

20th February 2026

Attention: Minister Chris Bishop and Minister Simon Watts

Buller District Council Submission on Simplifying Local Government Proposal

1. Overview/Executive Summary

The Buller District Council welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission on Simplifying Local Government reform. As per the discussion paper there are many and varied challenges faced by Local and Central Government in New Zealand – we acknowledge the significant reforms that Central Government is making at both a Local and Central Government level, and the interface between these.

We provide this submission as an indication that we acknowledge and support the need for change for New Zealand, and the expectations of our communities on the roles, functions, obligations, and financial sustainability of Local (and Central) Government.

Although there is a high level of support for assessing and implementing changes and alterations to the way the Local Government operates, there are also unique learnings, attributes and key considerations that will guide the Buller District throughout the pending process of reform.

Reform must be anchored in evidence—local, national, and international and it must be funded appropriately. Small Councils such as Buller do not have the capacity or Annual Plan budget to absorb major structural change without Government support.

We support a reform in principle, but not reform that risks further centralisation, unfunded mandates, or dilution of our local voice.

We also wish to note the excellent working relationships that our Council has with our West Coast partners, and ultimately this will be fundamental throughout the process. It is likely that there will be differences of opinion – but

we are committed to working collaboratively with Central and Local Government partners to assess options, whilst working alongside our communities to ensure that the 'Best for Buller' is front and centre of the required reforms.

We wish to speak to our submission.

2. **Unique Perspectives – Buller and the West Coast**

Ensuring that Local Government reform works for all requires a tailored approach for each Region in New Zealand – an amalgamation and/or unitary Council will be vastly different for small, isolated areas with high social capital such as ours when compared to Tier one or Tier two urban environments.

Buller, and indeed the West Coast, have challenges, opportunities and context which is important to acknowledge at the start of this process – this acknowledgment should guide the subsequent stages of the proposed reform.

a. The West Coast and Buller are different. At face value it appears logical that the West Coast should be working constructively on Unitary and potentially Amalgamated Council Functions due to population density and volume of residents. However, the geographical distances are drastic and if not acknowledged may lead to a weakening of local democratic process – the distance of the top of the West Coast to the bottom is similar from Auckland to Wellington – this requires serious consideration when looking ahead to potential reforms.

b. Local democracy – Our communities value self-determination and choice, indeed it is in our DNA. One of the core reasons we enjoy living here is our proximity to decision-making, our ability to influence change at a local level and the transparency of our decisions and processes. This must be safe guarded at all costs for our community, and models presented of changes to Local Government must provide evidence of stronger local democracy.

c. Historical Context – The West Coast has been here before. The discussion of Unitary and Amalgamation is not new for the West Coast, with substantive work having taken place in 2015 to 2018 to assess options via the Local Government Commission. This led to the Te Tai o Poutini (TTPP)

District Plan, one district plan shared at a Regional Level for the West Coast. It is clear that the views of the communities involved differ significantly.

- d. Deprivation, industry, and social indicators** – Buller has an aging population, with almost double the population of over 65's compared to the national average. Alongside this, there are opportunities and constraints in our key industries – when these are aligned with the social indicators (exposure to natural hazards, deprivation, job security, education, health etc) our district has distinct needs which require consideration.
- e. Stewardship of the Conservation Estate for all of New Zealand.** Buller and the West Coast are fortunate to have the vast majority of New Zealand's national parks and native forests. This is a unique attribute that benefits our entire country, however it also constrains our district in rateability and should be considered.
- f. Cutting our own track** – Westport (our largest urban area) has recently undertaken and fully developed a Council-endorsed, award-winning Masterplan, that outlines what is required for the community to grow and thrive. There is no doubt Buller is different; we are unique and it is imperative that local voice matters. We are the only district on the West Coast to have developed such a community-led strategy that guides future growth, development, and resilience. We need to ensure that the work that has been done for Westport does not get lost in the drive for a unitary council. Further to this, insurance, and a high exposure to natural hazards in the district requires consideration when looking at the context of Regional Council functions.

3. Working Together – at a Local, Regional and National Level

The Buller District and the West Coast Territorial Authorities and Iwi already work closely together on various elements that effect the Coast. We are united in our commitment to working collaboratively with all our Stakeholders – while acknowledging that we may have differences.

Whilst we understand that there is a desire to look at amalgamating the four Councils on the West Coast into one Unitary Council, that may not be the best

solution. There are multiple options that must be worked through which will take time and of course will cost a substantial amount.

We, however, have yet to see evidence that this would work in the best interests of our community – the process must be followed to ensure that we have not merely combined the functions of four councils to no end, or potentially a detrimental end. Other options will require a deeper exploration, for example our historical context and traditional boundaries with the Top of the South Island, and the West Coast–Tasman electoral boundaries are worth bearing in mind.

As previously stated, our assessment of options in due course to inform a Regional Reorganisation Plan will be anchored in clear evidence of beneficial outcomes for our communities.

4. Key Concerns, Issues and Areas for Further Consideration

- a. The Cost of reform** – the process, let alone the implementation of any reform will carry a large financial burden. The TTPP has already placed a \$10M cost to the Coast for the District Plan and that cost will continue to grow as we head into appeal mediation and legal battles. Beyond this the Local Water Done Well reform adds a further considerable cost implication on small Councils. Due to the small rating base of the district and region we advocate that costs incurred should be at the cost of Central rather than Local Government.
- b. Loss of democratic process** – We urge the Government to reconsider its desire to dis-establish the role of our Regional Councillors during the period of creating a Regional Reorganisation Plan. Our communities voted in our elected representatives to serve their best interests with Local Government at the time of the Election. The Regional Councillors were elected with the relevant skill set to meet the needs of the Regional Council mandated responsibilities.
- c. Development West Coast (DWC) and the Economic Development of Buller and the West Coast.** We wish to note that we also want to work closely with Central Government and West Coast Territorial Authorities to review, assess and amend the roles and functions of Development West Coast. While looking at all elements of Local Government it would be

remiss to not include the economic development branch – this would require Central Government involvement.

- d. The struggle for survival.** We have concerns that this process may be a ‘Hobsons choice’ moment. Any changes to the Buller District and associated governance and management structures must be clearly supported by our communities and based on clear evidence.
- e. Headquarter bias.** As noted earlier, we support change, but we need to ensure that our communities' best interests are front and centre of potential reforms. Centralised decision makers can and frequently do have locational bias. This subconscious bias can cause individuals to make decisions based on geographical proximity and familiarity, and regional leaders can tend to favour investment into areas that they are familiar with, rather than considering the wider options. The Buller already feels that there is a lack of understanding from centralised organisations such as Regional Council and DWC, of both the district's challenges and opportunities, thus we have concerns, that the power centre of decisions for our district being centralised, and possibly located in another district, will potentially leave our district poorer again, in influence and staff capacity and capabilities via centralisation.
- f. Conflicts of Interest.** The proposal to have Mayors sit on the Combined Territorial Board (CTB) creates a conflict of interest. A Mayor's primary job is to advocate for their district. On a regional board, they must advocate for the *region*. These often clash. Our submission asks for a clear Legal Framework for Conflicts of Interest if the Government pursues the CTB model for the West Coast.
- g. Alignment between Local Water Done Well and wider Local Government reform** We also wish to note that there is a distinct relationship between LWDW CCO works underway and the significance of this reform – these are interrelated and deserve due consideration throughout the pending process.

5. Responses to Government submission questions

Do you agree that there is a need to simplify Local Government?

Agree/strongly agree.

We strongly support the need for alterations to Local Government. We advocate that an evidence-based approach on potential models be assessed over time, also including historical considerations of the effectiveness and efficiency of previous reforms – the two-tiered system alongside the RMA requires consideration.

What do you think of the approach overall?

Although Council is supportive of the desire to simplify Local Government, we are not comfortable with the current approach.

We disagree with the establishment of the CTB's and removal of democratically elected representatives with substantive skill sets.

We advocate for a bespoke regional approach, looking to the current functions of the Mayors, Chairs, and Iwi Forum on the West Coast. However, we also wish to acknowledge that alternative options for amalgamations and unitary council structures outside of the West Coast region are required.

We also wish to note that our clear intention is to work openly in a transparent manner with our community, we are fortunate to still retain some strengths in local democratic participation, take the results of the turnout of the 2025 elections as an example – and will work closely alongside our various communities to ensure their voices are guiding our evolution as a district.

We are uncomfortable with the proposed uncertainty on process and timelines. These reforms will be resource heavy and require clear milestones and timelines – although we wish to move at pace alongside other stakeholders this must be balanced by the ability to ensure that cost implications and quality of outcome are not compromised by pace. We cannot forget that we also have a Water Services Council Controlled Organisation (WSCCO) to setup within the same period which is also resource hungry.

There are also concerns in respect to cross-party support for this reform. It is critical to provide certainty as we move forward.

Do you agree with replacing regional councillors with a CTB?

Strongly Disagree

We value democratic process, and we value the significant skill sets of our Regional Councillors. It is untenable to think that a CTB will be able to accommodate the workload of not only governing all aspects of Regional Council activities but further to this to also enact and enable a Regional Reorganisation Plan to be created while serving as Mayor to the district.

An alternative would be to look at the Mayors, Chairs and Iwi Forum as being a vehicle to work on Regional Reorganisation Plans – with further support to the Mayor from the Deputy Mayor and one further Councillor working alongside Regional Councillors.

What do you like or dislike about the proposal to replace regional councillors with a CTB?

Like:

Dislike:

- Loss of democratic process. Removing our duly elected Councillors without due process and community engagement is untenable as an approach.
- Overbearing workload. As per above, there is a substantial workload to create a Regional Reorganization Plan, govern Regional Council activities and provide Mayoral responsibilities to the district.
- High-cost implications. Placing an unnecessary further burden on or ratepayer base.

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

Commissioner (voting)

We firmly believe there is a role for a Crown Commissioner to work alongside on our Regional Reorganisation Plan, however the cost associated should be carried by Central Governments balance sheet.

We understand that there may be differences in our region, to avoid potential conflicts, settlement agreements etc we see a role for professional and independent input alongside our proposed team to work on the reorganisation

plan. Similar to the TTPP Committee we could see the Crown Commissioner acting as Chair for the Forum to remove any sense of bias.

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

One seat one vote is our preferred approach for decision making processes and representation.

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

As per previous commentary, we advocate for a bespoke approach for the West Coast. Rather than a CTB, as per the submission documentation, we prefer to work through the Mayors, Chairs, and Iwi Forum (with additional members, and support) to work through the Regional Reorganisation Plan.

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

Further work on success criteria should be developed in accordance with the Mayors, Chairs and Iwi Forum working on the Regional Reorganisation Plan. We note and support some of the criteria proposed but advocate the district and regionally appropriate criteria should also be applied in early stages of creating a Regional Reorganisation Plan. 'What success looks like' and the criteria should be a key workstream in the early stages of initiating the Regional Reorganisation Plan.

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

The proposal does not sufficiently clarify how enduring Māori representation and partnerships will be maintained in reality. While it states Treaty settlements that place an obligation on a Regional Council will carry over, it is not clear what is intended. The West Coast Regional Council and Poutini Ngāi Tahu have in place the Mana Whakahono ā Rohe – Iwi Participation Arrangement. In our view, it is appropriate and imperative that this arrangement would carry over to the West Coast Mayors Chairs and Iwi Forum.

The Local Government Act 2002 requires that Councils provide opportunities for Māori to contribute to decision-making processes. Therefore, the reform must

maintain mana whenua partnership in regional decision-making and ensure any new governance form supports kaitiakitanga across freshwater, biodiversity, coastal and climate functions.

6. Buller District Council's Overarching Position

Subject	Commentary	Recommendation
Combined Territories Board	Does not support	Request a bespoke model for the West Coast. <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Retain West Coast Regional Councillors 2. Amplify Mayors, Chairs, and Iwi Forum with additional Governance support (e.g. Deputy Mayor + District Councillor) to create Regional Reorganisation Plan
Cost	Current reforms, (including Te Tai o Poutini Plan, LWDW) BAU and lingering natural disaster costs partnered with small district and regional population make this an unbudgeted and expensive reform process.	Provide financial support and underwriting to support the process
Reform support	Agree to the need for reform at a Local and Central Government. This is an opportunity for the districts, regions, and country to re-assess all operations and functions of Government	Ensure that the appetite for reform truly reflects districts, regions, and country's needs. Use national and international evidence and case studies to strengthen local democracy.

Role of Commissioner	Supports a commissioner to work alongside Mayors, Chairs, and Iwi Forum to act as a neutral party and resolve any potential conflicts arising – we also believe there should be voting rights associated with the role.	Provide a commissioner with voting rights to work alongside bespoke model. Commissioner to act as Chair as per TTPP model.
Regional Reorganisation Plans (RRP)	Agree with the need to have a RRP, but have concerns that staying within current Regional Boundaries may not provide all options available and consideration should be given to Buller District Unitary Council, Electoral boundaries, etc.	Develop a RRP over a two-year window ensuring all options are assessed (within Regional Boundaries and outside of).

7. In Closing

As we look ahead, the Buller District remains committed to a reform process that strengthens rather than dilutes our distinct local identity and the democratic traditions that our communities deeply value.

Any future system must respect the reality that Buller is not only geographically unique but socially and culturally bound by a powerful sense of place, resilience, and self-determination.

We expect reforms to enhance our ability to make locally informed decisions, maintain transparent governance, and uphold the voices of our residents who have shaped this district for generations.

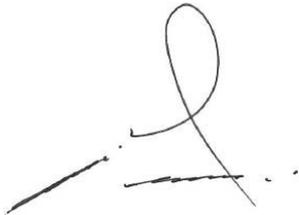
For Buller, success will be measured not through centralisation or uniformity, but through models that recognise our scale, our challenges, and our opportunities, ensuring that local leadership remains genuinely local. We stand ready to work constructively and collaboratively with our West Coast partners,

Iwi, Central Government, and our wider communities to ensure any changes lead to tangible, community-led benefits.

Ultimately, our commitment is unwavering: reforms must serve Buller's long-term wellbeing, honour our local identity, and support a thriving future for the people who call this district home.

Once again, we thank the committee for the chance to submit to these proposals.

Signed on behalf of the Buller District Council



Mayor Chris Russell