

ComVoices Submission: Review into the Future for Local Government. Providing the means for communities to prosper and thrive

Kupu arataki | Introduction

Ko wai mātou | Who are we

ComVoices is a network of 23 peak bodies working nationally across the community and voluntary sector.

We amplify the voices of Aotearoa's community sector to influence decision-makers.

Our vision is confident, connected communities served by a valued and collaborative community sector. We promote the value that community and voluntary sector organisations add to Aotearoa New Zealand's economic and social wellbeing. We provide a collaborative platform so that members of ComVoices can encourage the development of a policy and regulatory environment that is supportive of sector organisations and their communities and can provide effective responses to the New Zealand Government on emerging issues.

Tō mātou urupare | Our feedback

"Arewa ake te Kaupapa – Raising the Platform" prepares for the future for Local Government and provides an opportunity to rethink local government and local governance. This submission has been developed with input from ComVoices' member organisations to support the Review Group's thinking, in order to improve the wellbeing of New Zealanders. We have grounded the paper in Te Tiriti o Waitangi, and our collective experience working with both central and local government, and communities throughout Aotearoa.

Our shared position as Comvoices members is based on a principle that the wellbeing of individuals rests upon the wellbeing of the community groups they belong to. We see the principal role for Local Government as one of strengthening this social cohesion between individuals and their broader community, via the strengthening of its democratic processes, a focus on wellbeing, genuine partnerships with both local communities and with central government, monitoring all that it does for equitable outcomes.

We therefore acknowledge and support the key shifts recommended by the Review Group and provide our perspective toward Local Government achieving each pou:

1. Strengthened local democracy

2. A stronger focus on wellbeing
3. Authentic relationships with hapu/iwi
4. Genuine partnership between Central and Local Government
5. Equitable funding

To ComVoices members, these shifts combined lay a bedrock for Local Government's capability to strengthen social cohesion, improve community engagement, foster leadership and a sense of belonging among individuals in every locality. Local Government is not capable of replacing our community and voluntary sector, however, and while we support the pou outlined by the Review Group, we express concern that the Review to date has not acknowledged and supported in turn the vital role our Community and Voluntary sector plays in strengthening social cohesion, representing communities and providing for individuals' intersectional needs in every locality.

Nō tētahi hapori | Belonging to a Community

Community cannot be defined simply by geography alone, though local authority boundaries and consultations may be divided by this category. Someone's community can also be determined by, for example:

- Their demography (such as age, gender, income, disability, ethnicity, language and nationality)
- Need (such as those who are using social services, are experiencing violence, or those in aged care)
- Interest (such as businesses, environmental groups, trade unions, or cycling groups)
- By institution (such as those attending / connected with a particular school or religious group); and
- Their relationships (whanaungatanga - such as family-ties, digital connections, or shared experience (e.g. veterans))

These are not isolated categories. Individuals are complex, diverse and intersectional. A single person may be a member of an iwi and 3 different hapū, both in and outside a local authority area. They may have tamariki at the local school and own a business that is involved in recycling waste. They may have a child with a disability and elderly parents living with them at home who need care. Two people living in the same household may hold completely different views from each other on the same topic.

Tō mātou hapori | Our Community and Voluntary Sector

Comvoices members are part of a sector that provides for the complexity, diversity and intersectionality among individuals in the community. We provide a constant and frontline presence for the different people who live in each locality, through essential care, services, education, housing, sport and recreation, infrastructure, advocacy and skills. We give our time and effort to support others and to make a positive difference. We are often working with people and families when they are at their most vulnerable, and we often represent them when they don't

have the means or wherewithal to represent themselves. We are there regardless of who is in power today or what the hot topic of the moment may be - and we are ready to respond to needs including at times of crisis, to strengthen social cohesion, foster healthy discourse and empower otherwise marginalised voices.

Our members have built relationships with individuals through manaaki, trust and a mana-enhancing approach. We connect meaningfully with them in the context of their whānau and communities. The starting point for us is asking what is needed rather than saying this is what we will do.

We have a range of types of organisations within our sector.¹ Due to the local context of their purpose in every community, nearly 90% of not-for-profit organisations in Aotearoa have a revenue of under \$125K or are fully run by volunteers.² Some community and voluntary organisations have a national body with local branches or presence, but many more rely on the support of peak bodies and a network with partners. New Zealand's networks of community organisations weave resilience for communities and all their members. We respect and work with individual people within their whānau, community and social networks. That's a cloak of love and social capital.

Extending and growing community networks provides an avenue for more public scrutiny and engagement in democratic processes at local and national government level. Without the community and voluntary sector, democracy is left to individuals. Those with more time and resources have greater means to engage than others. Our sector's role is one of weaving membership and the sense among individuals of belonging. This is often referred to as community resilience and it is vital and must be valued by Local and Central Government. It is social cohesion in action, a cornerstone of meeting a wellbeing agenda and a necessary ingredient of a healthy democracy.

Despite this vital role, the financial security of the sector is at risk. This is seen in many ways including: rising job insecurity, rising costs of expenses against stagnant or declining income, dependence on funding from service delivery, and the impact of COVID-19 on funding streams.³

Precarious work and funding arrangements for the sector undermine the potential for long-term planning, impact and partnership. It also diverts time that could be spent on core business, to dealing with compliance costs and funding applications for a small and contested amount of money. The mahi of our organisations is sustained by aroha and passion but our people are exhausted. There are long-term systemic issues of being underfunded, under-resourced and

¹ Just a fifth of New Zealand's not-for-profit organisations are registered charities. (*2021 New Zealand Cause Report* JB Were, accessed here: <https://www.jbwere.co.nz/latest-insights/philanthropy/jbwere-nz-cause-report-2021/>).

² Ibid. Note the revenue bracket has now changed to '[under \\$140k](#)'. "Volunteerism continues to be of critical importance at a \$4b pa value to the New Zealand GDP, an average 234,618 Kiwis volunteer each week and 9 in 10 organisations rely solely on a volunteer workforce."

³ Ibid.

under-valued. There needs to be recognition of burnout and fundamental changes to the funding arrangements to unlock full potential.

Comvoices members assert that Local Government and its leaders will best reflect and respond to the communities they serve (Key Question 4) by giving greater value to the role of our sector in representing the needs and interests of their local community members, particularly the most vulnerable or otherwise under-resourced members who might otherwise stay marginalised within engagement processes. We also assert that to ensure viability and sustainability, fairness and equity and maximum wellbeing, local governance funding and financing (Key Question 5) should target community organisations that serve the needs and interests of these otherwise marginalised members, to increase their capabilities in fostering leadership and representation. We are doing the hard work in the community of supporting its diversity and discourse, with a long-term vision and interest in social cohesion and infrastructure. While this will continue regardless, we can do so much more, and have more collective impact, when we partner meaningfully with Local (and Central) government. Our answers to the five Key Questions of the Local Government Review team are given in this context. The voice of individual Comvoices members remain anonymous but are provided throughout this submission to give emphasis to each answer.

Pātai tuatahi | Question 1: How should the system of local governance be reshaped so it can adapt to future challenges and enable communities to thrive?

Function follows form: Rather than starting with an existing structure and asking what it can do, it's useful to work with local communities, using inroads of the Community and Voluntary sector, to work out what groups want to achieve. From there, Local Government's role is to be responsive, thinking strategically about what structures are necessary to support that vision of its members. *"Like the whānau ora approach, the aspirations of the people should lead what communities look like."*

Improving representation on local authorities: Improve the inclusiveness and effectiveness of councils. Ongoing and meaningful dialogue with iwi, business, community and voluntary sector and not-for-profit groups are important. There is a disparity in what councillors are paid in different areas even though the responsibilities are the same - the current formula is based on population. People don't realise how much power a local councillor holds and in some cases it's very easy to get elected. There's no real qualification or test: *"In one sense that's great because anyone can do it, but it can also become a massive problem. A change in function may change who wants to become a councillor."*

Recognise Local Government is just one part of local governance: There is a lack of understanding of the impact that community organisations have in local governance. Local Government should consult with national peak bodies about the community networks to target. Peak bodies have the benefit of being closely connected to both communities - through members - and to government. We see the breadth of reforms across government and have knowledge of

the other pressures that are on the sector. Peak bodies should be resourced across government departments to support this role.

Governance must be based on relationships and trust: Community groups and peak bodies already have relationships with networks, whānau and individual members of the community that may feed into consultation reviews. Frequently those they represent are not people who feel safe or comfortable speaking to government agencies in a bureaucratic consultation setting. Rather than always reinventing the wheel, leverage these existing relationships.

Pātai tuarua | Question 2: What are the future functions, roles and essential features of New Zealand's system of local government?

Be the local facilitator on Central Government directives: NZ local authorities have a small number of responsibilities compared to Australia and the UK. With any reduction of NZ local government responsibilities regarding the physical infrastructure of the area, the new function better done at the local level, with money attached from central government, is to deliver on social infrastructure instead. By this we mean becoming involved as a local facilitator for early childhood education, education, child protection and social housing, for instance. Local Government is best placed to deliver social infrastructure support that enables local communities to thrive and achieve their own aspirations, according to the measures determined by Central Government.

Be an advocate for local community needs to Central Government: Currently Central Government's push for poverty reduction, or climate change action, for instance, means there is little that Local Government can do, because Central Government has most of the levers. Such measures should be adopted and managed locally, albeit facilitated through Central Government's investment. There are issues with mandating Local Government to perform a particular function when there's a funding mismatch and this creates so much risk to the community. For example, *"[In one local area] communities are collaborating with a range of different government agencies on youth homelessness. The one agency that's not at the table is Local Government. Currently there's no engagement with them, except for funding streams and them providing spaces to hold meetings." "There's a lot of work that goes around Local Government rather than with it. I don't know if it's a problem, it just seems to work that way!"*

Pay attention to the basics - get that right and then build on it: Comvoices members continually hear from individuals they serve that there is lost trust in both Local and Central government agencies to do what they ask. To win trust is everything if Local Government is to ensure wellbeing and equity. But to win trust back is hard once it has been lost and so our recommendation is to start with small steps and build from there. *"Your responsiveness and proven acts will help to build trust for more ambitious projects. Work together for a solution - if there's a problem..., the community just wants it fixed, they don't care that it's local council not regional council. We've gotten used to things being easier in other parts of our life and have zero tolerance for "I can't report this", or lots of hoops to jump through."*

Support the community's capability to set their own benchmarks for Wellbeing: Rather than service delivery, local government may be best placed to monitor and respond to how their community's wellbeing changes over time - seeing the results of greater collaboration, in partnership with the community and voluntary sector and central government. Local government

also has an important role in enabling and maintaining the social infrastructure within the community to understand its capability and capacity and set achievable goals at a pace all in the community can collaborate effectively on.

Pātai tuatoru | Question 3: How might a system of local governance embody authentic partnership under Te Tiriti o Waitangi, creating conditions for shared prosperity and wellbeing?

Move beyond the Principles and Honour the Articles: Partnership, participation, protection, these are important, but Local Government has a responsibility to understand its role in the context of all four articles of Te Tiriti. The advantage Local Government has is that iwi are structured regionally as well. This means there is opportunity to engage so well with Māori within their own localities of reference. A lot of Comvoices members are on a “Treaty journey”. Consultants advised one member that there are some stages of this journey where you don’t need direct input from experts (Māori) but you need allies (Pakeha – Tauīwi) to be holding the baton internally for some of that journey to progress. *“Part of the partnership approach between communities and Local Government could be relieving that pressure on Māori in the broad system of local governance - where Māori participation and membership resources are facilitated and distributed equitably and collaboratively on multiple Tiriti journeys across the area.”*

Start with Whanaungatanga. Strengthen relationships with the community: Goodwill is required to bring people back to the table - because they’ve had mixed experiences in the past. There needs to be more simplicity in partnering. The reason people feel reluctant is that it is very onerous/complicated - at the very least, that’s the perception, so anything that can be made to simplify and reward engagement will make this more appealing. Help from Local Government in funding, recognition and connection - can lead to additional partnerships. Keep the Community and Voluntary Sector on the radar as a group of people who can support this.

Meet the community where they are: Local Government must make sure that engagement with the community is meaningful, safe, accessible, or at a time that it can be done. For example, a locality can have the most amazing centres but if they’re not close to public transport then that’s a barrier to entry. It is important to listen to those that connect with groups where they live: *“Volunteers are often key connectors with local communities - are aware of the gaps and needs and can help a community take ownership of what they need.”*

Demonstrate faith in partnership, starting between Local and Central government: There are devolution lessons that can be learnt from the Community and Voluntary Sector. Many run national offices with local / regional branches. All are working to the same strategy, with local knowledge and relationships valued equally alongside national oversight and strategy. *“We’re careful about what we mandate from a national office because we can’t really know how things are in a particular community. Think of this as a case study - the real power that can come from devolving power and resources locally.”* There is power in economies of scale and combining things together - e.g. centralising one marketing person or researcher to work with local staff/networks, with the responsiveness that can only be done locally.

Relevant and Purposeful Partnerships: ie. For impact on what’s meaningful to local communities. For meaningful engagement, we need to redefine what partnership is; funder and fundee is not an equal relationship. There are changes happening with funders in the philanthropic

sector, which could be reflected in central and local government. *“For meaningful engagement, recognise that this isn’t all we are doing, there are also many other potential partners. The sector would like to have more of a seat at that table but there has to be quite soon after that seat, some visible change/tangible result.”*

Pātai tuawhā | Question 4: What needs to change so local government and its leaders can best reflect and respond to the communities they serve?

Adopt and expand the Whānau Ora model: Enable the community to set the aspirations and priorities of wellbeing that they want to work towards. Whānau Ora is the service model for any organisation that goes in and tries to navigate with them. That’s a model / values-based approach that local authorities should look at too, rather than the traditional top-down approach to goal setting and mandating. *“Whānau Ora have a whānau/community aspirations approach. The community sets the aspirations and priorities of wellbeing that they want to work towards. That’s the service model for any organisation that goes in and tries to navigate with them. That’s a model / values-based approach that local authorities should look at too. It should not be directed by a councillor or Minister, it needs to come from the community itself.”*

Work with communities on their vision first: Before consultation, share in the visionwork what outcomes a community can/want to achieve. Clarity of shared vision, purpose and scope will help to ensure that consultation – when it comes – will be relevant and efficient for the community to engage in and provides a starting point for working out whose voice and perspective needs to be included. *“Some councils are doing good things – and working out what’s not working – e.g. like community plans that are council-led. They’ve handed it to communities to say, what’s the vision for their community, what do they want to see? They’ve listed the actions, asked who will be responsible, and then are resourcing the community. There’s some good things that are happening in some local councils that you want to retain / scale up.” “I’m tired of hearing the word consultation. Where was I when you workshopped the vision?”*

Consult with national peak bodies about the community networks to target, before going any further: Peak bodies have the benefit of being closely connected to both communities – through members – and to government. We see the breadth of reforms across government and have knowledge of the other pressures that are on the sector. They should be resourced across government departments to support this role. This helps to avoid overburdening individuals and community groups or misfiring with consultation requests. *“Local government and central government always think that they each need to go out to the community themselves, whereas we’ve already done a lot of that sort of scoping or analysis through our services or through our peak bodies. That’s our “in”. Partner with us on that.” “Peak bodies [add] value, efficiency and depth. Resource to capture voices that are harder to get. Māori, disabled, youth, etc. - the list goes on and on. They’re the least resourced and just delivering a workshop is not going to help.”*

Time is precious: Local Government must make sure that engagement – particularly consultation – is necessary and not overlooking existing sources of data, experiential and statistical, stored somewhere within the community already. Consultations often take place by one Government agency without seeing a connection to another’s. Local Government needs to respect its stakeholders; they shouldn’t have to work hard to contribute, or to repeat themselves

over and over again. Reflecting and responding to communities is about joining up across the system with all departments sharing intelligence strategically. Respect is also about providing a substantial and effective feedback loop before any implementation of policy. *“Our experience is that individual consultations from government and local government are frequently starting from scratch. They are not using existing sources of data. They don’t talk to each other / they’re not joined up. We’ve given this same information to another organisation recently and we never heard anything back, never knew how it progressed or what has changed. Were we listened to? Why would we spend time on this again?”* *“They are over consulted [particularly, Māori and refugee background communities] and nothing changes for them. Increases fatigue and disengagement.”*

Pātai tuarima | Question 5: What should change in local governance funding and financing to ensure viability and sustainability, fairness and equity, and maximum wellbeing?

Peak Bodies are well placed to do Local Government’s work in community engagement: Currently, the government’s budget is used internally or through an external engagement consultant. None of that funding is available to the people actually being consulted, it does not build on or strengthen relationships and it does not utilise existing community knowledge. Outsource appropriately - not to policyshops but national peak bodies for community research/democratic engagements/visionwork and consultations. *“There needs to be more reliable local and central government funding for NGO/not-for-profits that best know the local needs. More effectively decentralised with sensible financial risk management.”* *“Peak bodies are ideally placed to do a better job because we can use the information we already know is available, or we have already done, we may know about research that’s already available that can be used, existing datasets - we could give all the information in a much more robust way.”* *“For people who have English as a second language, for example, writing an 80-page consultation document in bureaucratic language is not going to meet the community’s standard of engagement. Not even us, the peak body for this community, has time to read that document!”*

Invest locally in Measuring Wellbeing: Local Government’s wellbeing function doesn’t need to be service delivery, it may be best placed to monitor and respond to how their community’s wellbeing changes over time - seeing the results of greater collaboration, in partnership with the Community and Voluntary Sector and Central Government. A challenge is how local councils operate - e.g. 3 year cycle. Communities don’t operate on that basis. The community and voluntary sector is constant, however, and it’s this continuity that provides a counterbalance to the politics of their local government representatives. Investing wisely in measuring wellbeing is also about building partnerships with community organisations to measure outcomes consistently over time.

Invest in Tiriti o Waitangi training for all Leaders working in Local Government: There is significant cultural bias and interpersonal ignorance related to Comvoices members by the people they serve, when engaging with Government agency workforces. On their own Tiriti journeys, members relate how the most notable shift in effectiveness for all minority groups comes when their governance groups invest in their collective understanding of Te Tiriti o Waitangi. It informs their decision-making which has impact on the direction of the entire organisation. It also improves conditions for Māori staff and enlists all staff on the journey through strategic objectives, such as

learning Tikanga practices in the workplace and networking with kaupapa Māori organisations. Local Governments across Aotearoa should learn from this example. When decision-making is premised on greater knowledge of and responsibility to te Tiriti, the whole community will experience less cultural bias and interpersonal ignorance from the system of governance.

Going out into the community is key: Local Government should invest properly in meeting the community where they are. Comvoices members relate how they make sure that where we try to engage with the community is meaningful, safe, accessible, and at a good time for the community. Local government also has an important role in enabling and maintaining social infrastructure such as Volunteer Centres, marae, community halls, cohesive social environments. Different groups have different places they wish to congregate, and all groups place high value in these collective spaces. This high value of the community should be reflected in the investment by Local Governments towards not just their maintenance and facility, but in Leaders' time spent engaging with communities there.

Kupu whakatepe | Conclusion

The recommendations we provide here are evidenced by the experiential knowledge of our members. This means they are best practice for the objectives of community development and engagement. We hope that they will provide a useful framework not only for this mahi but for future mahi and community consultations. We expect that there may be changes over time as decisions and structural changes are made, and as we try new ways of working together, but there are foundational principles and approaches in this submission that can be applied from Day 1. We encourage you to share this document with other government departments and local authorities.

The good news is, there's a lot of potential to improve from the status quo. We see an opportunity for us all - central government, local government, tangata whenua and the community and voluntary sector - to work better together to support our communities and environment, in genuine partnership. Our vision is for a transformative agenda that will require new ways of working but will lead to more efficiency, effectiveness and connectedness.

Case Studies

- [Pest-free Mirimar - Inspiring Communities](#)
- [Whananaki - Inspiring Communities](#)
- [Helping new migrants and refugees learn about elections, including voting](#) - **English Language Partners and the Electoral Commission**
- [Driver's licence for refugee programme](#) - **Red Cross and English Language Partners partnership**
- **Presbyterian Support's Te Ara Whānau:** We have a model of social needs assessment. A client walks in the door and we have a wrap-around service - we don't just scope one client but learn, understand and then actively try to address the needs of that client's entire household.
- **Youth homelessness:** Ministry of Housing and Urban Development and Auckland Council worked with Rainbow Youth and Te Ngākau Kahukura - collectively looking at

how we support the people who are working with young people who are homeless and rainbow. It's about improving capability.

- **Volunteer Centres** need to be recognised as regional peak bodies, supporting NGOs in their communities. Example of Volunteering Bay of Plenty being declined funding by a Funder. Cited that the funding was typically made directly to front-line charities. Call for more reliable local and central government funding.

Further Reading and Useful Frameworks

- [Te Tiriti](#)
- [The United Nations' Sustainable Development goals \(SDGs\)](#)
- <https://inspiringcommunities.org.nz/resources/>
- https://inspiringcommunities.org.nz/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/Tips_For-Public-Servants_v2.0-2.pdf
- https://inspiringcommunities.org.nz/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/10_Tips_Local_Govt_Oct_2021.pdf
- Ngā Tikanga Whānaketanga – He Arotake Tuhinga
<https://arataiohi.org.nz/research/aotearoa-youth-research/>
- Youth 19 <https://www.youth19.ac.nz/>
- Danny Kruger's *Levelling up communities*
<https://www.dannykruger.org.uk/sites/Levelingupcommunities.pdf>