

ORC feedback on ‘Simplifying Local Government – a draft proposal’

[Note: The following responses follow the structure of the digital consultation form at <https://consultations.digital.govt.nz/simplifying-local-government/proposal>. They will be transferred to the online form once approved.]

1. Do you agree there is a need to simplify local government?

[Multi-choice question] ORC **strongly agrees** that there is a need to simplify local government.

2. What do you think of the proposed approach overall?

ORC recognises the importance of ensuring that local government structures are fit for purpose and able to support strong community representation, effective environmental management, resilient infrastructure, and coherent planning across regions. ORC’s response to the proposal reflects its commitment to reform, to robust regional governance, and to the long-term wellbeing of the communities and environments it serves.

ORC supports the Government’s initiatives to review and reform local government in New Zealand. ORC considers that simplification can be beneficial where it reduces duplication, reduces costs, gains efficiencies and strengthens public understanding.

ORC has concerns with both stages of the proposal, as detailed in later responses.

- ORC strongly disagrees with the stage 1 proposal to replace regional councillors with a Combined Territories Board (CTB).
- ORC considers that business as usual regional council governance functions should remain with regional councillors, who hold a regional mandate from the community.
- ORC supports Regional Reorganisation Plans (RRPs) in principle but strongly recommends that the process be undertaken by a body other than the CTB. Further detail is provided in question 8.

3. Do you agree with replacing regional councillors with a Combined Territories Board (CTB)?

[Multi-choice question] ORC **strongly disagrees** with the proposal to replace regional councillors with a CTB.

ORC does not agree with the proposal to replace regional councillors with a CTB. Territorial mayors are elected to represent their own districts or cities, not their region. ORC is concerned that the CTB model would create unavoidable conflicts of interest and undermine the integrity of regional decision-making and regional democracy. ORC considers that regional council governance functions should remain with those holding a regional mandate from the community or, as a fallback position, commissioners operating in a caretaker capacity.

ORC is particularly concerned that a CTB would urbanise decision-making and weaken practical rural voices, undermining the catchment-based and environmental responsibilities that regional governance must uphold. ORC considers that effective regional governance requires a dedicated regional focus, community endorsement, specialist understanding, and continuity of oversight, none of which are supported by the CTB model.

4. What level of Crown participation in regional decision-making do you prefer?

[Multi-choice question] No answer to this question

5. Do you agree that mayors on the CTB should have a proportional vote adjusted for effective representation?

[Multi-choice question] ORC **disagrees** that mayors on the CTB should have a proportional vote adjusted for effective representation.

6. What do you like or dislike about the voting proposal for the CTB?

ORC maintains that voting mechanics cannot resolve the underlying structural issues associated with the CTB. For any CTB to work effectively, members would require clear statutory expectations to act for the regional interest rather than their territorial constituencies. Without such expectations, adjusted voting risks reinforcing the territorial bias it seeks to overcome.

ORC considers that the ability of the governance structure, and those sitting within it, to focus on the regional interest is more important than the technical design of the voting system. Governance conduct, strong analysis, and appropriate process design are, therefore, more critical than the voting formula itself.

7. What do you think about the ways that communities crossing regional boundaries could be represented?

While ORC does not support mayoral representation on the CTB, should that model progress ORC would support the 'additional representation' approach set out in the proposal document. This approach would ensure that communities spanning regional boundaries (particularly the Waitaki District) are represented in all relevant forums. Representation through a delegate of the mayor would be appropriate for smaller communities in that instance. ORC views this approach as consistent with natural communities of interest, particularly catchments, and essential to ensuring these communities are not disadvantaged by administrative boundary lines.

ORC does not think the re-organisation process should be constrained by current regional boundaries. Looking beyond boundaries would provide for innovation and an opportunity to re-set the local government model for the future. It would also provide an opportunity to look how to best govern catchment scale opportunities, environmental issues that go beyond current regional boundaries, infrastructure requirements and social impacts on communities of interest.

8. Do you support the proposal to require CTBs to develop Regional Reorganisation Plans?

[Multi-choice question] ORC **strongly disagrees** with the proposal to require CTBs to develop regional reorganisation plans.

ORC supports RRP in principle but does not support CTBs developing them. ORC considers that designing future governance arrangements is a complex and sensitive task requiring impartiality, expertise, and balanced representation. It is therefore better suited to an independent body or for us a South Island-wide process involving the Crown, regional and territorial councils, iwi/Māori, and independent experts. Such an approach would provide greater legitimacy, reduce conflicts of interest, and allow for more innovative and regionally appropriate solutions.

Further, there are existing local government reorganisation processes that specify participants, timeframes, consultation and implementation that could be used to support the reorganisation process with appropriate amendments as necessary to meet Government and the sector's ambitions to complete reorganisation plans as efficiently as possible.

9. What do you think about the criteria proposed for assessing Regional Reorganisation Plans?

ORC considers the criteria to be a constructive starting point but incomplete. It believes that environmental protection and catchment outcomes must be explicitly included. Strengthening the criteria in this area would support more credible and durable reorganisation proposals.

10. What do you think about how the proposal provides for iwi/Māori interests and Treaty arrangements?

ORC values the long-standing relationship with mana whenua in our region. We support the position that Iwi should have a role in any future change mechanism, should one be introduced by Government. We support the position that the focus should be the development of high-quality regional reorganisation plans which are enduring and intergenerational, and that existing regional councils should remain in place for the duration of the current term to support a smooth transition process.