

103 WAYS TO SAVE MONEY IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT





Foreword

***Andrew Tripe,
Mayor, Whanganui***

Local government's most immediate duty is to deliver the basics that keep communities functioning — safe roads, clean water, reliable pipes, flood protection, and services that citizens rely on every day. For most households, those services are funded through rates, so how we set, manage and control rates matters deeply. At a time of intense cost-of-living pressure, I welcome the Taxpayers' Union's focus on rates capping. I support the principle: well-designed caps force greater discipline, prioritisation and transparency. But caps alone are not a silver bullet. They must be paired with reforms that protect essential services and the long-term fiscal health of councils.

Whanganui's recent record shows what disciplined delivery can achieve. Through tough choices and sustained work we constrained our rate rise to 2.2 percent this year and recorded one of the lowest combined three-year increases nationally (and on target for another low rates rise next year). That result did not come from cuts to frontline services — it came from careful prioritisation, better procurement, and a sustained focus on efficiency and revenue diversification. This is the diligence I believe rates capping should demand: not short-term cuts that defer costs, but structural changes that lower the long-term burden on households.

To demonstrate what meaningful reform looks like in practice, we implemented a focused six-point programme. First, growing Whanganui's population: attracting people, supporting new housing and boosting economic opportunity widens the rates base so costs are shared more fairly. Second, improving efficiency: an internal restructure delivered \$1.2m of annual savings without harming frontline services, and smarter procurement and digital investment are reducing overheads. Third, exploring alternative funding: we now pursue government and philanthropic grants and co-funding partnerships as a first principle before committing ratepayer money. Fourth, cutting or deferring non-essential services: reversing the food-scrap rollout, deferring selected projects and trimming non-core budgets saved meaningful sums. Fifth, selling or repurposing non-strategic assets: targeted disposals reduce debt and interest costs while protecting core assets. Sixth, identifying non-rates revenue: fairer user fees and new commercial initiatives are expected to lift non-rates income by nearly 20 percent in 2025/26.

These measures show that caps can work when matched with a practical plan: grow the income base, operate more efficiently, secure external funding, and reallocate or pause non-essential spending. My support for rates capping is therefore conditional — I back caps that are principled, accompanied by accountability measures and by funding-first requirements so that vital services remain protected.

The Taxpayers' Union's scrutiny is welcome. It sharpens our focus and keeps public discussion where it belongs: on results for households. I look forward to continuing to work with central and local partners to keep Whanganui moving forward — delivering the basics well, protecting household budgets, and giving permission to dare to dream about the so-called nice to haves which make our communities more liveable.

INTRODUCTION

With the decision on rates-capping announced December, councils across New Zealand need to prepare now for a new reality. For decades, many councils have relied on rate increases to cover rising costs and fund new projects. But with ratepayers feeling the pinch and political momentum building to limit increases, that approach is no longer sustainable.

In the years ahead, councils will need to cut costs, find efficiencies, and ensure every dollar delivers real value. The Auditor-General's review of councils' 2024–34 long-term plans shows they are collectively set to raise more than \$9 billion in rates revenue this year, or about \$4,438 per household. For many families, that money could otherwise have gone toward essentials as the cost of living continues to bite. Ratepayers are right to expect their contributions to be carefully managed and spent only where it makes a real difference.

Debt is also further compounding the challenge. Nationwide, council liabilities are rising. In Auckland, debt per household reached \$18,664 in 2023, over 500 percent of rates income. With borrowing up and revenue capped, councils will face hard decisions to prioritise core services.

Additionally, public trust in local government is down. Research commissioned by Local Government New Zealand (LGNZ) shows confidence is at record lows, while frustration over high rates and poor performance is growing. Declining voter turnout a further sign communities are losing faith in their local representatives. Councils that fail to adapt risk eroding this trust even further.

Other countries have already moved to introduce rates capping. In the United Kingdom and Australia, governments have implemented caps, pushing councils to cut waste.

The 103 Ways report builds on our 2018 edition, offering practical, proven ideas both from New Zealand and abroad. Many draw on the work of our UK sister organisation, the TaxPayers' Alliance, and its Ways to Save Money in Local Government report.

The aim is simple to equip councils with the tools to operate effectively under tighter revenue constraints, while protecting essential services and keeping rates affordable. By sharing examples of councils that have achieved real efficiencies, we hope to add the adoption of best practice, reduce wasteful spending, and help restore public confidence in local government.



Rhys Hurley,
Investigations Coordinator

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01

Pay Back Debt - What Right Do Councils Have To Excessively Borrow Against Future Generations

Councils shouldn't be racking up debt now that future generations will have to pay off. Auckland Council made the right call in 2024 when it sold half its shares in Auckland Airport and used the \$833 million to bring debt down, but unlike Auckland, other councils can't be allowed to let that debt creep back up again.

02

End Costly International Visits And Sister City Partnerships

Hosting and visiting overseas delegations comes with travel, accommodation, and hospitality costs that deliver little value for ratepayers. Whangārei District Council spent around \$8,294 simply to sign a sister city agreement with French Polynesia. Foreign relations are the role of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Maybe councils should focus on local priorities, not entertaining dignitaries.

03

Stop Ratepayers Funding Chambers Of Commerce

Chambers of Commerce exist to support and promote local businesses, offering training, advice, and networking opportunities. These activities should be funded through membership fees, not public money. Porirua City Council's decision to end the \$60,000 annual grant to the Porirua Chamber of Commerce is a good example. Business advocacy should be paid for by business, not ratepayers.



04

Proactively Publish Information To Cut LGOIMA Costs

Handling Local Government Official Information and Meetings Act (LGOIMA) requests consumes valuable staff time. Councils can save money and increase transparency by publishing frequently requested or high-interest information online before it's asked for. Greater Wellington Regional Council reviews LGOIMA responses and releases material of public interest which reduces repeat requests and frees staff for other priorities. Increasing trust in council while lowering costs.

05

Don't Waste Resources Fighting Reasonable Information Requests

Challenging legitimate information requests wastes staff time and undermines public trust. Unless the material is genuinely commercially sensitive or an actual invasion of privacy, councils should release it. The Ombudsman found Tauranga City Council acted unreasonably in refusing to release an attendance list for a farewell cocktail night for its commissioners, an avoidable cost and reputational hit.

06

Don't Rush Decisions Before Elections

Significant decisions made just before elections risk being overturned by newly elected councillors, wasting time, money, and staff resources. Taupō District Council deferred a joint water management agreement with iwi due to limited public consultation and the upcoming election. Gore District Council, however, extended its Chief Executive's contract by two years just days before the election, leading to a breakdown in relations with the new mayor, mediation, and a costly payout.

07

Install Water Meters To Improve Efficiency And Detect Leaks

Water meters help councils identify leaks, encourage efficient use, and create fairer charging systems. In Ashburton and Waimate District Councils' urban areas, meters have enabled early leak detection, delivering immediate savings. Over time, they also allow councils to adopt charging structures that reward efficient users and ensure high users pay their fair share.



08

Require Annual Public Reports From All Council-Controlled Organisations

Annual reports from council-controlled or jointly owned organisations reveal which assets are performing well and which may be better sold, restructured, or closed. These reports should be publicly available, as with the eight Wellington City Council-controlled organisations, to allow ratepayers to scrutinise activities and spending. The requirement should also extend to smaller, non-profit CCOs that receive council funding to ensure outcomes justify the investment.

09

End Free Lunches And Alcohol For Councillors And Staff

Ratepayers should not be footing the bill to feed or entertain elected representatives and council employees. On 2 March 2023, the Auckland Council Planning, Environment and Parks Committee scrapped the free lunches previously provided to members and reducing costs at a time when every dollar counts.



10

Scrap Council-Funded Mayoral Advisors.

Our three biggest cities spend ratepayers money giving mayors political advice. These roles should be scrapped or funded from the mayor's own funds. Directly below is the total cost for Christchurch, Wellington and Auckland in 2023:

Christchurch Mayor's Office cost = \$583,778 - \$649,273

- Head of the Office of the Mayor and Chief Executive = \$144,608 - \$160,676
 - Principal Mayoral Advisor = \$125,803 - \$139,781
 - Principal Policy Advisor = \$97,829 - \$108,699
- Team Leader Business Support and Assistant to the Mayor = \$81,264 - \$90,923
 - Mayoral Support Coordinator P/T = \$67,137 - \$74,597
- Executive Assistant to the Deputy Mayor = \$67,137 - \$74,597

Wellington Mayor's Office cost = \$787,256.13

- Chief of Staff = \$180,000 - \$219,999
- Principal Communications Advisor = \$120,000 - \$159,999
- Senior Communications Specialist = \$90,000 - \$129,999
- Senior Advisor Office of the Mayor = \$90,000 - \$129,999
- Vacant Senior Social and Multimedia Advisor = \$90,000 - \$129,999 (0.6FTE)
 - Executive Assistant to the Mayor = \$70,000 - \$109,999
 - Senior Business Support Officer = \$60,000 - \$99,999
 - Creative Officer = \$60,000 - \$99,999 (0.4FTE)

Auckland Mayor's Office cost = \$2,172,901.

- Chief of Staff
- Head of Communications and Government Relations
 - Head of Finance and Budget
 - Head of Governance
 - Senior Communications Advisor
- Senior Communications Advisor – Digital
 - Press Secretary
- Principal Advisor (10 hours per week)
 - Lead Liaison
- Mayoral Support Advisor x 3 (Diary, Events, Correspondence)
 - Principal Adviser – Transport and Infrastructure

11

Abolish Youth Councils

Youth councils often prioritise photo opportunities over meaningful policy input and deliver limited value for ratepayers. Tasman District Council operates four separate youth councils, while Hastings District Council even granted them voting rights on decisions. Engagement and civic education are better delivered through schools, where debates and civics programmes can foster understanding of local government, unlike councils, which have to draw on ratepayer resources, staff time, and department budgets.

12

Partner With Private Organisations To Fund And Manage Services

Charities and private organisations can deliver council services at little or no cost to ratepayers. In Hamilton, instead of fully funding repairs to a Claudelands playground, the council partnered with the Magical Bridge Trust to create a \$3.5–\$4 million disability-inclusive park. Council contributed \$1.2 million from its renewal budget, while the trust funded the remainder and now manages promotion, events, and activities, reducing council costs while providing a valuable community asset. Another option may be to partner with schools to have these playgrounds open after hours so there is less need for doubling up.

13

Avoid Excessive Spending On Advertising

Councils should not pour money into advertising without evidence of impact. South Taranaki District Council spent \$200,000 on radio campaigns over three years, with no clear proof the spending benefits ratepayers. Instead they relied on stories of farmers turning up at council to pay after hearing rate reminder adds while milking. Promotional budgets should be backed by measurable results, not stories at the front desk.

14

Audit Recycling To Cut Contamination And Disposal Costs

Rubbish mixed with recycling can cause entire loads to be rejected and sent to landfill, increasing transport and disposal costs. In Ashburton District, kerbside recycling audits reduced contamination rates to below 10 percent, saving about \$20,000 annually. Educating households that misuse bins helps drive rates down further and boosts savings.

15

Build Practical, Affordable Public Toilets

Public toilets should be functional and cost-effective, not expensive vanity projects. Wellington City's \$2.3 million light-up toilet even triggered an archaeological dig, adding to the costs. Councils should focus on delivering standard, durable facilities that meet community needs without unnecessary extras.

16

Partner With Local Businesses To Provide Public Toilets

Building and maintaining public toilets is costly, especially in areas with growing populations or high tourist numbers. Nelson City Council's "Use Our Loos" trial scheme partnered with local businesses to make their facilities available to the public during opening hours without requiring a purchase. With nearly 50 public and private toilets in the network, the scheme provided clean, accessible amenities while reducing the need for council-funded construction and maintenance.



17

Hire Summer Students To Reduce Contractor Costs

Employing university students for seasonal roles can be a cost-effective alternative to contractors or part-time hires. Waimakariri District Council uses summer students in its Utilities and Roding departments, meeting maintenance needs while creating a pathway to future staff and reducing recruitment costs. These roles should fill genuine seasonal or overflow work however such as lifeguarding or peak-period maintenance not created solely to provide employment.

18

Use Sheep, Cows, Goats And Horses To Trim The Lawns

Sheep are already used on One Tree Hill in Auckland. Why not expand this to all fenced parks or rent out underused land for grazing? However if the land is not needed, selling it should be the first consideration.



19

Review Programme Delivery To Reduce Costs And Reprioritise Funding

Regular reviews can identify cheaper ways to deliver services and free up funds for higher-priority work. In 2023/24, Northland District Council saved \$375,000 by removing planned project increases, reassessing staff roles, and reprioritising programmes. For example, the council deferred hiring a freshwater ecologist that was not needed for a programme's delivery, redirecting funds to more urgent needs.

20

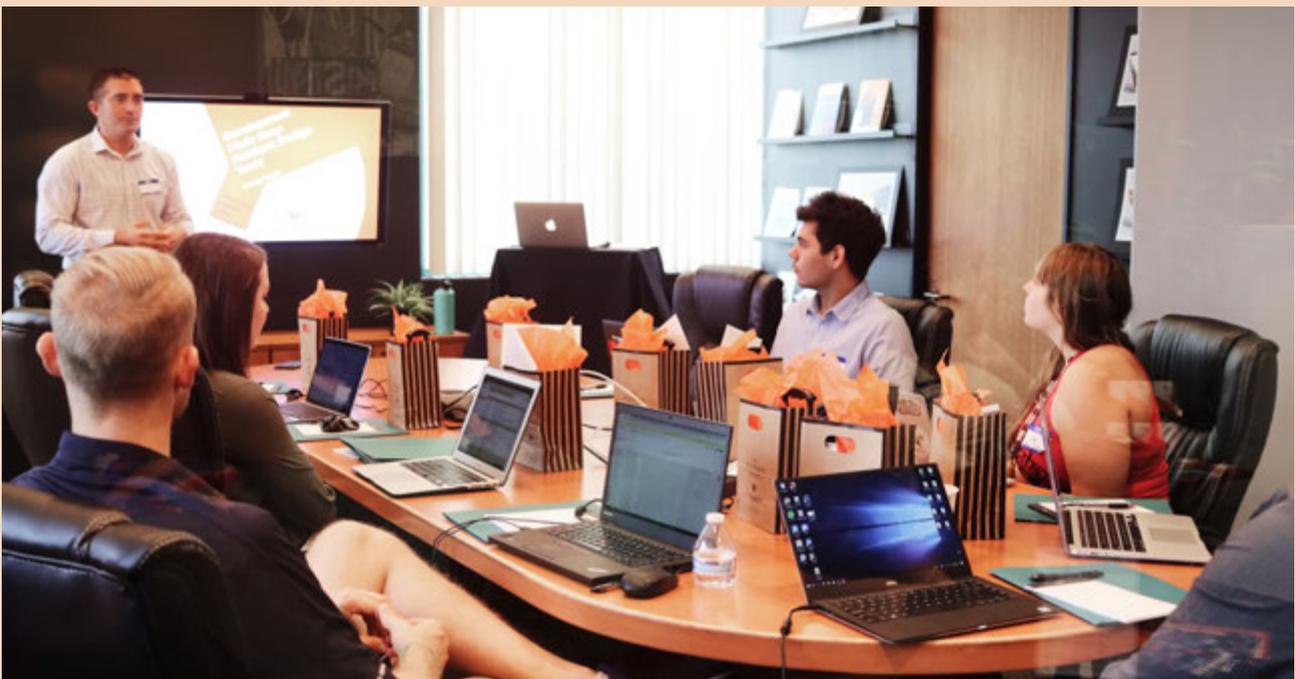
Share Office Space To Reduce Rent And Upgrade Costs

When councils outgrow existing offices or lease space, costs for rent, upgrades, or new premises can be high. Sharing buildings allows rent and maintenance costs to be split, delivering substantial savings. In Dargaville, Northland Regional Council staff moved into a shared building in May 2023, followed later that month by more than 65 Kaipara District Council staff from across the district.

21

Require Meeting Attendance

Elected members and appointed representatives can't make informed decisions if they fail to attend meetings. In New Plymouth, some councillors missed dozens of meetings without apology, while Arapata Reuben of the Canterbury Water Zone Committee was a no show at meetings in 2023 and 2024 but received his full \$8,000 honorarium. In the private sector, pay without attendance is unacceptable and the same should apply to public representatives. It is time to start docking pay for those who can't front.



22

Stop Chasing Costly Council Amalgamations

Mergers are often promoted as a cost-saving solution, but experience shows they can have the opposite effect. Auckland's Super City a prime example with the 2022 report by the Infrastructure Commission finding no evidence that larger councils are more efficient. Unless there is strong community demand, councils should avoid spending time and resources on investigations that are likely to fail.

23

Collaborate With Neighbouring Councils To Share Services And Cut Costs

Pooling resources with nearby councils can deliver significant savings by reducing duplication. The four Taranaki councils of New Plymouth, South Taranaki, Stratford, and Taranaki Region jointly advertise for services such as dog registration, rates payment reminders, and water conservation without the need for amalgamation and losing local control. This approach makes better use of existing budgets without the need for amalgamation.

24

Use Shared Service Organisations For Regional Savings And Strategy

Regional shared service companies can cut costs, improve strategy, and avoid the expense of amalgamation. Hawke's Bay Local Authority Shared Services Limited (HBLASS) and Bay of Plenty's Bay of Plenty Local Authority Shared Services Limited (BOPLASS) Ltd facilitate joint procurement, shared services, and best-practice delivery while preserving local decision-making. Following the Havelock North water inquiry, HBLASS created a joint committee to implement safety recommendations which reduced duplication and costs through shared resources and management.

25

Use Regional Shared Services To Maximise Purchasing Power

Pooling resources through regional shared service companies can deliver substantial savings for ratepayers. In the Manawatū–Whanganui region, councils have collaborated on regional archives (\$1.5 million saved), collective rating valuation services (more than \$900,000 saved on a nine-year contract), pooled insurance (\$500,000 saved over three years), regional aerial photography (\$100,000 saved), and rates modelling software (\$30,000 saved). By sharing costs for common services, councils achieve better value for money.

26

Cancel Subscriptions To Local Government New Zealand

Membership in Local Government New Zealand (LGNZ) is optional, and leaving can produce significant savings. Christchurch City Council saved \$163,254.75 (plus GST) in 2024/25 by withdrawing. While some councils leave and rejoined such as Waikato Regional Council, those seeking savings should consider leaving and committing to the decision. Ratepayers shouldn't be funding anti-ratepayer advocacy, like LGNZ's Three Waters campaign.



27

Reduce Reliance On Consultants By Accepting Some Risk

Not every piece of staff work needs to be double-checked by external consultants. Invercargill Mayor Nobby Clark noted the council should “take more risk” after it was revealed \$7.3 million had been spent on consultants in less than three years. Sensible risk-taking can cut consultant bills and keep more work in-house.

28

Prioritise Core Services Over Nice To Haves

Essential services like roads, rubbish, and water should take priority over non-essential projects. Despite existing NZTA-funded town signage, the Clifton Community Board spent \$113,850 on its own signs, resulting in drivers being greeted twice. Ratepayer funds should focus on necessities before “nice-to-have” extras.



29

Limit Spending On Costly Public Art

Councils can support local artists and enhance public spaces without excessive spending. Many artists would contribute work for minimal costs or even free for the exposure and community benefit. Taupō District Council spent \$200,000 on 'Boom Boom' the dinosaur. Public art can add value without burdening ratepayers.



30

Cancel Council-Funded Subscriptions To Taituarā

Taituarā – Local Government Professionals Aotearoa can change up to \$450 per year for full membership. If staff want professional development not essential to their current council role, they should fund it themselves. Ratepayers should not be covering costs for memberships that may only benefit staff in future roles outside the council.

31

Rely On National Tourism Agencies Instead Of Duplicating Efforts

Councils should avoid duplicating Tourism New Zealand's role by running costly local campaigns. Rotorua Lakes District Council spent \$94,000 on its "Robe Trip" campaign featuring the mayor, while Ashburton District Council paid \$7,800 to social media influencers to promote the district. National agencies already market New Zealand as a destination so councils should focus on supporting local infrastructure and services instead.

32

Keep Staff Welcome Events Simple And Affordable

Welcoming new staff is important, but it doesn't require lavish spending. Wellington City Council spent more than \$12,000 on a special morning tea and lunch to greet its new Chief Executive, Matt Prosser. Modest, low-cost events can still make newcomers feel valued without burdening ratepayers.

33

Avoid Lavish Spending On Council Offices

Council offices should be functional, not extravagant. Tauranga City Council signed a \$91.9 million lease for new offices and budgeted another \$33.5 million for the fit-out, including a \$470,000 lease for coffee machines, all while rates have risen an average of 35.98 percent over the past three years. Ratepayers should not be funding luxury workplaces for council staff.

34

Avoid Unnecessary Accreditation Costs

Councils can demonstrate respect and inclusivity without paying for costly accreditation schemes. Hamilton City Council spent \$12,000 per each year for Rainbow Tick accreditation. Common sense, good policy, and respectful workplace culture can achieve the same goals without the ongoing expense.

35

Stick To Priorities Over Ideology

Every council motion and staff hour carries a cost. Palmerston North City Council spent time debating a ban on sugary drink sales at its venues in a move even the Mayor considered overreach. Councils should prioritise decisions that deliver meaningful savings and benefits for ratepayers, rather than symbolic measures with minimal impact.

36

Enforce High Standards In Financial Reporting

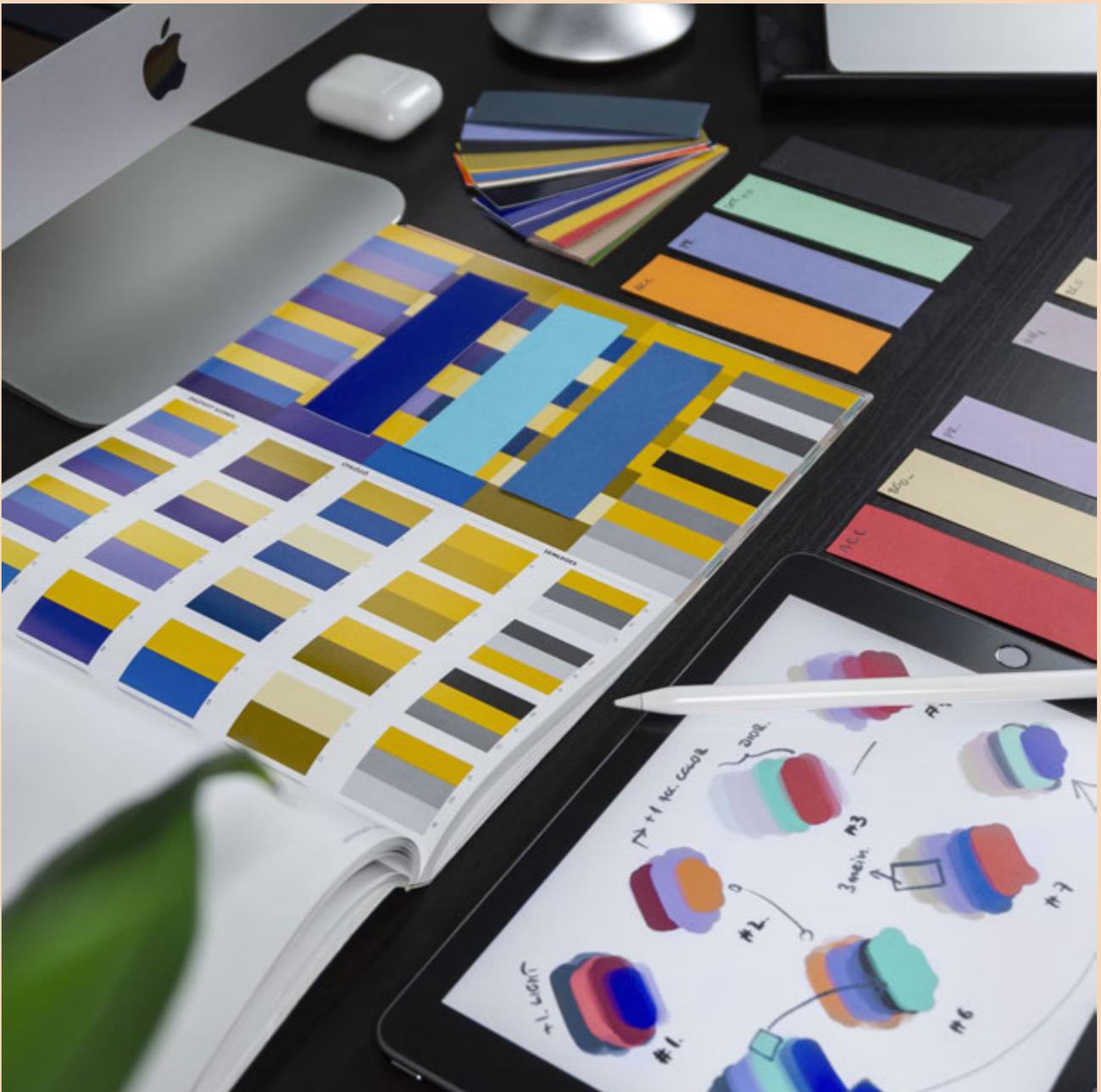
Poor financial management can cause major losses for ratepayers. In 2024, Ruapehu District Council overspent its community and recreational facilities budget by \$700,000, while New Plymouth nearly lost \$20 million in rates revenue due to reporting errors. Adopting clear, consistent financial reporting standards across all councils will help prevent costly mistakes.



37

Avoid Costly Council Rebrands

Logos and branding changes should be rare and justified, as they represent the whole district and come with significant costs. Ōtorohanga District Council spent over \$100,000 on a new logo and website, sparking public backlash. Waitaki District Council's rebranding has cost up to \$400,000 for a logo many ratepayers compared to genitals. Funds are better spent on essential services than cosmetic changes.



38

Cultural Consultants Are Still Consultancy Costs

Consultancy spending should be managed carefully, regardless of the provider. Dunedin City Council spent \$1.365 million over three years on services from Aukaha, an iwi-owned consultancy, while rates rose by an average of 17.5 percent. Not every project, such as the \$40,000 consultation for a landfill, requires external cultural advice before proceeding.

39

Phase Out Postal Billing

Emailing invoices and statements saves money and increases efficiency. Waitaki District Council estimates it had saved around \$2,000 per month, or around \$20,000 annually by moving ratepayers to email billing instead of post. Partnering with banks could help older residents set up automatic payments, reducing reliance on mail.



40

Apply Clear Rules For Funding Non-Council Events

Councils should not fund protest logistics ad hoc without a clear and consistent policy. Wellington City Council spent \$21,702 on hiring Portaloos for the Hīkoi protest, the first time such support was given in a city well known for protests. Without consistent rules, these ad-hoc decisions risk appearing biased and wasteful.

41

Audit Council-Owned Buildings And Sell Unused Assets

Councils often hold buildings and land they no longer need, incurring ongoing maintenance and management costs. Unused assets should be identified through regular audits and sold, with proceeds used to reduce debt or fund essential services. If community groups are not using council-owned facilities, those assets should be returned for sale.



42

Appoint Commercial Sector Directors To CCO Boards

The Auditor-General recommends councils appoint independent directors with the skills, knowledge, and experience needed to govern effectively. Bringing in leaders from the commercial sector can improve spending control and operational efficiency in council-controlled organisations. Too often, public sector appointees lack the governance experience to cut costs and drive performance.

43

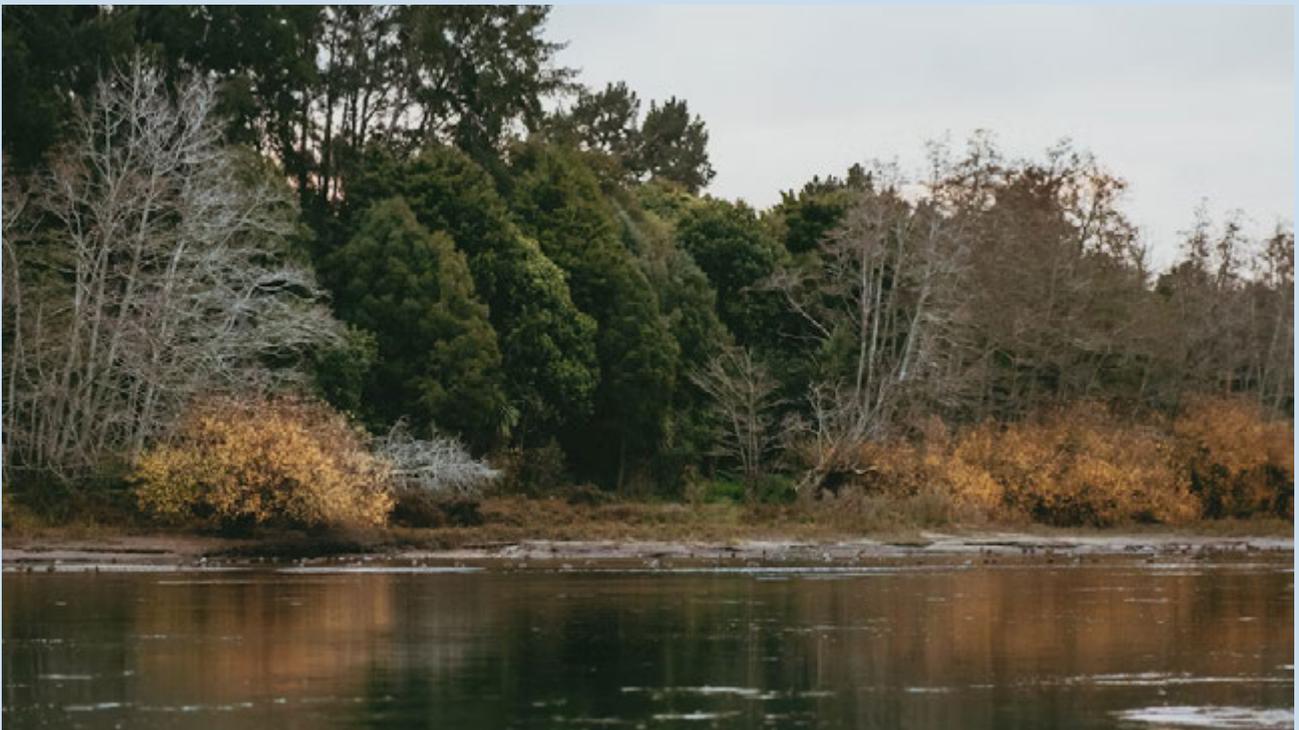
Consider Partial Or Full Sales Of CCOs

A report on Christchurch City Council recommended corporatising its CCO boards, reducing councillor representation, and selling a portion of shares to investors. Such sales could release hundreds of millions of dollars to reduce debt, reinvest, or lower rates, while potentially improving dividend returns. Other councils should review their CCO structures and consider similar options to deliver savings.

44

Partner With Local Groups And Businesses To Reduce Costs

Partnerships with businesses, schools, and community groups can deliver significant savings. Waimakariri District Council has saved \$99,000 through such collaborations, including \$15,000 each by supporting Rotary to build two dog park shelters, and further savings by enabling Ashley Rugby Club to supply and install irrigation at Loburn Domain using its own contractors and members. Passing costs to those who want the service reduces the burden on ratepayers.



45

Avoid Blanket Living Wage Policies

Adopting a living wage for all council employees and contractors can increase costs and reduce opportunities for low-skilled workers. Higher pay rates may attract more skilled applicants, crowding out those seeking entry-level experience and forcing ratepayers to overpay for roles. When Wellington introduced a living wage, 17 low-skilled employees lost their jobs. While some staff benefit from a pay increase, much of the gain can be lost through higher taxes or reduced benefits. Evidence shows blanket wage hikes often harm the very people they aim to help.



46

Disestablish Costly CCOs

CCOs that cannot sustain themselves should be sold or wound up, such as in 2023 when Whangārei District Council's Hundertwasser Art Centre required an \$800,000 bailout. Costs like these should be covered through loans, not ratepayers.

47

Use Electronic Agendas Instead Of Paper

Moving from paper-based to electronic agendas saves money and improves efficiency. Ashburton District Council now uses electronic agendas for all meetings, saving \$10,000 annually on printing costs. Councils could also consider electronic voting to reduce the staff time spent reviewing notes and recordings to confirm results.

48

Stop Providing Corporate Welfare

Businesses take on their own risks and should seek private finance, not ratepayer handouts. In 2018, Palmerston North City Council gave \$391,000 to Toyota New Zealand, one of the world's largest car manufacturers. The \$32 million Reading Cinema deal in Wellington is another attempted example. If councils want to support job creation, they should focus on lowering rates and streamlining regulations, not subsidising multinational corporations.

49

Councils Should Not Lend To Private Businesses

Council funds should be reserved for infrastructure and essential services, not used as a source of cheap loans. In 2020, Ōtorohanga District Council lent \$2 million to the Ōtorohanga Kiwi House. Companies needing finance should approach banks or seek local investment, not draw from money needed for core council services.





50

Leave Social Housing To Central Government

Housing is a central government responsibility, yet some councils continue to fund large-scale housing projects. Wellington City Council has budgeted \$437 million for social housing upgrades over the next decade. These responsibilities must be transferred to central government, which would free up council budgets for core local services.

51

Keep Reports Simple And Cost-Effective

Council reports should use plain language, avoid jargon, and focus on delivering information clearly. Setting maximum word limits prevents unnecessarily long documents that waste staff time and obscure accountability. Using the council logo and providing reports digitally can further reduce printing and production costs.



52

Charge Fair Prices For Council Services

Setting reasonable fees encourages compliance and payment while still covering the cost-of-service delivery. Kawerau District Council charged some of the lowest prices in the country, including \$37 for dog registration, \$82 for the annual fixed water charge, and \$168 for a Land Information Memorandum. Lower charges, combined with cutting red tape and unnecessary services, can reduce administration costs and keep prices fair for ratepayers.

53

Retain Library Late Fees

Library books, DVDs, and other borrowable items are community-owned assets. Charging late fees helps ensure they are returned on time and available for others. Thames-Coromandel and South Waikato District Councils no longer charge \$3.50 per week for overdue books, yet charging is a reasonable way to encourage responsibility and protect ratepayers' investments.



54

Encourage Private Investment In Major Projects

Large developments, such as stadiums or waterfront upgrades, can place heavy costs on councils. Partnering with private investors reduces the burden on ratepayers while still delivering community benefits. Kaikōura District Council sought private investment for its Wakatu Quay development, with potential savings of \$800,000 once a partner was secured. However, this doesn't mean small scale projects can't be justified in getting private backing too.

55

Make Consultations Short, Low-Cost, And Meaningful

Community consultations are valuable but can be expensive if poorly planned. Councils should avoid social media gimmicks and instead engage directly at events where stakeholders are already present, such as weekend markets or major community gatherings. Using in-house staff, who know the community and are already on the payroll, rather than hiring consultants can reduce costs while ensuring meaningful feedback is gathered. Digitally engaging those who have previously done council surveys, such as the Auckland People's Panel, is another low-cost way to gather perspectives.



56

Add Cultural Design Without Blowing The Budget

Incorporating cultural elements into public assets can enhance community identity, but costs must be controlled. Nelson City Council spent \$661,704.35 on a footbridge in 2025, including \$100,518.95 for cultural designs. Such additions should be kept within reasonable limits to avoid contributing to significant rate rises, like the council's recent 8.2 percent increase.



57

Review Salaries Over \$200,000

High-paying council roles should be regularly reviewed to ensure they are necessary and cost-effective. Positions earning over \$200,000 should be assessed for potential restructuring, merging with other roles, or reassignment if the work no longer justifies the salary. This ensures ratepayers get value for top-tier pay.

58

Cut Chief Executive Salaries

Councils should benchmark chief executive and senior management pay against comparable roles in other regions and countries. In New Zealand a majority of Chief Executives earn over \$300,000 with Dunedin City Council's Sandy Graham receiving \$483,652.00 in 2023/24. Cutting excessive salaries would reduce costs and bring pay into line with reasonable expectations.

59

Keep Playgrounds Simple And Affordable

Playgrounds should focus on safe, functional play equipment rather than costly extras. Tauranga City Council spent \$5 million on a destination playground, including \$1.67 million for equipment, \$1.1 million on hard landscaping, nearly \$640,000 on consulting and management, \$361,000 on safety surfacing, and \$150,000 on staff costs. Basic equipment with low-cost surfacing can deliver fun for children without excessive spending.

60

Engage Early With Ratepayer Groups To Avoid Costly Disputes

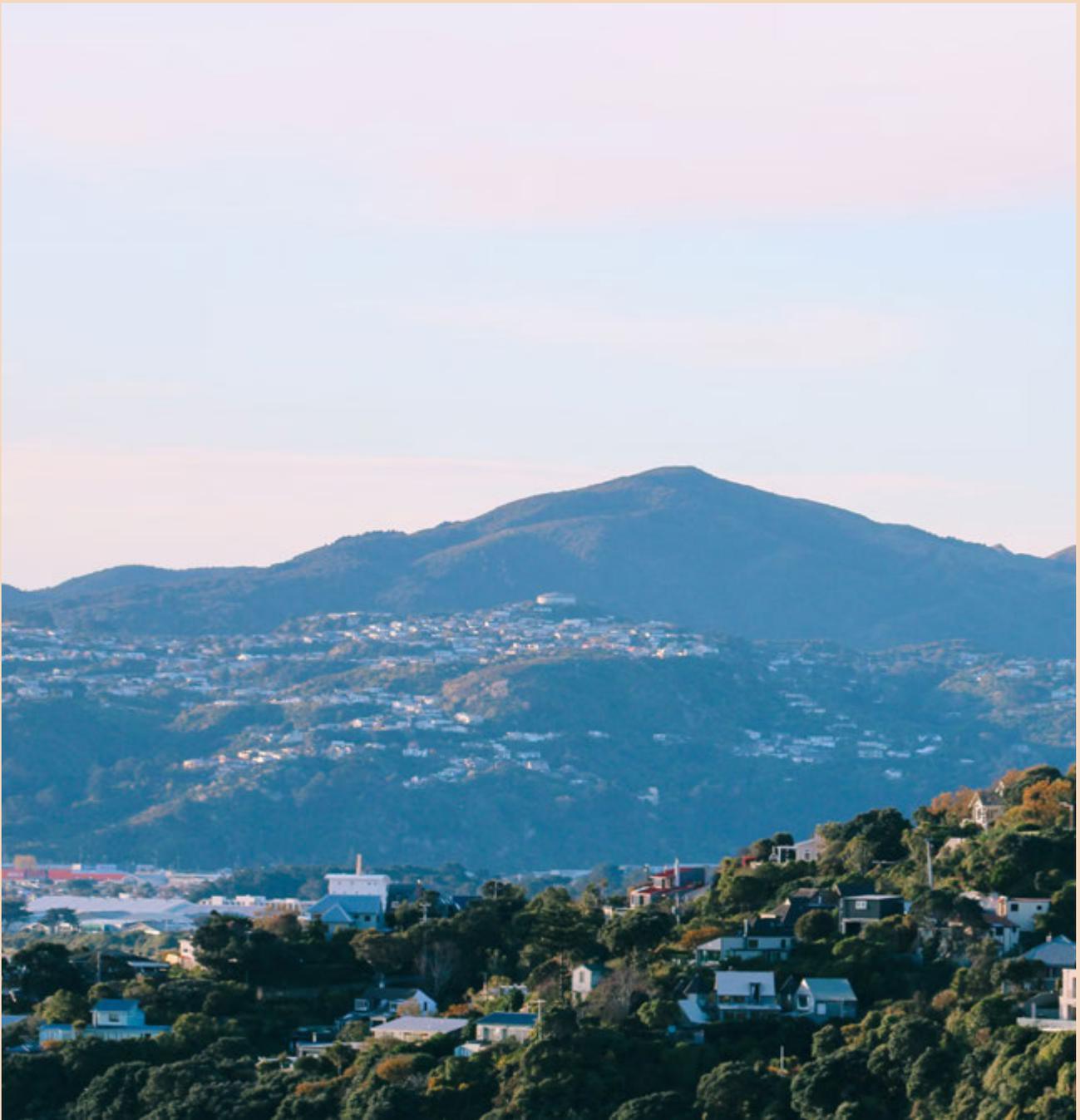
Ignoring reasonable requests from community groups can lead to drawn-out disputes, higher consultation costs, and wasted staff time. Selwyn District Council initially refused the Rolleston Residents Association's request to add the word "library" alongside the Māori name Te Ara Atea. Nearly a year later, the council commissioned a report on the issue after abandoning planned consultation, turning a simple matter into an unnecessary expense.

61

Make Manager Pay Performance-Based

Linking manager pay to budget performance creates accountability and rewards efficiency. Managers who deliver services under budget should receive bonuses, while those who exceed budgets should face pay reductions. Performance-related pay ensures council leaders have a direct incentive to control costs and meet targets.





62

Keep Rates Affordable To Reduce Arrears

Excessive rates can push households into arrears, increasing court costs and reducing revenue. In June 2025, Southland District Council had \$2.68 million in unpaid rates across 1,078 properties. Lower, more manageable rates encourage timely payment and reduce the costs of enforcement.

63

Avoid Excessive Spending On Christmas Displays

Festive decorations should be affordable and proportionate. Auckland Council spent \$1.2 million in 2024 on a Christmas tree, more than 25 times the cost of Christchurch City Council's Christmas display. Council debt is ratepayer debt, and excessive spending today will be paid for by future generations.

64

Use Apps To Reduce Call Centre And Investigation Costs

Mobile apps allow ratepayers to report issues, cutting call centre demand and improving response times. Porirua City Council uses Antenno for service requests, while Westland District Council uses Snap Send Solve, both enabling residents to log issues with photos and real-time details. Councils without such systems should adopt the most cost-effective app available to lower administration costs and speed up problem resolution.

65

Scrap Cultural Training Programmes Without Measurable Outcomes

Over three years, Auckland Council spent \$430,865 on Te Reo Māori training, with no tests, pass/fail criteria, or proficiency outcomes required. Staff logged 6,411 paid hours on the courses, costing a further \$317,922 in wages. Training that cannot demonstrate tangible results should be restructured to prove its value or discontinued to save ratepayer funds.

66

Prioritise Essential Spending On Disability Access

Improving accessibility is important, but projects should be prioritised to ensure value for money. New Plymouth District Council allocated \$1.28 million for ramps and stairs at Fitzroy Beach, despite an existing accessible pathway. Projects that duplicate existing access should be reconsidered in favour of more pressing needs.

67

Remove Unelected Appointees From Council Committees

Unelected representatives are being given influence over council decisions that involve millions of ratepayer dollars. In Palmerston North City Council, councillors acted to remove appointees from all committee structures, restoring decision-making to those elected by the public. Ratepayers deserve accountability in who is making decisions for them and that can only happen through elected councillors deciding on spending and policy.

68

Prioritise Road Spending Based On Use And Necessity

In large rural districts with small populations, maintaining every sealed road can be prohibitively expensive. Southland District Council spends about \$25 million annually on road maintenance and rebuilding. Options such as speed or weight restrictions, or downgrading low-use sealed roads to gravel, can free up funds for more heavily used routes. Where residents want sealed roads retained, councils could support them in funding the upgrade directly.

69

Weigh Cycleway Projects Against Business And Revenue Impacts

Removing parking to build cycleways can reduce parking meter revenue and hurt local businesses. Wellington City Council had last term planned to remove 1651 car parks, leaving shops with fewer customers and risking further rate losses if businesses close. Councils should carefully assess whether the benefits of a cycleway outweigh the financial and economic costs.



70

Sell Council-Owned Airports

Airports and ports can be valuable assets, but they are not core council services. Palmerston North City Council owns 100% of its airport, valued at \$84 million, while projecting net debt to rise to \$553 million by 2034. Selling such assets could significantly reduce debt and ease the burden on ratepayers.



71

Scrap Mayoral Employment Taskforces

Employment programmes are the responsibility of central government and non-profits, not councils. Mayoral taskforces often hire dedicated staff, such as pastoral care support roles, duplicating services already provided by high schools and the Ministry of Social Development. Scrapping these initiatives allows councils to focus resources on core services for ratepayers.



72

Better Recruitment Checks Stop Questionable Appointments

Christchurch City Holdings' former CEO, Tim Boyd, allegedly misled the council about his work history to secure a \$430,000-a-year role. After just six months, two of them spent on leave, he departed with a \$200,000 payout. Ratepayers should not be footing the bill for “golden handshakes” resulting from questionable appointments. Recruitment failures like this underline the need for stronger vetting and accountability in senior hiring processes to prevent costly and unjustified payouts.

73

Require Staff To Work Primarily In The Office

Flexible work arrangements should not reduce productivity. At Napier City Council, staff (including the Chief Executive) are required to be in the office only 60 percent of the time, just three days a week. While reducing office space can save money, those savings disappear if output drops. Unless there are genuine operational or safety reasons, staff should work primarily from the office to ensure ratepayers get full value for their wages.

74

Publish Council Credit Card Spending

Making council credit card use public increases accountability and discourages wasteful spending. In 2022, Tauranga City Council's executive team spent more than \$88,500 on ratepayer-funded cards, including \$188 on chocolate fish, \$796 for an "executive team meeting" at a bar, and \$471 for the chief executive's annual car valet. Regularly publishing these expenses helps prevent excessive or frivolous spending.

75

Learn From Central Government Waste

Councils should learn from Central Government's wasteful spending and avoid similar mistakes. ACC spent more than \$251,000 hiring The Research Agency to run a monthly public engagement and trust survey. Councils should reconsider the need for frequent community surveys and limit them to essential, cost-effective intervals.

76

No Ratepayer Funding For Personal Monuments

Former Invercargill Mayor Tim Shadbolt requested a ratepayer-funded statue of himself, despite residents already paying for a large mayoral portrait. Former Mayor Nobby Clarke rightly rejected the proposal, protecting ratepayers from unnecessary spending. If individuals or groups want monuments, they should fund them privately, not through council budgets.



77

Use Cross-Department Roles To Reduce Staffing Costs

Assigning staff multiple responsibilities can cut unnecessary positions and reduce hiring costs. Kaipara District Council combines roles, with the Executive Assistant serving both the Mayor and Chief Executive, and five General Managers sharing two Personal Assistants. Savings can also come from contracting volunteer and community groups for tasks like maintaining campgrounds, beach accessways, parks, and reserves. Larger councils, such as Auckland, have reduced costs by simplifying management structures and sharing resources, leading to staff reductions where roles are no longer needed.



78

Don't Commit To All Government Co-Funding Programmes

Not all central government funding offers deliver long-term value. Many NZTA 50/50 agreements have led to costly projects, such as cycleways and road crossings, that councils must co-fund at no real benefit to ratepayers. Stratford District Council took up a 100% funding offer and still spent \$96,230 on traffic management alone for two crossings. Time-limited funding should only be accepted when the project is genuinely needed and financially sustainable beyond the funding period.

79

Offer Free Flu Jabs To Reduce Sick Leave

Providing free flu vaccinations can reduce staff sick days and maintain productivity. Kaipara District Council has offered flu jabs for at least 15 years, helping keep staff healthy and at work. Jabs are a low-cost perk that benefits both employees and ratepayers.



80

Keep Travel Costs Modest

Work travel should be necessary, cost-effective, and free from luxury spending. Greater Wellington Regional Council spent \$200,000 on international travel over two years, including \$900 per stay at London's Hyatt Regency. When overseas trips are essential, councils should opt for reasonably priced accommodation and transport to minimise costs to ratepayers.



81

Publish All Staff Job Titles And Vacancy Status

Making all staff positions and their vacancy status public allows ratepayers to see where resources are allocated and identify unnecessary roles. High-paying positions can face greater scrutiny, creating pressure to merge roles or expand responsibilities. Transparency in staffing enables councils to prioritise frontline services and invest in areas that directly benefit ratepayers.

82

Don't Replace Functional Assets Without Need

If facilities such as libraries, bus stops, or information centres are still fit for purpose, replacing or combining them can be an unnecessary expense. South Taranaki District Council's new cultural centre, Te Ramanui O Ruapūtahanga, blew out from an \$8 million estimate to \$20.1 million. This highlights the risks of replacing functional assets with new costly replacements.

83

Sell Non-Essential Council Assets

Councils should focus on providing infrastructure and services not otherwise delivered by the private sector, rather than competing with local businesses. Assets such as farms, cafés, shops, golf courses, caravan sites, and theme parks should be sold unless they are necessary. Christchurch City Council approved the disposal of 58 surplus properties no longer needed for their original purpose. An approach other councils should adopt.

84

Amalgamate Water Assets

Regional water groupings might save money, and add much needed experience with the appointment of liable commercial directors. With group buying power, this is a cheaper option that will allow councils to take the debt off their books and implement a proper user-pay model without the need for long-term investment directly from rates or loans. Yet this also keeps local control by being able to leave these groupings when necessary.



85

Recycle Underperforming Assets

Auckland Council is targeting \$430 million in asset recycling over the next decade, from a potential \$590 million pipeline of property, commercial, and business unit opportunities. All assets should be reviewed, including the city's 13 golf courses, which have a combined value of over \$2.9 billion, but run at annual losses exceeding \$160 million. Selling or repurposing underperforming assets could significantly improve Auckland's financial position and fund higher-priority projects.

86

Scrap Expensive Leadership Courses

Some councils are spending tens of thousands of dollars on leadership and professional development courses without measuring whether they deliver value for money. These programmes often come with high course fees, significant staff time away from core duties, and additional costs such as travel and accommodation. Without clear evaluations or proven outcomes, ratepayers are left funding training that may have little practical benefit. Councils should prioritise essential services and only invest in staff development when there is strong evidence it will improve performance.

87

Sell Advertising Space On Council Land

Allowing billboards or signage on council land alongside busy roads can generate additional revenue without burdening ratepayers. Hutt City Council earns around \$50,000 per year from hiring out four double-sided roadside signboards. This is a low-effort, low-cost way for councils of all sizes to boost income.

88

Use Private Agents To Manage Venue And Asset Hire

Contracting private companies to manage the hire of council locations, such as billboards, parks, or buildings, can increase bookings and revenue while reducing staffing costs. Professional agencies can take a more proactive approach to marketing and managing these assets, ensuring councils maximise income for reinvestment into community projects.



89

Hire Out Green Spaces For Events

Councils can generate revenue by hiring out parks and reserves for events. Hastings District Council allows bookings for its green spaces, charging hire fees, bonds, and penalties where applicable. This approach lets the community enjoy memorable events while providing funds to maintain and improve these public areas.

90

Leave International Sporting Events To The Private Sector

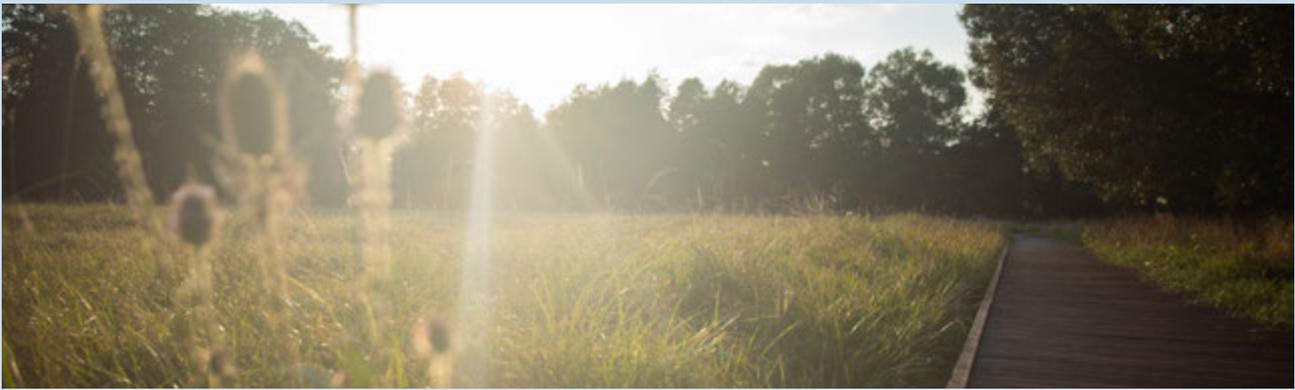
Bidding for major events like the America's Cup or the Commonwealth Games can cost councils millions, with no guarantee of success. Hosting international sporting events is a central government responsibility, not a core council function. Councils should limit their role to consultation, not funding.



91

Negotiate Better Supplier Deals Or Bring Services In-House

Councils can save significantly by renegotiating supplier contracts or ending unnecessary outsourcing. Waimakariri District Council saved around \$45,000 annually by bringing graphic design in-house instead of outsourcing to an agency. New Plymouth District Council also reduced costs by consolidating roading work into a single contract with Downer. Similar reviews across other services could deliver further savings.



92

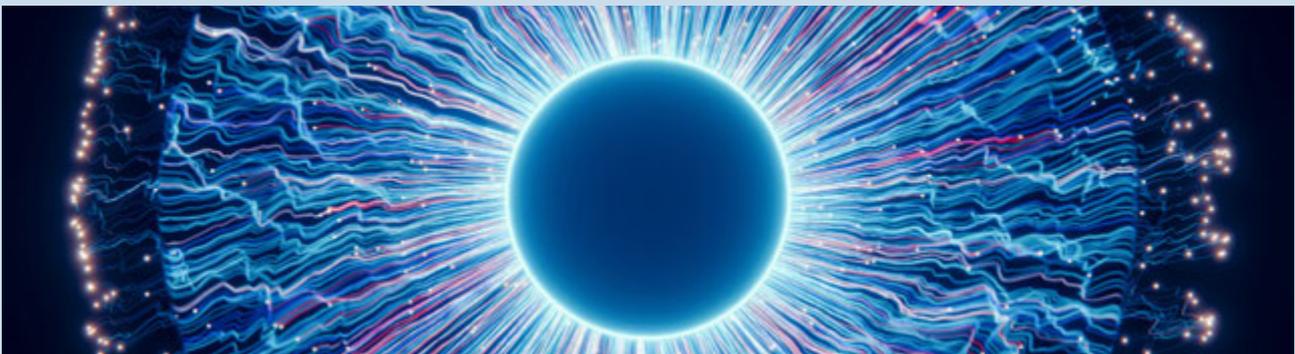
Create 'No-Mow' Zones In Low-Use Park Areas

Leaving low-traffic areas of parks and reserves unmown can significantly cut maintenance costs. Kāpiti Coast District Council, which manages over 500 hectares of green space, is introducing 'no-mow' zones to reduce mowing frequency, saving on staff time, fuel, and equipment wear while still maintaining high-use areas for public enjoyment.

93

Invest In Technology To Save Time And Reduce Costs

Targeted technology upgrades can improve efficiency and free up staff time. In Waimakariri District, bark recorders are used to monitor dog noise complaints, reducing the need for site visits and saving around 5–6 staff hours each week. As technology advances, councils should adopt cost-effective tools across departments to make services faster, cheaper, and more effective.



94

Use Community Surveys To Guide Funding Priorities

Professional community surveys can help councils understand performance and target funding where it's most needed. Grey District Council's annual residents' satisfaction survey found 58 percent dissatisfaction with footpath maintenance, while 75 percent were satisfied with walking tracks. Results like these suggest funding could be redirected from well-performing areas to those needing improvement.

95

Streamline And Restructure Job Roles

Many current job roles don't have enough work to carry them through the day, leading to slacking and the need for restructuring. Instead of only relying on lay-offs, then hiring these same staff back for new roles, councils should merge roles and departments. How many salary payments could be cut by pushing alike jobs together?

96

Seek Sponsorships To Offset Event Costs

Partnering with sponsors can significantly reduce the cost of council-funded events. In 2022/23, New Plymouth District Council worked with Toi Foundation, TSB, Venture Taranaki Major Event Funding, Art in Public Places Trust, and PowerCo to deliver WOMAD and the Festival of Lights. Sponsorships covered more than a third of operating costs, including \$387,500 in funding and nearly \$100,000 in in-kind goods and services, reducing the direct burden on ratepayers.

97

Reduce Oversized Communications Teams

Waipā District Council's 12-person Communications and Engagement team cost nearly \$800,000 over nine months last year. Elected members and the chief executive are already responsible for representing the council, reducing the need for large, costly communications teams. Scaling back would cut spending without compromising essential public information.

98

Avoid Heritage Cost Traps

The Odeon Theatre in Christchurch is a prime example of how heritage buildings can become financial black holes for councils. Environment Canterbury purchased the earthquake-damaged façade and neighbouring properties for \$4.63 million in 2020. It later revealed that total spending, including maintenance and emergency bracing, had reached around \$8 million, with stabilising the façade alone costing \$1.2 million, about 20 percent over budget. In 2025, ECan voted to sell the site at a loss after failing to find a viable redevelopment partner, concluding that the property was beyond its core role and financial capacity.



99

Consider Spend-To-Save Initiatives Only After Cost-Benefit Testing

While scepticism is justified, some investments do pay off by phasing out old processes. For example, Waikato Regional Council's shift from iPhones to Android devices as their standard mobile phone saved \$68,000 in 2022. Councils should always compare the cheapest options and confirm that savings will follow before committing to spending. If the numbers stack up, investment should not be avoided.

100

Remove Staff And Elected Member Perks Not Available To The Public

Mayors, councillors, and council staff should not receive benefits or exemptions that ordinary ratepayers don't get. Manawatū District Council staff received free pool visits, while Palmerston North had issued dozens of VIP parking passes to mayors, former mayors, councillors, their partners, MPs, and other associates, exempting them from parking fees. These perks cost councils lost revenue and undermine fairness; if the public must pay, so should those in power.



101

Limit Mayoral Office Spending

The budget for a mayor's office should be part of the same budget as other elected members, with allowance for spending for decoration using their own funds. Ex-Wellington City Council Mayor Andy Foster charged a total of \$127,992.73 worth of expenses from the mayoral budget over 2022, including \$52.17 for his own birthday cake. By tying mayoral costs to their salaries, perhaps the extravagance of councils can be reduced.

102

Avoid Hiring Climate-Specific Staff

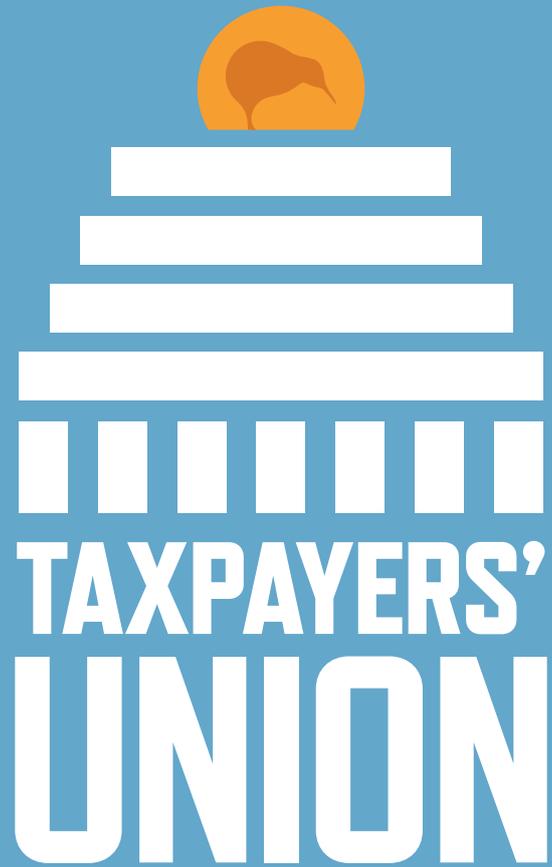
Ruapehu District Council employs a Climate Change Strategic Advisor to lead its regional response and work with elected members and mana whenua toward carbon neutrality by 2050. While climate strategy is important, councils should prioritise visible adaptation measures, strengthening infrastructure and reducing damage from future storms or disasters, while also repaying debt to maintain financial resilience. Mitigation should remain the responsibility of central government through the Emissions Trading Scheme (ETS); local councils should focus on practical adaptation that directly protects ratepayers.

103

Let The Emissions Trading Scheme Do The Heavy Lifting When It Comes To Climate Change

The national-level Emissions Trading Scheme (ETS) covers all industries except agriculture. It establishes a cap on total emissions, which are then distributed as carbon credits through auction and can subsequently be traded on the secondary market. However, any decrease in emissions by a council simply frees up carbon credits that can be used elsewhere in New Zealand, resulting in no net effect on the country's emissions. This ultimately renders costly emissions reduction projects, while appealing, ineffective and an imprudent use of ratepayer funds. Central government sets emissions budgets and the only way net emissions can be reduced is by reducing the cap on carbon credits allocated. Councils should allow the ETS to do the heavy lifting and instead focus on cost to ratepayers over emission reductions. For example, when considering a switch to a lower-emitting alternative, such as electric vehicles or renewable electricity generation instead of petrol or coal, the primary concern should be the cost to ratepayers. In some cases, due to the price of carbon, renewable options may prove less expensive. However, it often amounts to little more than an expensive display of virtue.





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