

Community Survey – Future of Local Government Feedback



Overview

This document highlights the key themes and insights gathered from the recent Community Survey on the Future of Local Government for Masterton. It outlines the priorities identified by the community in relation to a potential amalgamated council entity.

Background

In May 2026, the Government announced a proposed change programme to simplify local government through amalgamation into unitary authorities. As part of this, the Government introduced the *Head Start* pathway, giving councils 12 weeks to develop and submit their own amalgamation proposals for consideration. The Government will make the final decision on any received proposals.

Councils that do not participate in *Head Start* will fall under the *Back Stop* pathway. Under this process, central government will determine what amalgamation will look like for those councils following the 2028 local government elections.

Alongside independent benchmarking and general conversations with Elected Members, Masterton District Council invited the community to provide feedback on their priorities for the future of local government. Feedback closed at 11.59pm on Friday 19 June.

Summary: Top three takeaways

1. Local voices matter

The community wants to ensure a strong Wairarapa based voice informs any final model

The clearest signal in the data is that respondents want Masterton to stay connected to a Wairarapa voice and decision-making structure.

This is reinforced by:

- 80.5% supporting a single Wairarapa authority with Carterton and South Wairarapa versus 11.5% supporting a wider Wellington authority.
- Strong free-text opposition to being absorbed into a Wellington-based structure.
- Repeated concerns about rural needs, local priorities and Wairarapa identity being overshadowed by urban interest

If the Council proceeds under the Head Start pathway, the community feedback provides a strong mandate to prioritise a solution that prioritises a Wairarapa voice, with clear safeguards for Masterton's voice and rural/community representation.

If the Council proceeds but as part of a broader Wellington model, protection of Masterton's voice and rural/community representation should be prioritised as part of any final structure and governance or delegation provisions.

2. Cost is key

Support for change is conditional on proving value for money and financial fairness. Respondents are focused on whether amalgamation will genuinely improve affordability and reduce duplication while protecting service levels.

Key signals include:

- Value for money was the highest-rated priority at 4.06/5.
- Quality infrastructure and services followed closely at 4.03/5.
- Top concerns included services becoming less locally focused, potential cost increases, and reduced responsiveness.
- Written responses repeatedly raised concerns about rates, debt, transition costs, subsidies, and whether a Wairarapa-only model could fund services currently supported through Greater Wellington Regional Council.

Any proposal needs a strong financial case. The community will expect evidence on rates impacts, transition costs, debt, subsidies, infrastructure funding and service levels. A Wairarapa model is favoured, but it needs to be credible, transparent and above all affordable.

3. Locals value local

People want local services and accountability retained, even if regional coordination improves.

The data shows a clear preference for services to remain locally managed where they directly affect community life, while recognising that some services may benefit from broader regional coordination.

Key signals include:

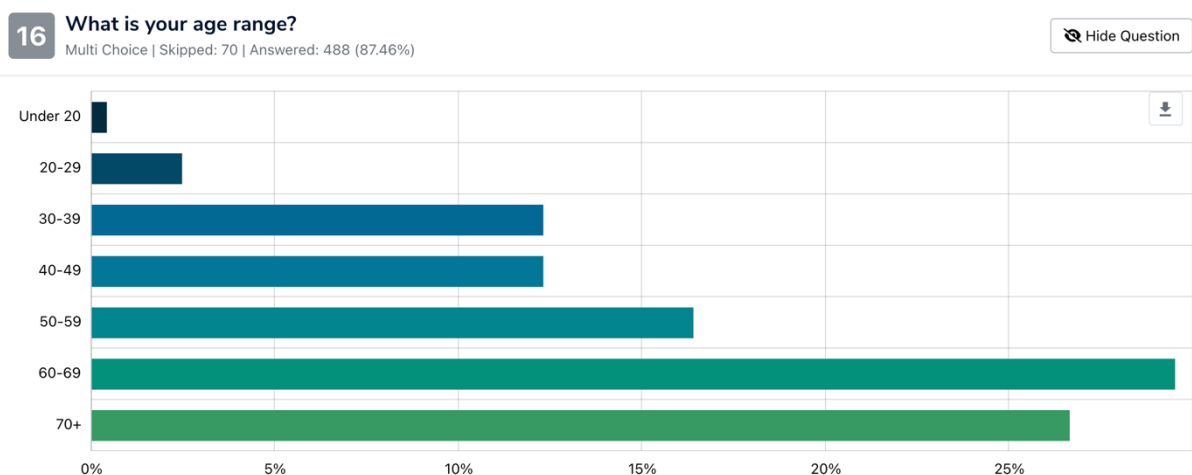
- More than 50% of respondents preferred all listed services to be managed locally.
- The strongest local delivery preferences were:
 - Community facilities: 91.4%
 - Parks, reserves and open spaces: 87.8%
 - Community development: 86.2%
- Regional delivery was more accepted for:
 - Public transport: 39.3%
 - Emergency management and resilience: 36.7%
 - Economic development: 30.1%
- For representation, the strongest priority was clear accountability for local decisions at 4.16/5.

The responses indicate they want the Council to consider governance and service design options that keep community-facing services close to people, while using scale where it improves infrastructure planning, resilience, transport, environmental management or economic development.

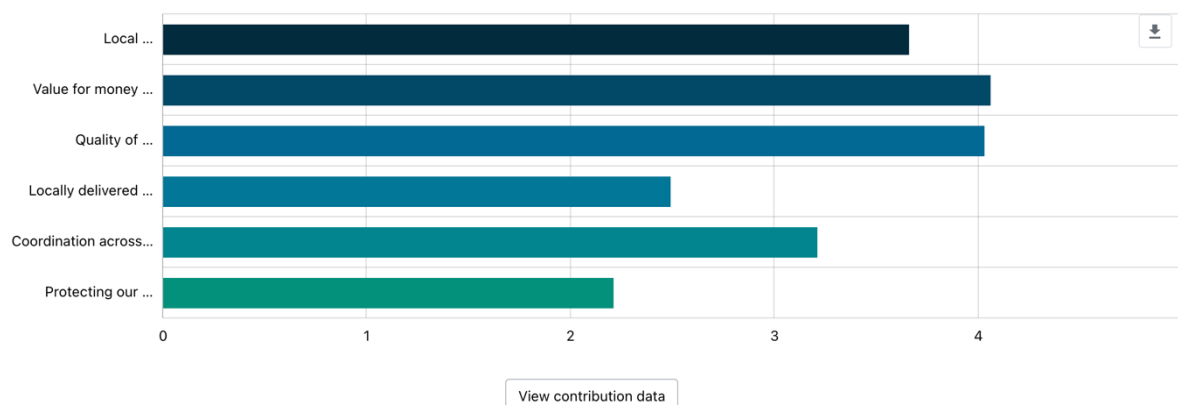
Report

In total, we received 559 submissions from 487 submitters. Submitter numbers are based on a unique account or device. For example, if 10 submissions were made from one device, this would count as 10 submissions but only one submitter. This disparity is attributable to paper-based submissions later entered online by council officers.

While personal data was optional and therefore not included in this report, 87.4% of respondents answered the age range question. This is shown below and provides an indication of the spread of responses across different age groups.



What matters most about how local government works in our area



We asked contributors to prioritise what matters most about local government in our area.

The six areas offered for ranking by priority were:

- Local decision making close to the community
- Value for money (keeping costs down)

- Quality of infrastructure and services
- Locally delivered infrastructure and services
- Coordination across the Wairarapa region
- Protecting our district's voice and character

The highest scoring priority was value for money (keeping costs down) at 4.06/5, followed closely by quality of infrastructure and services (4.03/5), and local decision making close to the community (3.66/5). The two lowest scoring areas were locally delivered infrastructure and services (2.49/5) and protecting our district's identity and character (2.21/5).

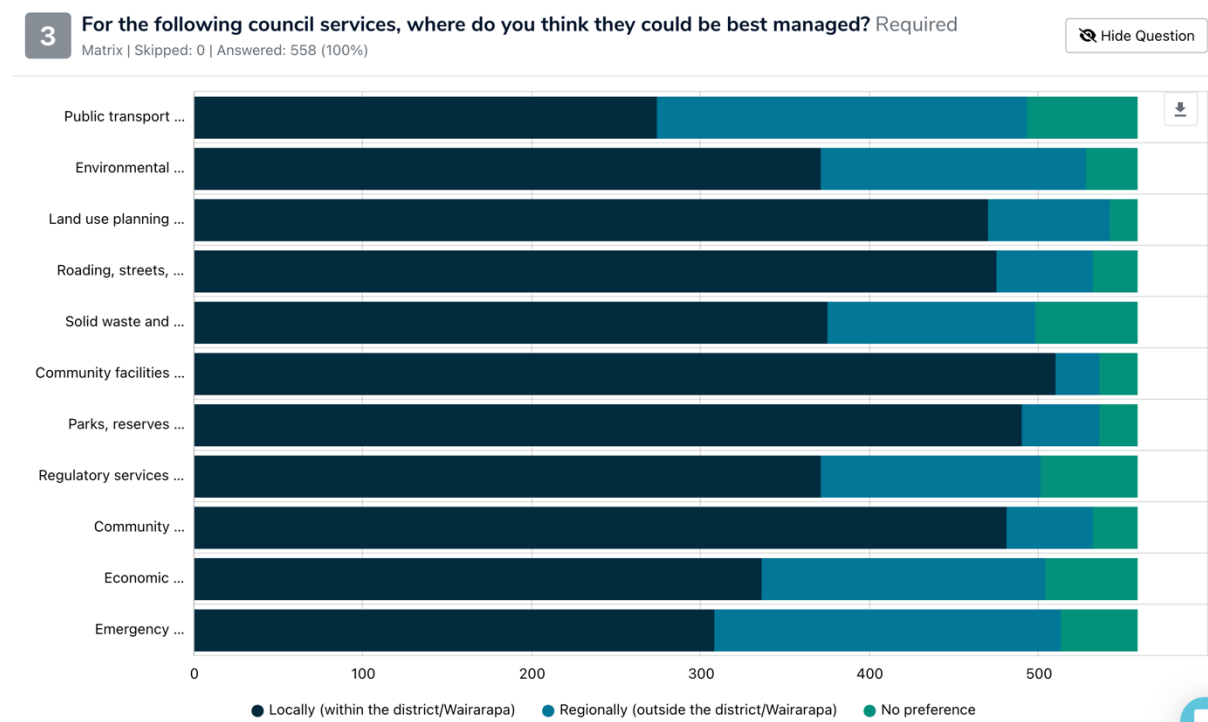
Participants were asked if they wanted to share anything further on what matters most for local government in a free-text box. Written feedback shows a strong overall desire for local control, voice, and independence, with many contributors emphasising that decisions should be made by and for the Wairarapa.

There was a clear theme of resistance to being merged into Wellington, driven by concerns about losing local voice, maintaining rural identity, and retaining influence over local priorities. At the same time, people want a council that is approachable, accountable, and genuinely listens to the community, with transparent communication and meaningful engagement shaping decisions.

A second major theme centred around efficiency, affordability, and capable governance. Rising rates and perceived waste are key concerns, with frequent calls to reduce duplication, improve cost-effectiveness, and ensure value for money. Respondents want a streamlined, well-run council with skilled leadership, good decision-making, and a focus on delivering core services well. Views on amalgamation are mixed, but there is general agreement that any structural change should be carefully planned, driven by community benefit, and designed to improve efficiency rather than protect existing systems or staffing.

Finally, there is a strong focus on infrastructure, sustainability, and long-term regional outcomes. Essential services such as water, transport, and flood protection are seen as top priorities, alongside better long-term planning and investment. People also emphasise environmental protection, coordinated regional approaches where appropriate, and support for local communities, businesses, and vulnerable groups. Overall, contributors want a future-focused council that balances regional coordination with local delivery, protects the environment, strengthens the local economy, and ensures equitable access to services across the Wairarapa.

For the following Council Services, where do you think they could be best managed



This question focused on where certain services should be delivered from. Given the proposal for a unitary authority, where councils would deliver both local and regional functions, this question was designed to explore which services people wanted delivered locally, which could be delivered regionally, and which they had no preference for.

The services offered for consideration included:

- Public transport
- Environmental management (rivers, land, biodiversity)
- Land use planning (district plans, zoning)
- Roothing, streets, footpaths, and parking areas
- Solid waste and recycling services
- Community facilities (pools, libraries, sports fields, customer service centres, etc.)
- Parks, reserves, and open spaces
- Regulatory services (building consents and licences)
- Community development (grants, local funding agreements, community support, events)
- Economic development and tourism
- Emergency management and resilience

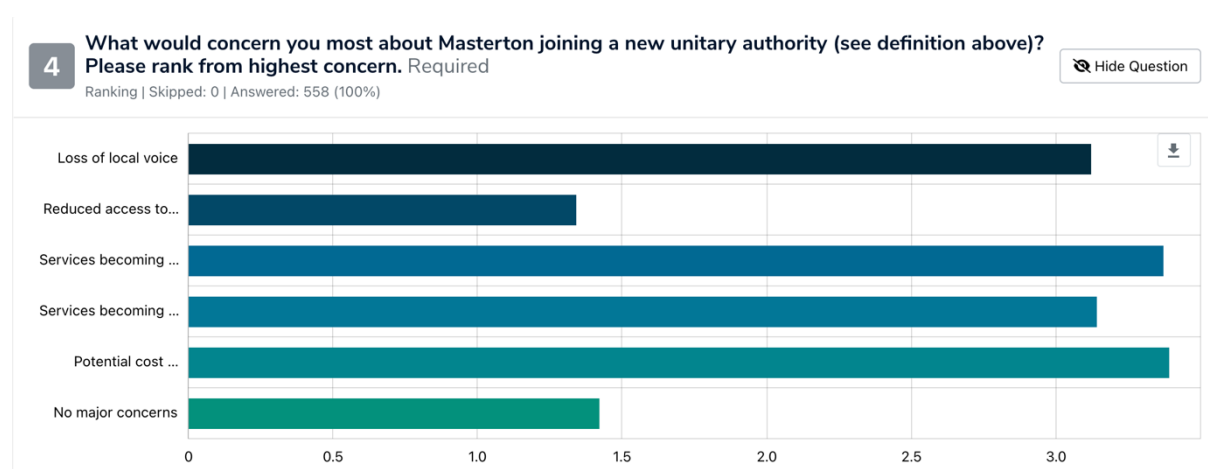
The x-axis shows the number of respondents, with preferences indicated by the colour of each bar. Overall, more than 50% of respondents indicated a

preference for all listed services to be managed locally (within the district or Wairarapa).

The strongest preference for local delivery was for community facilities, with 91.4% of respondents wanting these managed locally, followed by parks, reserves, and open spaces (87.8%), and community development (86.2%).

For regional delivery, public transport had the highest level of support, with 39.3% indicating it could be delivered regionally, followed by emergency management and resilience (36.7%) and economic development (30.1%).

What concerns you the most?



The community was asked to rank their biggest concerns from a list of five key topics or indicate that they had no major concerns about the proposed amalgamation.

The topics offered for ranking were:

- Loss of local voice
- Reduced access to elected members
- Services becoming less locally focused
- Services becoming less responsive
- Potential cost increases

Services becoming less locally focused (3.21/5) and potential cost increases (2.93/5) ranked the highest, followed closely by loss of local voice (2.73/5) and services becoming less responsive (2.67/5). Fewer respondents indicated that they had no major concerns (1.9/5) or were concerned about reduced access to elected members (1.12/5).

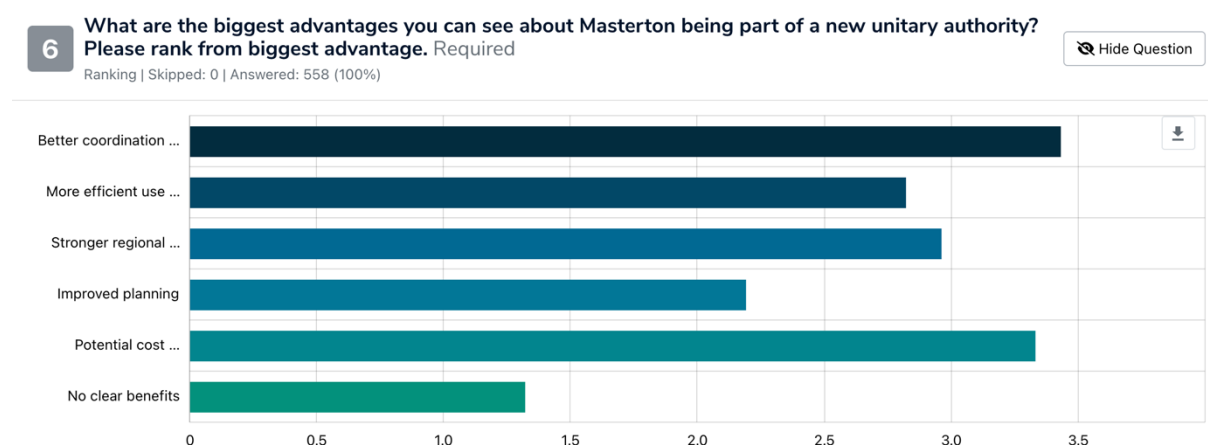
Participants were also given the opportunity to share additional comments. The responses highlighted strong concerns around costs, funding, and financial sustainability. Many people are worried about losing subsidies currently provided through Greater Wellington Regional Council, particularly for public

transport, flood protection, and environmental management. There is uncertainty about whether a Wairarapa-only model could maintain current service levels, alongside concerns about rising rates, transition costs, or being required to take on debt or infrastructure costs from other areas. At the same time, some respondents see potential efficiency gains from amalgamation, provided it genuinely reduces duplication and delivers better value.

A second key theme is representation, local voice, and identity. There is significant concern that joining a larger Wellington-based structure would dilute the Wairarapa's influence, with urban priorities potentially outweighing rural needs. Many respondents emphasised the importance of maintaining local accountability, responsiveness, and strong community representation, particularly for rural and coastal areas. Protecting the Wairarapa's distinct voice and ensuring decisions are made by people who understand local issues are seen as critical. There are concerns that larger governance structures could reduce engagement and weaken the community's voice.

Finally, respondents raised issues around service delivery, governance quality, and the risks associated with change. These include concerns about reduced service levels, increased bureaucracy, job losses, and the ability to attract skilled staff or manage expanded responsibilities such as transport and environmental functions. Some also highlighted the risks of rushed decision-making, limited detailed analysis, and an uneven distribution of costs and benefits across districts. Overall, respondents want any changes to prioritise effective, locally responsive services, fair distribution of resources, and a well-planned implementation that avoids unintended negative outcomes.

Biggest advantages for Masterton being part of a new unitary authority



This question asked participants to prioritise what they saw as the biggest advantages of becoming a unitary authority, or to indicate that they did not see

any clear benefits. Responses were totalled and averaged to produce the results.

The advantages listed were:

- Better coordination of infrastructure and planning
- More efficient use of rates
- Stronger regional decision making
- Improved planning
- Potential for cost savings/economies of scale
- No clear benefits

There is a strong view from the community that the main advantages would be better coordination of infrastructure and planning (3.44/5) and the potential for cost savings from becoming a unitary authority (3.29/5). This was followed by stronger regional decision making (3.13/5) and more efficient use of rates (2.42/5), indicating general support for the concept of economies of scale and using these to improve efficiency and reduce costs for ratepayers. There was less support for improved planning (2.01/5) as a standalone benefit, and some respondents indicated that they did not see any clear advantages to a unitary authority (1.33/5).

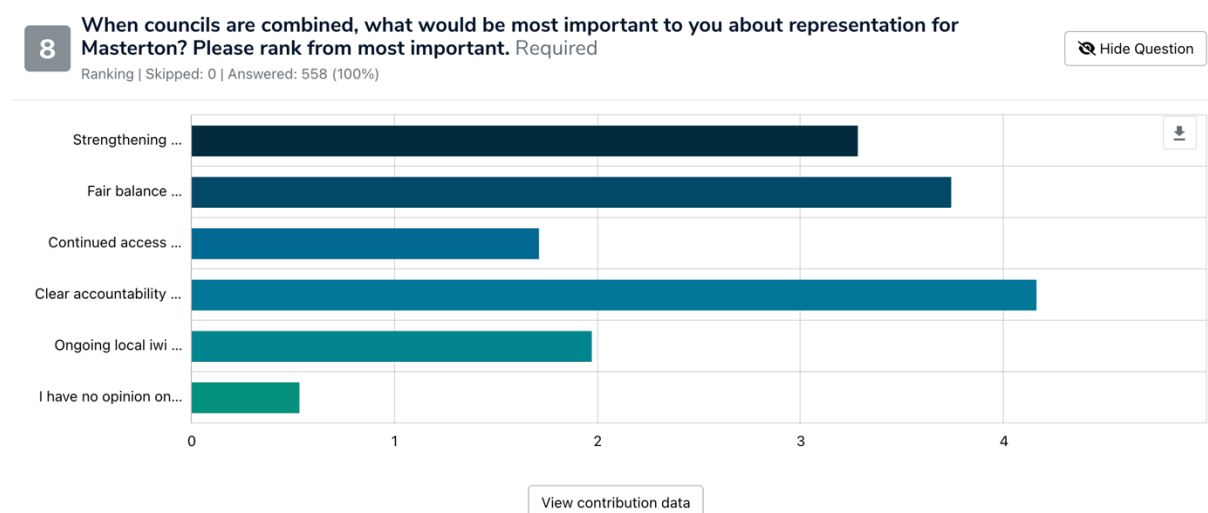
Participants were also given the opportunity to share written feedback. Responses show a mixed, and often sceptical, view of the potential advantages, with many people either unsure or believing there are limited or no real benefits to amalgamation. A common theme is a concern that promised efficiencies may not be realised. Many emphasised the need for clearer evidence around costs, savings, and service impacts before supporting any change.

Where advantages were identified, they focused on efficiency, capability, and scale. This includes reducing duplication across councils, lowering administrative overheads, sharing resources, and potentially achieving cost savings. Some respondents also see benefits in being able to recruit more specialised staff, improve planning and technical expertise, streamline processes such as consenting, and deliver services more consistently. A larger or unified structure is also seen as potentially strengthening the region's advocacy, improving access to funding, and better coordinating infrastructure, transport, and economic development.

Another key theme is the desire to strengthen a unified Wairarapa identity and voice, particularly through a Wairarapa-only model. Respondents highlighted benefits such as greater local control over decision-making, the ability to present a cohesive regional strategy (including tourism and investment), and improved collaboration across the region. However, these benefits are often seen as conditional on good implementation, with many stressing that any new

structure must remain efficient, locally focused, and clearly demonstrate real value to ratepayers.

What is the most important thing to you about representation for Masterton when combined?



This question asked people to prioritise what is most important about Masterton's representation in a bigger entity. The categories included;

- Strengthening community-level representation
- Fair balance between rural and urban areas
- Continued access to elected members
- Clear accountability for local decisions
- Ongoing local Iwi representation

A clear lead priority in this area is the clear accountability for local decisions (4.16/5), ensuring the Masterton voice is at the table for local decisions to be made. This is followed strongly by a fair balance between rural and urban areas (3.7/5) and strengthening community level representation (3.24/5). There was a lower priority given to ongoing local iwi representation (1.95/5), and continued access to elected members (1.59/5), with a small percentage not having an opinion on this (0.53/5).

Additional information responses focused on the importance of elected members having voting rights and clear accountability to their communities as part of a bigger entity. There is a clear desire for strong, capable leadership and improved engagement with the public, including more accessible processes and opportunities for community input. Some also highlight the need for greater transparency in decision-making.

A major theme is ensuring fair and balanced representation across different groups and areas. This includes strong calls for rural representation, ensuring Masterton and other districts each have a fair voice, and avoiding domination by any single area (urban or otherwise). There are also mixed views around Māori representation. Additional ideas include youth representation, ward-based structures, and ensuring diverse community perspectives are included.

Finally, there is concern around equity, identity, and maintaining local voice. Respondents want to ensure that well-managed areas are not disadvantaged by being combined with others, and that local priorities, funding, and voice are preserved. Many stress the importance of staying locally focused (particularly east coast / Wairarapa-focused) and avoiding being overshadowed by larger regions like Wellington. Overall, people want a governance model that is fair, locally responsive, inclusive, and representative of all communities, while maintaining strong accountability and protecting local interests.

Council Priorities

The final questions looked at what Council should prioritise in what a future unitary authority should look like, and whether Council should take advantage of the *Head Start* pathway.

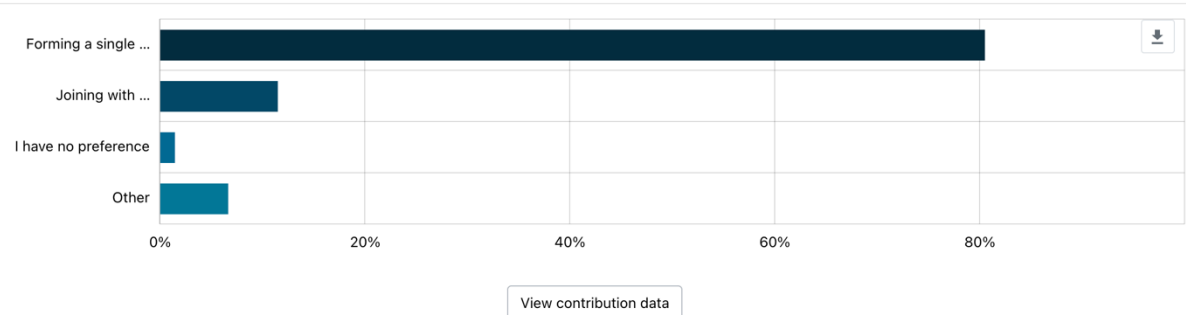
80.5% of people believe Council should form a single authority in the Wairarapa with Carterton and South Wairarapa, with 11.5% supporting a wider Wellington authority. The remaining respondents either didn't have a preference or indicated a different option but didn't indicate what they would look like.

94.3% supported Council taking advantages of the *Head Start*, with only 5.7% encouraging the *Back Stop* pathway.

A majority of respondents (90.3%) indicated they live in the Masterton district, with 6.6% living elsewhere in Wairarapa and 3.1% living outside of Wairarapa. Respondents outside of Masterton were included in this survey as while they may not live in the district, they may have relatives, own business or actively participate in the Masterton community.

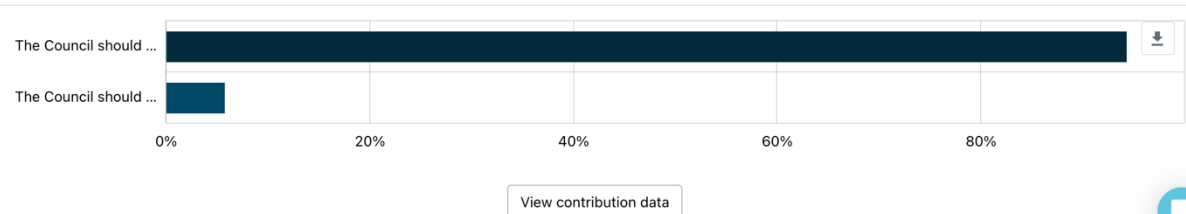
10 Considering the answers that you have given in this survey, which option would you prefer Masterton District Council prioritises? (Select one) Required [Hide Question](#)

Multi Choice | Skipped: 0 | Answered: 558 (100%)



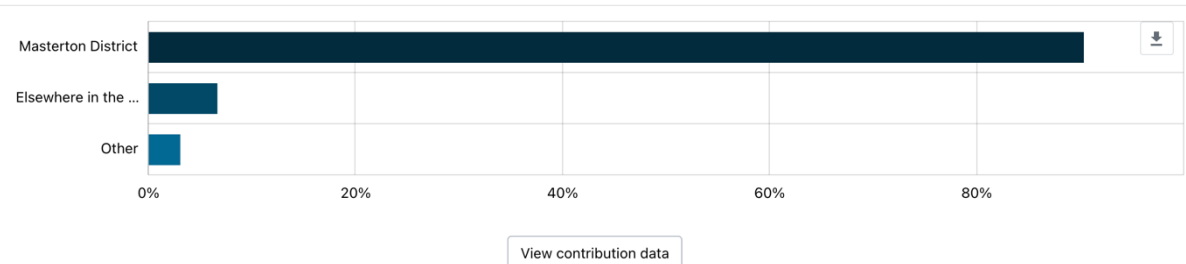
11 Which statement best reflects your view? Required [Hide Question](#)

Multi Choice | Skipped: 0 | Answered: 558 (100%)



12 Where do you live? Required [Hide Question](#)

Multi Choice | Skipped: 0 | Answered: 558 (100%)



Respondents were given the opportunity to share any further thoughts at the end of the survey. These responses emphasise strong concerns about financial sustainability, affordability, and the fair distribution of costs. Many contributors stress the need for careful analysis of funding, including subsidies (particularly from Wellington), and the true cost of delivering regional services such as transport, flood protection, and environmental management. There is a consistent call for transparent financial information, clear cost-benefit analysis, and equitable rating systems. Concerns were frequently raised about potential rate increases, cross-subsidising other districts, and inheriting debt or underinvestment from other councils.

A second major theme is the importance of local control, identity, and representation. Many respondents strongly favour keeping decision-making within the Wairarapa and resisting integration with Wellington. This is driven by concerns about losing local voice, being overlooked, or having decisions made by those unfamiliar with local or rural needs. Protecting the region's distinct

identity, community character, and local autonomy is seen as critical, alongside ensuring fair representation across all areas and maintaining strong connections between councils and residents.

Finally, there is a focus on getting both the structure and the process right. Respondents call for better planning, more detailed information, and meaningful community engagement before decisions are made. There is also emphasis on the need for a well-managed transition, including retaining skilled staff and ensuring clear operational planning to avoid service disruption. Some respondents suggest hybrid or staged approaches, such as sharing services at a regional level while maintaining local delivery. Overall, there is a clear expectation that any reform should prioritise efficient delivery of core services, long-term resilience (including infrastructure and climate preparedness), and strong accountability to ratepayers.