proposed. The consultation on draft proposals, the establishment of a Combined Territories Board (CTB), and the development of a regional reorganisation plan cannot be viewed as a linear sequence. They must be considered alongside:

- The wider suite of reform proposals (resource management, rates capping, emergency management, water services).
- Councils’ existing statutory obligations (Long Term Plans, Annual Plans).
- Meaningful engagement with iwi to give effect to Treaty settlements, including those yet to be completed.
- Ensuring communities feel part of the process, rather than treated as transactional participants.

DESIGNING A CTB THAT REFLECTS REGIONAL REALITIES

Composition of the CTB

7. We favour a mayor-led composition rather than a model that pairs mayor with Crown Commissioners because it preserves democratic legitimacy while still enabling coherent regional leadership. A mayor-led approach maintains accountability to local communities, avoids introducing parallel lines of authority, and reduces risk of central government overreach.

Retention of Regional Councillors

8. The proposal to remove regionally elected councillors raises significant concerns. Regional Councillors play an important role in local democracy and support the region by preserving strong regional relationships that enable effective coordination of cross-district initiatives and activities.
9. We strongly recommend the retention of Regional Councillors during the transition period to ensure stability, continuity of statutory functions, and delivery of region-wide outcomes. Mayors already carry significant responsibilities and adding regional duties risks diluting their ability to focus on local priorities for communities they were elected to represent.
10. Likewise, we recommend the inclusion of one regional councillor as a member of the CTB. This seat ensures that regional statutory responsibilities remain visible in decision-making and provides essential input to support the board in any maintaining alignment with the regional context. This arrangement preserves local democratic leadership while strengthening the Board’s ability to make well-informed decisions during the transition period.

Māori Representation

11. The absence of clearly defined Māori representation within the proposal risks sending the wrong message to iwi partners. The Bay of Plenty Regional Council was the first local authority in Aotearoa to establish Māori Constituencies in 2004, and each Eastern Bay council provides for Māori wards. These arrangements have strengthened relationships with iwi and hapū and have been central to progressing shared priorities across the region.
12. Māori representation plays a critical role in advancing conversations with iwi and hapū, and any future governance model must maintain and build on these established commitments. The Joint Committee recommends the inclusion of Māori participation within the transition process, whether through representation on the CTB or through a dedicated advisory function. The specific mechanism should be co-designed with iwi. What is essential, however, is that Māori participation is embedded from the outset to ensure the future design of local government reflects Treaty obligations and the aspirations of Māori across the Eastern Bay.

ENSURING FAIR AND BALANCED DECISION-MAKING IN THE CTB

13. We acknowledge the complexity of designing a fair voting model for the CTB. The consultation document notes issues with both the *One Mayor, One Vote* and *Pure Population* models. We agree that each has limitations.
14. Across the Eastern Bay, councils hold a range of views:
 - Some councils prefer *One Mayor, One Vote* as the essential foundation for protecting rural and sub-regional interests.
 - Others are open to a hybrid model **because it incorporates One-Mayor-One-Vote as a core component**, while allowing for additional weighting.
 - There is recognition that *One Mayor, One Vote* alone may struggle to maintain social licence across the wider region.
 - Kawerau District & Ōpōtiki District Councils do not support a pure-population-based voting model, as it risks marginalising large geographic districts that have smaller populations.
15. Given this, the Joint Committee supports:
 - **A voting model that reflects regional realities**, including geography, land area, water catchments, and resource contributions.
 - **The inclusion of a Regional Council representative** onto the CTB with full voting rights.
 - **Recognition that CTB voting models may appropriately differ between regions**, reflecting their unique circumstances.

16. We note that the Local Government Commission is currently developing guidance to provide clarity and balance between approaches. This guidance is essential before we can responsibly commit to a final model.

SYSTEM STEWARDSHIP, ROLES, AND A STABLE TRANSITION

Crown Commissioners

17. We do not support Crown Commissioners as default decision-makers. However, Commissioners may be appropriate to address skill gaps on the CTB and bring independence to specific functions—for example, accredited Resource Management Commissioners. We therefore recommend an ability for CTBs to appoint commissioners where needed, using a ‘One-Mayor-One-Vote process’.

Role of Central Agencies

18. The reforms present an opportunity to reconsider the functions currently carried out by central government agencies and how these intersect with local government responsibilities.

19. The proposed reform creates space to explore new pathways for delivering community services. We believe this conversation should include where central agency functions could be better administered locally, particularly where councils are closer to communities and better placed to deliver integrated, place-based outcomes.

20. Areas for exploration include, but are not limited to:

- Climate change
- Economic development
- Emergency management
- Social housing.

URGENT ENGAGEMENT REQUIRED TO MEET REFORM EXPECTATIONS

21. Given the compressed policy timeline and the significance of the decisions before the sector, the Committee requests an urgent meeting with officials from the Department of Internal Affairs and the Minister of Local Government to clarify how councils can realistically meet the expectations set out in the consultation document.

Signed by Nándor Tánczos
Chairperson, Eastern Bay of Plenty Joint Committee