



Forest & Bird

TE REO O TE TAIAO | *Giving Nature a Voice*

SUBMISSION ON 'SIMPLIFYING LOCAL GOVERNMENT' CONSULTATION

To **The Department of Internal Affairs**

Simplifying Local Government team
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Submitter **Royal Forest & Bird Protection Society of New Zealand Inc. (Forest & Bird)**

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Introduction

New Zealand's largest and oldest conservation organisation

The Royal Forest & Bird Protection Society (Forest & Bird) is New Zealand's largest and longest-serving independent conservation organization with over 100,000 members, supporters, and volunteers. Our mission is to be a voice for nature – on land, in the sea, and in our fresh waters. Forest & Bird's constitutional purpose is to *“take all reasonable steps within the power of the Society for the preservation and protection of the indigenous flora and fauna and the natural features of New Zealand.”*

An advocate for nature

Forest & Bird advocates for policy development and law reform and represents nature in all levels of the Court system, in Environmental Protection Authority panel processes, and in council planning processes. A century after establishment, we are still working just as hard for the protection and restoration of our wildlife and wild places.

An interest in local government reform

In February 2023, Forest & Bird made a submission on the Review into the Future for Local Government draft report, 'He mata whāriki, he matawhānui'¹ (Attached as Appendix 1). The submission emphasised the need to prioritise environmental wellbeing in the purpose of the Local Government Act, strengthen central–local government relationships, and establish joint funding mechanisms for complex issues such as climate change adaptation and the protection of indigenous biodiversity, which are fundamental to resilient and healthy communities, and a thriving economy. The Review's final report, 'He piki tūranga, he piki kōtuku'², released in June 2023, set out 17 recommendations across five key reform areas. These included embedding intergenerational wellbeing in local government's purpose, strengthening Te Tiriti-based partnerships, and establishing a dedicated Crown department to improve collaboration between central and local government.

While Forest & Bird recognises that reform is necessary to ensure local government is fit for the future, we are concerned that the proposed Simplifying Local Government consultation misses

¹ [https://www.dia.govt.nz/diawebsite.nsf/Files/Future-for-Local-Government/\\$file/Draft-report-October-2022.pdf](https://www.dia.govt.nz/diawebsite.nsf/Files/Future-for-Local-Government/$file/Draft-report-October-2022.pdf)

² [https://www.dia.govt.nz/diawebsite.nsf/Files/Future-for-Local-Government/\\$file/Te-Arotake_Final-report.pdf](https://www.dia.govt.nz/diawebsite.nsf/Files/Future-for-Local-Government/$file/Te-Arotake_Final-report.pdf)

the mark and does not adequately reflect the recommendations of the 2023 review, despite that consultation's extensive and well-informed process.

The Simplifying Local Government proposal is a step backwards, which risks weakening local government's ability to address climate change adaptation and mitigation, freshwater pollution and allocation, and indigenous biodiversity loss in a way that meets community needs - these are issues that are critical to the environmental, social, cultural and economic wellbeing of communities in Aotearoa New Zealand.

The Simplifying Local Government proposal ignores the 2023 recommendation to improve collaboration between central and local government and to ensure core, critical functions can be appropriately implemented. This proposal instead modifies the structure of local government itself. This risks detracting from and failing to address the real issues which are challenging both councils and the communities they serve.

Forest & Bird has a strong interest in effective local government. It is at the regional and district level where decisions are made that can directly shape how communities respond to climate change, biodiversity loss, resource management, and the delivery of safe and resilient water infrastructure. Too often these responses have been fragmented, inconsistent, or simply inadequate for the scale of the environmental challenges Aotearoa New Zealand faces now and into the future.

Forest & Bird believes that nature must be embedded at the heart of decision-making. A healthy environment underpins human wellbeing, and nature-based solutions remain among the most effective and affordable tools we have for both climate mitigation and adaptation³. Every remaining wetland, river, indigenous dryland, tussock land, and forest is critical for protecting our globally unique native species and ecosystems.

Forest & Bird is concerned that the Simplifying Local Government proposal:

³ Parsons, Sam (2024) Nature-Based Solutions For Climate Adaptation: Roadmap For Scaling Use In Aotearoa New Zealand - https://www.boffamiskell.co.nz/storage/uploads/e68f25b2-99a2-4485-825a-c64d7d32361b/Nature-based-Solutions-Roadmap-for-Climate-Adaptation_compresses.pdf

- Fails to take into account important recommendations from the 2023 Future for Local Government review.
- Does not clearly define the problem it is trying to solve. It appears to assume that Regional Council governance is the problem. However, no rationale is given for this.
- Lacks understanding and clarity on local government functions and how these might be impacted by proposed changes.
- Potentially weakens local democracy and autonomy by introducing increased central government oversight and the ability to veto or make decisions on behalf of the local community.
- Diminishes local government's ability to address the twin-crises of climate change and indigenous biodiversity loss within a local/regional context.
- Potentially limits Councils' capacity to meet unique community needs.
- Does not clearly integrate with the Government's wider packages of reforms (including RMA reforms).
- Risks increasing funding pressures for the natural environment.
- Does not address the ownership of assets, such as flood banks.
- Does not consider alternative models, such as a catchment-based approach to governance.

Below, our submission answers the consultation questions and further expands on Forest & Bird's key concerns with this proposal.

Comments on the Simplifying Local Government Proposal questionnaire

Part A: Background

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

Forest & Bird agrees that local government reform is necessary to reduce costs, increase efficiency, improve collaboration and remove duplication. However, the problem the consultation is trying to 'fix' has not been defined and the options proposed in this report are contrary to the recommendations of the final report 'He piki tūranga, he piki kōtuku', which was subject to extensive local government and public consultation.

Forest and Bird's 2023 submission on the Future of Local Government (Appendix 1) strongly recommended that the functions of any new local government structure need to be explicitly clear, defining and prioritising environmental well-being. Local government functions need to clearly ensure large complex issues facing communities, like climate change adaptation and indigenous biodiversity protection, are front and centre of any new structure; and that the relationship between central and local government is strengthened and supported and appropriately funded through a joint arrangement model. Forest and Bird strongly supports the 'He piki tūranga, he piki kōtuku' report recommendations.

What do you think of the proposed approach overall?

Forest & Bird is concerned that the overall approach falls short and will not achieve its goal. The approach assumes that Regional Council governance is the problem but provides no evidence of this. The proposed approach risks centralising power, entrenching parochialism, and redirecting the focus to urban issues over region wide environmental issues.

Part B: Simplifying regional governance

Do you agree with replacing regional councillors with a CTB?

Forest & Bird does not agree with replacing elected regional councillors with a CTB. The discussion document provides no rationale for this proposal. Regional councils are an important environmental check and balance for district and city councils.

CTB's as proposed already exist in a similar form for regional activities like regional transport planning, indigenous biodiversity, biosecurity, and climate strategies, and are working well. These initiatives are often regional council-led and function effectively with the current structure of locally elected members. However, using this approach on a wider scale to replace regional councils will not work, as the focus and make up of members will be different. These groups should be used to complement a new structure, not replace it.

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

The proposal to replace regional councillors with a CTB risks shifting decision-making away from a regional focus and 'big picture' thinking towards narrower local interests. 'Mayors are elected to represent their own districts, and this proposal has potential to encourage parochialism, which could weaken accountability to the public, and shifts focus away from regional decision-making.

Forest & Bird is concerned that the composition of the CTB could influence decision making more towards either rural or urban issues, depending which group would hold a larger share of representation, rather than balanced region-wide governance. Considering the legacy issues of underfunded critical infrastructure (like ageing water, wastewater and road networks), CTB's may end up 'robbing from Peter to pay Paul', with nature paying the ultimate price. Mayors may not know or understand the supporting role that nature plays in these critical services, or the advantages of nature-based solutions, like regional councillors currently do.

District councillors and Mayors are not elected to address region-wide challenges, which often come with their own complex, interconnected environmental issues. Their responsibilities are centered on local issues and priorities within their districts, rather than broader regional responsibilities. The proposal to replace regional councillors with a CTB risks weakening the quality and focus of regional environmental decision-making, as many may lack the experience or expertise needed to make informed decisions on matters such as biodiversity, freshwater, and climate change.

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

- **None – only mayors on the CTB**

Forest & Bird disagrees with the model of CTBs, but if that was the model decided on for local government into the future, then we would not support any Crown involvement.

Forest & Bird think it is important that the local representatives the community have democratically elected remain as the local decision-makers for that community and environment. Local representatives will have a greater understanding and connectedness to people and place, rather than enabling a Crown Commissioner to be appointed, under unknown criteria, with potential strong central government influence and overriding decision-making power. We need to preserve the principle of subsidiarity, including within local democracy.

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

Neither agree nor disagree.

The term 'effective representation' does not appear to be clearly defined in the consultation document. Aotearoa's communities are diverse, so effective representation needs to ensure that all communities have a voice.

Representation should be supported by transparent decision-making, accessible information, and well-resourced engagement processes that enable participation early and throughout policy development. Ideally, governance structures should reflect the demographic, cultural, and geographic diversity of communities, have clear pathways for iwi, hapū, and Māori to exercise rangatiratanga consistent with Te Tiriti o Waitangi. In essence, mechanisms need to be in place that amplify voices often under-represented in council processes, such as young people, rural communities, people with disabilities, and those most at risk of implications from climate change.

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

Regional councils are purpose-built to manage natural resources and environmental issues at scale across diverse regions. Forest & Bird is concerned that if led by mayors, a CTB may place less priority on long-term environmental outcomes, especially where these would compete with development and infrastructure priorities. In addition, we don't believe district or city mayors have the same technical expertise or exposure to environmental matters as many regional councillors, which may diminish ecological literacy and environmental decision-making.

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

Forest & Bird believes the most effective way to represent communities that cross council boundaries is through the introduction of catchment-based committees. Under this approach, affected communities would elect representatives to committees aligned with natural systems, such as catchments, aquifers, and coastal cells. The committees would include local

representatives such as iwi and hapū as well as technical experts who would be (or inform) the key decision-makers. Rivers and ecosystems do not follow strict boundaries, which is why this approach would prevent upstream-downstream inequities while aligning with Treaty obligations and mātauranga Māori, building on existing freshwater co-governance.

This model would complement the 'Ki uta ki tai' model, meaning 'from the mountains to the sea'. This is a model already used widely by local government and represents a holistic, integrated approach to environmental management. It emphasises the interconnectedness of the entire ecosystem—land, water, mountains, rivers, and oceans—and is used to guide sustainable resource management.

Part C: Improving local government

Do you support the proposal to require CTBs to develop regional reorganisation plans?

Forest & Bird agrees with the concept that a regional (or catchment-based) reorganisation plan could be advantageous. This could improve effectiveness and efficiency depending on details and decision-making. However, we do not agree that a CTB would be the most appropriate group to make these plans.

What do you think about the criteria proposed for assessing regional reorganization plans?

The criteria fail to consider the natural environment and have a strong focus on built infrastructure.

The criteria also fail to represent local communities first and foremost, by suggesting combining small councils that may have very different communities and local needs.

We therefore propose the inclusion of the following criteria for a more balanced assessment:

- Environmental protection and restoration
- Climate change mitigation, resilience and adaptation
- Ecosystem-based decision-making
- Environmental expertise and capacity
- Te Tiriti and te taiao outcomes

We would also like to see mechanisms in place to avoid environmental mismanagement or degradation through any transition period.

Part D: Treaty of Waitangi and Māori representation

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

The proposal offers a limited recognition of iwi/Māori interests, and risks weakening existing Treaty-based arrangements, rather than strengthening them. The proposal states that Treaty settlements and obligations will be carried over, though it overlooks the significance of the proposed structural changes to regional governance and how Treaty principles are given effect to in decision-making.

The removal of Māori constituencies and iwi-specific representation at a regional level would weaken established mechanisms designed to address under-representation and give effect to Treaty principles such as partnership and the protection of Māori rights and interests.

Replacing elected regional councillors with district and city mayors doesn't provide a guarantee of Māori voice or influence, especially for regional-scale decisions affecting land, water, biodiversity, and climate adaptation.

A reform of local government must strengthen rangatiratanga and partnership with Māori, not dilute and strip councils of the ability to uphold Te Tiriti. A new model must provide arrangements that are consistent with the Crown's obligations to protect Māori participation in public decision making.

Further feedback

Simplifying Local Government and RMA Reform

The timing of the Simplifying Local Government proposal creates major implementation risks for the resource management reform process. Forest & Bird has recently submitted on the Natural Environment Bill and Planning Bill. Those Bills retain "regional council" and "territorial authority" functions. Forest & Bird is concerned that there was no indication in those Bills (or the

consultation on them) of the major changes proposed to those entities, including the effective dis-establishment of regional councils.

The two reforms also appear to work against each other: at the same time that regional / territorial distinctions are being strengthened by splitting the resource management system into a land use-focussed Planning Act (largely implemented through territorial functions) and a natural environment-focussed Natural Environment Act (with largely regional functions), the Simplifying Local Government proposal does the opposite, collapsing the territorial/regional distinction.

We request that the Government recognises the cumulative impact that this fragmented consultation has on communities and mana whenua, who are struggling to engage in complex reform processes that even the Government cannot present in an integrated way. This is not helped by the sparseness of the Simplifying Local Government consultation which has just one page on the implications for resource management decisions, a completely different voting approach for such decisions, and no analysis of what this means for unitary authorities.

The consultation document states that Ministers have already decided on the voting arrangements for resource management decisions and that the relevant Minister will be able to appoint a member to CTB resource management decisions. On that basis, it does not appear that any feedback will be taken into account. For the record, Forest & Bird:

- a. Does not support CTBs being the decision-making body for spatial plans and natural environment plans due to a lack of clarity on how this will operate in practice.
- b. Does not support the voting arrangements for CTB decisions on spatial plans and natural environment plans because it is purely population based and not based on the natural environmental values that those decisions are meant to be upholding and protecting.

Additional concerns are that Annex C is limited to spatial plan and natural environment plan approval. There is no clarity on how other resource management functions will be implemented. For example, how will enforcement work where the breach is by a territorial authority asset holder (wastewater being a good, and current, example).

Lastly, Forest & Bird is concerned that there is no clarity on how regional council functions will be resourced. The Natural Environment Bill and Planning Bill impose significant monitoring duties on regional councils, which are essential to have any hope of meeting environmental limits. If there is no capacity at the governance level, or insufficient resourcing to provide operational capacity, this carries significant risks for the environment.

Funding/revenue

The government recently released a targeted consultation proposing to cap rates rises at 2-4% per annum, starting in 2029. Forest & Bird submitted feedback to this consultation, which is attached as Appendix 2.

Capping rate rises risks severe cuts to local government funding for biodiversity protection and enhancement, climate change adaptation and mitigation work, and community grants that provide value-for-money investments for councils and local communities throughout the country.

Sufficient funding is critical to ensure the long-term success of nature enhancement projects such as pest/predator control, native planting, invasive plant control, biodiversity monitoring/tracking, and the implementation of nature-based solutions that protect communities and our built infrastructure. These activities are often underfunded, with traditional infrastructure usually taking the priority share of rates⁴.

The Environmental Defence Society (EDS) Restoring Nature' report⁵ revealed that Regional and Unitary council spending on protecting biodiversity is \$82 million per annum (p. 168). While this sounds like a large sum, this is in fact less than three percent of total rate revenue collected by those councils, indicating the low priority that biodiversity and environmental conservation is given in budgetary decisions. At the top end, Horizons Regional Council spent 15.5% and at the lower end, the ORC spent only 2.9% of the total rate collection on biodiversity. Given the

⁴ <https://www.oag.parliament.nz/2025/local-govt/part2.htm>

⁵ Koolen-Bourke, D; Peart, R; van Uitregt, B; Dowsett, C (2024) *Restoring Nature - Reform of the conservation management system*, p. 168: <https://eds.org.nz/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/Restoring-Nature-Report-FINAL-web.pdf>

majority of our environmental indicators continue to decline, or inadequately improve, it is clear investment in these areas cannot further decrease.

Local government has numerous responsibilities – relevant to biodiversity, conservation, and climate mitigation and adaptation. Local government is legislated to be responsible for these domains under numerous Acts, some examples include:

- National Policy Statement for Indigenous Biodiversity (2023): places significant, legally binding obligations on local authorities to identify, protect, and restore indigenous biodiversity in New Zealand; and
- National Policy Statement for Freshwater Management (2020): prioritises the health of water bodies, through regional plan changes, mapping wetlands, managing freshwater, and integrating land-use planning. Regional councils must set binding targets, monitor, and enforce limits on water takes and contaminants, while territorial authorities manage urban development impacts.
- New Zealand Coastal Policy Statement (2010): Specifically requires the protection of indigenous biodiversity in the coastal environment (which is under local government jurisdiction); and
- Resource Management Act (1991): assigns councils the responsibility to manage biodiversity, regulate land use, and protect significant natural areas; and
- Local Government (Water Services) Act (2025): ensuring safe drinking water, managing stormwater networks, implementing transparent charging, and adhering to new economic regulations.
- Local Government Act (2002): requires councils to promote environmental well-being and sustainable development; and
- Biosecurity Act (1993): requires local government to participate in the management of pests and harmful organisms that threaten biodiversity, as part of the broader national biosecurity system; and
- Climate Change Response (Zero Carbon) Amendment Act 2019: requires all levels of government, including local government, to contribute to national emissions-reduction and climate-adaptation planning through alignment with emissions budgets and adaptation plans.

While the funding of these areas only represents a fraction of overall local government spending, it is essential that adequate budget is enabled for these functions, given the level of responsibility delegated to councils and the need for sound, locally informed decision-making to achieve meaningful environmental, social, and economic outcomes.

With the escalating climate crisis and many councils declaring a climate crisis/climate emergency in 2019/20, councils have been investing in climate change adaptation and mitigation measures, such as zero carbon plans and policies, blue/green infrastructure initiatives and nature-based solutions⁶. As seen in more recent years, budget cuts often affect these plans and initiatives greatly, with councils having to make the decision to decrease (or cut investment completely) in this area. Forest & Bird is greatly concerned that rates caps will force councils to underinvest in climate adaptation, which not only sacrifices nature and biodiversity, but it also diminishes natural hazard mitigation and puts human health and safety at risk – exacerbating long-term implications. Climate related events are becoming increasingly costly, as proven by the 2023 North Island Weather Events, which cost the New Zealand economy between \$9 billion and \$14.5 billion⁷. It could also force councils to choose less expensive, and less effective, shorter-term options (for example flood banks vs. making room for rivers). Underinvestment now will only cost more in the long term⁸.

Territorial authorities are responsible for council-owned land and property, often used as parks, reserves and other public places which benefit the community and nature. There is a risk that capping rates will mean cuts to important biodiversity work and projects undertaken on these assets. An example of one such project is City Sanctuary in Ōtepoti Dunedin, a Dunedin City Council project which spans more than 8,000 hectares and includes many of Dunedin's suburbs and urban reserves, reducing introduced predators to very low numbers in key parts of the city to protect native wildlife and prevent the surrounding landscapes being reinvaded⁹. There are numerous projects like this throughout the country, run and funded by councils, often having their own dedicated staff or team of staff as well as dedicated local communities and their volunteers. If budget cuts need to be made, these projects could be put on

⁶ https://www.forestandbird.org.nz/sites/default/files/2025-06/F%26B_NBS_Resource_Online.pdf

⁷ <https://www.icnz.org.nz/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/ICNZ-NIWE-REPORT-FINAL-1.pdf>

⁸ See for example Brierley et al. (2022). Reanimating the strangled rivers of Aotearoa New Zealand. <https://wires.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1002/wat2.1624> & https://www.camecon.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/The-economic-costs-benefits-of-nature-based-solutions_final-report_FINAL_V3.pdf

⁹ <https://citysanctuary.org.nz/our-project>

hold/abandoned, have their scope reduced, or cheaper options chosen which are not as effective for nature. Not only would this adversely impact biodiversity, but it could also lower the quality of life for residents in the relevant area.

Forest & Bird has 'on the ground, at place' projects across the country, such as Ark in the Park (Waitākere, Auckland), Pest Free Hibiscus Coast (Whangaparāoa Peninsula, Auckland), Tarapurahi Bushy Park (Manawatū-Whanganui), Te Hoiere Bat Recovery Project (Marlborough), Lenz Reserve/Tautuku Restoration Project (Catlins, South Otago) and more. The long-term benefits of these projects are substantial¹⁰. As well as protecting and enhancing habitats and species population numbers, these projects also result in increased carbon storage, better water quality, connected ecosystems/eco-corridors, increased climate resilience, and opportunities for the public to connect with nature, bringing a range of social and cultural benefits. These projects benefit greatly from the council grants and non-contestable funding that they receive, and in the absence of other funding opportunities such as the retired Jobs for Nature program, council funding is relied upon to provide essential resources. Moreover, councils and communities benefit from the cost-benefit of these projects.

Forest & Bird, along with many other groups across the country, leverage private funding and volunteer time to help deliver conservation outcomes on Council land, boosting the effectiveness of Council spending. An example of this is our Pest Free Hibiscus Coast project. Councils are getting millions of dollars' worth of output and outcomes from community groups and projects at little cost. Without volunteers undertaking this work, nature-focused or otherwise, the work would need to be undertaken by Council staff and/or contractors, costing ratepayers millions a year. We think it is crucial that these numbers are understood and considered by those making such significant financial decisions relevant to rating caps. Capping rates could mean less funds available for community projects, creating significant shortfalls in environmental protection and community improvements, creating difficulties for councils to meet their legislated responsibilities.

¹⁰ For example, see the mahi achieved in just one year at Pest Free Hibiscus Coast, thanks to council funding and the enabled volunteer commitment (https://www.forestandbird.org.nz/sites/default/files/2025-02/F%26B%20PFHC%202024%20Impact%20Report_compressed_Jenny%20Hanwell.pdf)

With the rates cap proposal in reality only saving the average household \$2.79 a month¹¹, the possible cost to nature, community resilience and hazard mitigation is too high. We advocate for the government to abandon this proposal, to retain the impact of local decision-making and communities.

Thank you for your time in reading and considering Forest & Bird's submission. Forest & Bird is open to discuss the content of this submission at any time.

Ngā mihi nui,

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¹¹ <https://newsroom.co.nz/2026/01/15/rates-cap-will-save-households-a-can-of-baked-beans/>



Forest & Bird

TE REO O TE TAIAO | *Giving Nature a Voice*

Submission to ‘Review into the Future for Local Government Draft Report - He mata whāriki, he matawhānui’ - October 2022

28 February 2023

To: Future for Local Government Review Panel
Email: futureforlg@dia.govt.nz
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Thank you for the opportunity to submit feedback on the Review into the Future of Local Government.

Introduction

Forest & Bird has been Aotearoa New Zealand’s independent voice for nature since 1923 with many members and supporters nationwide. Forest & Bird’s constitutional purpose is:

To take all reasonable steps within the power of the Society for the preservation and protection of the indigenous flora and fauna and the natural features of New Zealand.

To this end, and regarding local government, Forest & Bird is actively involved in regional and district planning processes, annual and long-term plans, and resource consent applications where they relate to the protection and management of land and freshwater, the coastal environment and indigenous biodiversity throughout Aotearoa New Zealand. Our staff and supporters engage across local government via community working groups, local boards, community boards, councilors, council officers, and with executive leaders.

Forest & Bird branches and supporters frequently work alongside local government on initiatives that advance the Society’s core purpose, the protection and preservation of New Zealand’s indigenous biodiversity, through environmental restoration, pest plant and animal control, wildlife surveys and other conservation initiatives. It is fair to say that there is an overlap in the core purpose of Forest & Bird and the responsibilities of local government.

Key Recommendations

Forest & Bird agrees with the opening statement in the executive summary of the draft report that states that:

“Today’s communities faced a host of challenges – climate change, pandemics, biodiversity loss, and growing social and economic inequity”¹

Forest & Bird is particularly concerned with the performance of Local Government regarding the protection and maintenance of indigenous biodiversity, and its apparent lack of preparation to deal with the climate crisis.

The Panel’s subsequent acknowledgement that:

“We are at a time of change, a moment in history where we need to shift to new ways of working, to living our lives more sustainably, to transition to a greener economy, to utilise new technologies and to fully acknowledge our social and Te Tiriti responsibilities”²

...is also supported by Forest & Bird

There is no time like the present to put local government under the microscope. Examination of local government’s fitness for future purpose and deliberation on systemic improvements to effectively tackle the complex challenges people and governments face is urgent. Specifically with respect to defining the purpose and the allocation of roles and functions between central and local government to maximise community and environmental wellbeing in an efficient and equitable way.

Forest & Bird strongly supports the institution of local government as a check and balance on central government, and as a vehicle for upholding the principle of subsidiarity, where, as set out in the draft report, *“roles and functions should be led and managed at the most appropriate local level so that communities are empowered to shape their outcomes and take a leadership role in doing so”*.

No one size fits all. Forest & Bird believes that a strong relationship between central and local government is critical, where purpose, roles and responsibilities are clearly defined and respected. Communities need strong guidance on complex issues like climate change adaptation and indigenous biodiversity protection and restoration, with access to a suite of appropriate tools and expertise, while maintaining the ability to adapt and decide for their unique local circumstances. Adequate resourcing and capability are also vital.

In summary, and with respect to the Society’s core purpose, Forest & Bird’s key recommendations for the Local Government Review include amending the purpose of Local Government to prioritise environmental well-being, and that well-being be clearly defined; that the relationship between central and local government is strengthened and the roles and functions are clearly defined; and that the large complex issues facing communities, such as climate change adaptation and indigenous biodiversity protection, and where concerted and deliberate action will result in public benefit, that these mandates be appropriately funded through a joint arrangement model, between central and local government.

¹ He mata whāriki, he matawhānui, Draft Report, October 2022, p7

² He mata whāriki, he matawhānui, Draft Report, October 2022, p7

Purpose of Local Government

The Local Government Act 2002 s 3 (d) in its Purpose sets out:

The purpose of this Act is to provide for democratic and effective local government that recognises the diversity of New Zealand communities; and, to that end, the Act-

(d) provides for local authorities to play a broad role in promoting the social, economic, environmental, and cultural well-being of their communities, taking a sustainable development approach.

Forest & Bird is concerned that the purpose of Local Government as set out in the Local Government Act³, particularly where local government is required to balance the four well-beings – economic, environmental, social, and cultural, has led to suboptimal outcomes for people and the natural environment.

Forest & Bird is concerned that environmental well-being is too often perceived as a “*nice to have*” when in fact it is a vital component to ensure the other well-beings can be achieved⁴.

Forest & Bird is concerned that cumulative effect of local governments who have attempted to ‘balance’ the four well-beings, particularly in pursuit of economic well-being, has led to the incremental erosion of environmental well-being, and the subsequent demise of social and cultural well-being across parts of their communities.

Forest & Bird recommends amending the purpose of Local Government to prioritise environmental well-being, to ensure that concerted and deliberate action on the climate and biodiversity crises is mandated at the local government level.

We note however, both the draft report and the Local Government Act 2002 refer to ‘wellbeing’ but do not explicitly state how well-being is defined. We recommend that the final report provide a clear definition of well-being that clearly encapsulates both environmental and human well-being. A definition of well-being would need to acknowledge the role of climate change resilience and healthy native ecosystems.

Prioritising environmental well-being in the Local Government Act purpose, particularly with a focus on improving outcomes for indigenous biodiversity, will help align the Act with other legislation including the Resource Management Act 1991, Conservation Act 1987, the National Parks Act 1980 and the Reserves Act 1977, that prioritise provisions for the protection of indigenous species and their habitats.

A similar environmental priority is presented in the National Policy Statement for Freshwater Management 2020 (NPSFM)⁵ in Te Mana o Te Wai and in the proposed National Policy Statement for Indigenous Biodiversity (NPSIB)⁶ in Te Rito o te Harakeke.

³ Local Government Act s 3 Purpose of Local Government

⁴ Newsroom “We deserve more than a climate house of cards” Accessed 18 February 2023 at <https://www.newsroom.co.nz/sustainable-future/we-deserve-more-than-climate-house-of-cards>.

⁵ National Policy Statement for Freshwater Management 2020 Accessed 18 February 2023 at <https://environment.govt.nz/publications/national-policy-statement-for-freshwater-management-2020/>.

⁶ Proposed National Policy Statement for Indigenous Biodiversity Accessed 18 February 2023 at <https://environment.govt.nz/acts-and-regulations/national-policy-statements/proposed-nps-indigenous-biodiversity/>.

Te Mana o te Taiao is the Government's Strategy for Indigenous Biodiversity.⁷ Te Mana o te Taiao is an all of government strategy that contains goals and targets for indigenous biodiversity for 2025, 2030 and 2050. The strategy is underpinned by three pillars: Tūāpapa (getting the system right), Whakahau (empowering action) and Tiaki me te Whakahaumanu (protecting and restoring).

Achieving the goals and targets in the strategy, relies on all government agencies recognising and incorporating the strategy into their day-to-day work. Prioritising environmental well-being in the Local Government Act would align with the underpinning pillars, particularly getting the system right, and help achieve the strategy targets.

Furthermore, the Government has produced the first National Climate Adaptation Plan (NAP) under the Climate Change Response (Zero Carbon) amendment Act 2019. The NAP contains Action 5.9 which prioritises nature-based solutions to address the climate and biodiversity crises together.⁸ The NAP explains that Government will prioritise nature-based solutions in planning and regulations, where possible, for both carbon removals and climate change adaptation. It will also investigate how to best ensure that climate change policy and planning use a biodiversity lens to prioritise nature-based solutions. Local government will be essential in implementing nature-based solutions at the community or regional level.

Prioritising environmental well-being in the Act's purpose will help to align local government with other legislation and other Government initiatives to deal with the climate and biodiversity crises. It will be essential that local government is both equipped and resourced to implement nature-based solutions at the community or regional level.

Local Government/Central Government Relationship

Forest & Bird is concerned that the relationship between Local Government and central Government is broken and often pulls in opposite directions. Our experience is that central government mandates for local government, particularly for indigenous biodiversity and climate change are regularly demoted at best and ignored at worst.

A recent Local Government Official Information Act 1987 (LGOIMA) request by Forest & Bird regarding the presence or absence of a climate or biodiversity strategy revealed that climate and biodiversity initiatives are implemented in an extremely adhoc way, and despite a legislated mandate for indigenous biodiversity⁹, many councils considering it optional.

Forest & Bird has not yet fully analysed the responses, however, on initial review we remain concerned that little priority is given to these matters by many councils. Furthermore, the discrepancy between council responses is stark.

⁷ Te Mana o te Taiao – Aotearoa New Zealand Biodiversity Strategy. Accessed 18 February 2023 at <https://www.doc.govt.nz/nature/biodiversity/aotearoa-new-zealand-biodiversity-strategy/te-mana-o-te-taiao-summary/>.

⁸ Urutau, ka taurikura: Kia tū pakari a Aotearoa i ngā huringa āhuarangi Adapt and thrive: Building a climate-resilient New Zealand AOTEAROA NEW ZEALAND'S FIRST NATIONAL ADAPTATION PLAN. Accessed 18 February 2023 at <https://environment.govt.nz/assets/publications/climate-change/MFE-AoG-20664-GF-National-Adaptation-Plan-2022-WEB.pdf>.

⁹ Resource Management Act 1991 s 31 (1) (b) (iii)

For example:

Auckland Council	Gore District Council	Kaipara District Council
Does your council have a biodiversity strategy?	Does your council have a biodiversity strategy?	Does your council have a biodiversity strategy?
Yes – Auckland Council’s Indigenous Biodiversity Strategy was released in July 2012, and is available online .	No.	This is a regional council matter.
Does your council have an implementation plan for your biodiversity strategy?	Does your council have an implementation plan for your biodiversity strategy?	Does your council have an implementation plan for your biodiversity strategy?
Implementation of Auckland Council’s Indigenous Biodiversity Strategy is now embedded within Business-as-usual activities.	No. Although, the Council has recently planted 3000 native trees next to an old landfill in Gore to generate a native habitat.	Only through the provisions of the District Plan.

The Draft Report discusses the allocation of roles and responsibilities of central and local government and recommends principles including the concept of subsidiarity, local government’s capacity to influence the conditions for wellbeing is recognised and supported and that Te Ao Māori values underpin decision-making. Forest & Bird generally supports these principles.

In the context of Forest & Bird’s core purpose, and the dual biodiversity and climate crises, conditions are needed to ensure flexibility of the approach to eliminate confusion or uncertainty. Forest & Bird (as above) reinforces the importance of defining and prioritising environmental well-being in the Local Government purpose, so that local government and central government are aligned in what is sought to be achieved, but with the flexibility to adapt and respond to how the outcome will be achieved based on local conditions.

Appropriate Resourcing

Forest & Bird acknowledges the draft report comments on “*unfunded mandates*”.¹⁰ We suspect that the responses to our LGOIMA request outlined above are examples of unfunded mandates.

The Report of the Biodiversity Collaborative Group (BCG)¹¹ explains that “*while law and regulation set important boundaries for human actions, as proposed with the draft National Policy Statement for Indigenous Biodiversity (NPSIB), other initiatives are equally important. Complementary and supporting measures are required. This report sets out the actions and resources that the Biodiversity Collaborative Group (BCG) consider are needed both to make sure the NPSIB is implemented well, and perhaps more importantly, to encourage the step change in how people care for and protect indigenous biodiversity.*”

¹⁰ He mata whāriki, he matawhānui, Draft Report, October 2022 Equitable funding, and finance p22

¹¹ Report of the Biodiversity Collaborative Group October 2018 Part 3 Complementary and Supporting Measures for Indigenous Biodiversity Accessed 18 February 2023 at https://environment.govt.nz/assets/publications/biodiversity/report_of_the_biodiversity_collaborative_group.pdf.

For Local Government to be equipped to deliver on central government mandates, they need to be supported and resourced financially and with the necessary expertise. Among the suite of recommendations, for example, the BCG recommend...

“the Ministry for the Environment and the Department of Conservation (DOC) establish and maintain a contestable fund for local authorities to access for assistance with identification and mapping of s6(c) areas of significant indigenous vegetation and habitats of indigenous fauna. The fund should be subject to criteria prioritising local authorities with a large land area and a low rating base.”

This kind of model would contribute to achieving Te Mana o te Taiao’s pillar ‘getting the system right.’

Regarding addressing the ‘unfunded mandate’ issue, Forest & Bird urges the Review Panel to recommend implementing the BCG recommendations for complementary and supporting measures regarding the local government approach to indigenous biodiversity. Without doubt, a similar initiative could apply to central government climate action mandated at the local government level.

General Comments and Suggestions

Forest & Bird notes that throughout the draft report, and within the five key shifts, the issues of climate change, biodiversity loss, pandemics and social and economic inequality *were not explicitly addressed*.

Forest & Bird concludes with these comments and suggestions for the final report:

Nature protection and climate change adaptation, and local governments role in addressing these critical issues, is at the forefront of the final report and recommendations.

The final report needs to highlight that the current slow bureaucratic structure is not equipped to deal with the biodiversity loss, climate change, pandemics or inequality, and therefore total system change will be necessary to mitigate the threats to people and place.

An agile and flexible local government can work and partner closely with community stakeholders, Iwi, central government, NGO’s and conservation and environmental organisations.

We recommend that the final report/recommendations be aligned with Te Mana o Te Taiao, the New Zealand Biodiversity Strategy and the strategic framework for the protection, restoration and sustainable use of biodiversity, particularly indigenous biodiversity, in Aotearoa New Zealand from 2020 to 2050. Collaboration and partnerships are a key focus in Te Mana o te Taiao, and any recommendations in the final report need to be strongly linked and aligned.

We agree councils need to be the ‘enablers’ of local democracy, not the ‘holders’ of it’.

Forest & Bird supports a review of the legislative provisions relating to engagement, consultation, and decision-making to ensure a comprehensive, meaningful, and flexible platform for revitalising community participation and engagement. Currently local government has far too much discretion to run processes that are wholly inadequate and undemocratic. Directive provisions regarding engagement and consultation will help ensure a stronger environmental voice from groups actively engaged in addressing the biodiversity and climate crisis.

Forest & Bird supports the urgent improvement of the requirements for engaging with Māori across all local government legislation. Engagement needs to be authentic and based on mutual trust. Improving the understanding of local governments role as a partner to Te Tiriti o Waitangi is also supported.

Local government should be required to adopt the concept of long termism in planning. One, five- and ten-year plans ignore intergenerational needs. Short planning time frames fundamentally omit the climate and biodiversity crisis. If planning for 50–500-year timeframes, intergenerational and

environmental considerations are naturally considered, and better well-being outcomes are more likely to follow.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide feedback.

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30 January 2026

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SUBMISSION ON RATES CAP CONSULTATION

INTRODUCTION

1. The Royal Forest & Bird Protection Society Inc. of New Zealand (Forest & Bird) is Aotearoa New Zealand's leading independent conservation organisation. For over 100 years, Forest & Bird has been a 'voice for nature', having strong interest and involvement in advocating for, protecting and restoring nature on land, in freshwater and in the ocean, throughout the motu. Our legal and advocacy work is independently funded by private subscriptions, donations, and bequests. While our practical conservation mahi is funded through these mechanisms, as well as contestable and non-contestable grants and funding initiatives.
2. As well as employing over 70 staff, Forest & Bird have very active volunteer network including 41 regional branches, whose multigenerational members and supporters play an important and active role in protecting and restoring the region's native species and habitats in their respective districts through advocacy, education and 'on the ground' projects. Forest & Bird also have regional Kiwi Conservation Clubs (KCC) for tamariki, and Youth hubs for rangatahi across the country.
3. Forest & Bird are submitting on this consultation as we are concerned that capping rates could mean decreased funding available for nature, such as:
 - Less contestable and non-contestable grants/funds for community projects.
 - Decreased investment in nature-based solutions and natural hazard mitigation.
 - Long-term biodiversity and environmental outcomes (e.g., by choosing cheaper and quicker options, rather than investing in longer term, co-beneficial projects).
 - Council owned land (such as parks and reserves) not being utilised to their full potential to benefit both people and nature.
 - Decreased investment in climate change mitigation and adaptation, resulting in a more costly and difficult future state.

POINTS OF CONCERN

4. Capping rate rises risks severe cuts to local government funding for biodiversity protection and enhancement, climate change adaptation and mitigation work, and community grants that provide value-for-money investments for councils and local communities throughout the country.
5. Sufficient funding is critical to ensure the long-term success of nature enhancement projects such as pest/predator control, native planting, invasive plant control, biodiversity monitoring/tracking, and the implementation of nature-based solutions that protect communities and our built infrastructure. These activities are often underfunded, with traditional infrastructure usually taking the priority share of rates¹.
6. The Environmental Defence Society (EDS) Restoring Nature' report² revealed that Regional and Unitary council spending on protecting biodiversity is \$82 million per annum (p. 168). While this sounds like a large sum, this is in fact less than three percent of total rate revenue collected by those councils, indicating the low priority that biodiversity and environmental conservation is given in budgetary decisions. At the top end, Horizons Regional Council spent 15.5% and at the lower end, the ORC spent only 2.9% of the total rate collection on biodiversity. Given the majority of our environmental indicators continue to decline, or inadequately improve, it is clear investment in these areas cannot further decrease.
7. Local government has numerous responsibilities – relevant to biodiversity, conservation, and climate mitigation and adaptation. Local government is legislated to be responsible for these domains under numerous Acts, some examples include:
 - National Policy Statement for Indigenous Biodiversity: places significant, legally binding obligations on local authorities to identify, protect, and restore indigenous biodiversity in New Zealand; and
 - New Zealand Coastal Policy Statement (2010): Specifically requires the protection of indigenous biodiversity in the coastal environment (which is under local government jurisdiction); and
 - Resource Management Act 1991 (RMA): assigns councils the responsibility to manage biodiversity, regulate land use, and protect significant natural areas; and
 - Local Government Act 2002 (LGA 2002): requires councils to promote environmental well-being and sustainable development; and
 - Biosecurity Act 1993: requires local government to participate in the management of pests and harmful organisms that threaten biodiversity, as part of the broader national biosecurity system; and
 - Climate Change Response (Zero Carbon) Amendment Act 2019: requires all levels of government, including local government, to contribute to national emissions-reduction and climate-adaptation planning through alignment with emissions budgets and adaptation plans.

While the funding of these areas only represents a fraction of overall local government spending, it is essential that adequate budget is enabled for these functions, given the level of responsibility

¹ <https://www.oag.parliament.nz/2025/local-govt/part2.htm>

² Koolen-Bourke, D; Peart, R; van Uitregt, B; Dowsett, C (2024) *Restoring Nature - Reform of the conservation management system*, p. 168: <https://eds.org.nz/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/Restoring-Nature-Report-FINAL-web.pdf>

delegated to councils and the need for sound, locally informed decision-making to achieve meaningful environmental, social, and economic outcomes.

8. With the escalating climate crisis and many councils declaring a climate crisis/climate emergency in 2019/20, councils have been investing in climate change adaptation and mitigation measures, such as zero carbon plans and policies, blue/green infrastructure initiatives and nature-based solutions³. As seen in more recent years, budget cuts often affect these plans and initiatives greatly, with councils having to make the decision to decrease (or cut investment completely) in this area. Forest & Bird are greatly concerned that rates caps will force councils to underinvest in climate adaptation, which not only sacrifices nature and biodiversity, but it also diminishes natural hazard mitigation and puts human health and safety at risk – exacerbating long-term implications. Climate related events are becoming increasingly costly, as proven by the 2023 North Island Weather Events, which cost the New Zealand economy between \$9 billion and \$14.5 billion⁴. It could also force council to choose less expensive, and less effective, shorter-term options (for example flood banks vs. making room for rivers). Underinvestment now will only cost more in the long term⁵.
9. Territorial authorities are responsible for council owned land and property, often used as parks, reserves and other public places which benefit the community and nature. There is a risk that capping rates will mean cuts to important biodiversity work and projects undertaken on these assets. An example of one such project is City Sanctuary in Ōtepoti Dunedin, a Dunedin City Council project which spans more than 8,000 hectares and includes many of Dunedin’s suburbs and urban reserves, reducing introduced predators to very low numbers in key parts of the city to protect native wildlife and prevent the surrounding landscapes being reinvaded⁶. There are numerous projects like this throughout the country, run and funded by councils, often having their own dedicated staff or team of staff as well as dedicated local communities and their volunteers. If budget cuts need to be made, these projects could be put on hold/abandoned, have their scope reduced, or cheaper options chosen which are not as effective for nature. Not only would this adversely impact biodiversity, but it could also lower the quality of life for residents in the relevant area.
10. Forest & Bird has ‘on the ground, at place’ projects across the country, such as Ark in the Park (Waitākere, Auckland), Pest Free Hibiscus Coast (Whangaparāoa Peninsula, Auckland), Tarapurui Bushy Park (Manawatū-Whanganui), Te Hoiere Bat Recovery Project (Marlborough), Lenz Reserve/Tautuku Restoration Project (Catlins, South Otago) and more. The long-term benefits of these projects are substantial⁷. As well as protecting and enhancing habitats and species population numbers, these projects also result in increased carbon storage, better water quality, connected ecosystems/eco-corridors, increased climate resilience, and opportunities for the public to connect with nature, bringing a range of social and cultural benefits. These projects benefit greatly from the council grants and non-contestable funding that they receive, and in the absence of other funding opportunities such as the

³ https://www.forestandbird.org.nz/sites/default/files/2025-06/F%26B_NBS_Resource_Online.pdf

⁴ <https://www.icnz.org.nz/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/ICNZ-NIWE-REPORT-FINAL-1.pdf>

⁵ See for example Brierley et al. (2022). Reanimating the strangled rivers of Aotearoa New Zealand. <https://wires.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1002/wat2.1624> & https://www.camecon.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/The-economic-costs-benefits-of-nature-based-solutions_final-report_FINAL_V3.pdf

⁶ <https://citysanctuary.org.nz/our-project>

⁷ For example, see the mahi achieved in just one year at Pest Free Hibiscus Coast, thanks to council funding and the enabled volunteer commitment (https://www.forestandbird.org.nz/sites/default/files/2025-02/F%26B%20PFHC%202024%20Impact%20Report_compressed_Jenny%20Hanwell.pdf)

retired Jobs for Nature program, council funding is relied upon to provide essential resources. More so, councils and communities benefit from the cost-benefit of these projects.

11. Forest & Bird, along with many other groups across the country, leverage private funding and volunteer time to help deliver conservation outcomes on Council land, boosting the effectiveness of Council spending. An example of this is our Pest Free Hibiscus Coast project in [Appendix One](#). Councils are getting millions worth of output and outcomes from community groups and projects at little cost. Without volunteers undertaking this work, nature focused or otherwise, the work would need to be undertaken by Council staff and/or contractors, costing ratepayers millions a year. We think it is crucial that these numbers are understood and considered by those making such significant financial decisions relevant to rating caps. Capping rates could mean less funds available for community projects, creating significant shortfalls in environmental protection and community improvements, creating difficulties for councils to meet their legislated responsibilities.
12. With the rates cap proposal in reality only saving the average household \$2.79 a month⁸, the possible cost to nature, community resilience and hazard mitigation is too high. We advocate for the government to abandon this proposal, to retain the impact of local decision-making and communities.

We welcome any questions on our submission and would be happy to discuss further.

Ngā Mihinui

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⁸ <https://newsroom.co.nz/2026/01/15/rates-cap-will-save-households-a-can-of-baked-beans/>

APPENDIX ONE

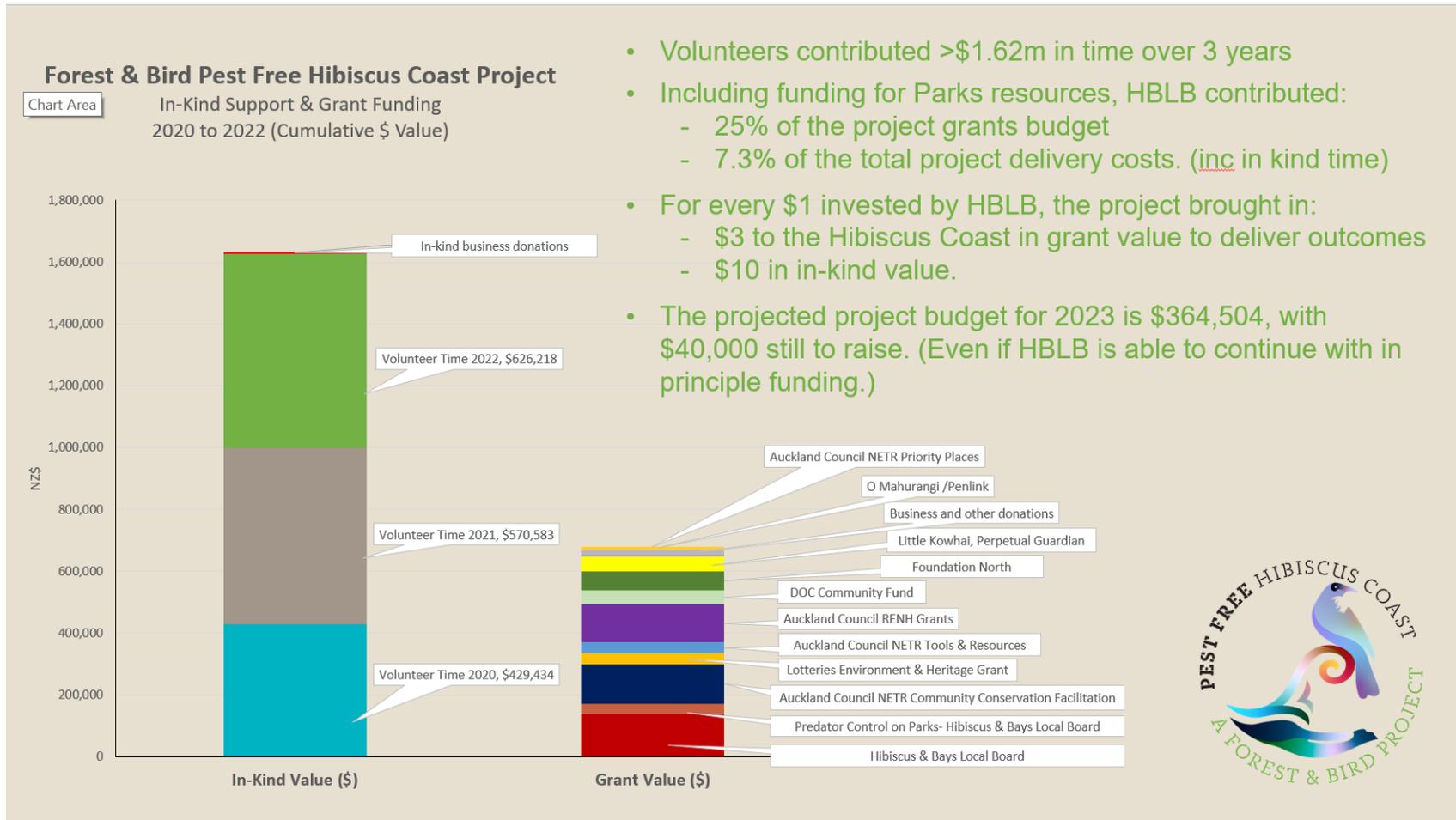


Figure 1: Forest & Bird's Pest Free Hibiscus Coast project funding and resourcing