

What the media told New Zealand about local government

October 2026

Councils, the capital and the Crown

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Lilly Herds
SOCIALHERDS

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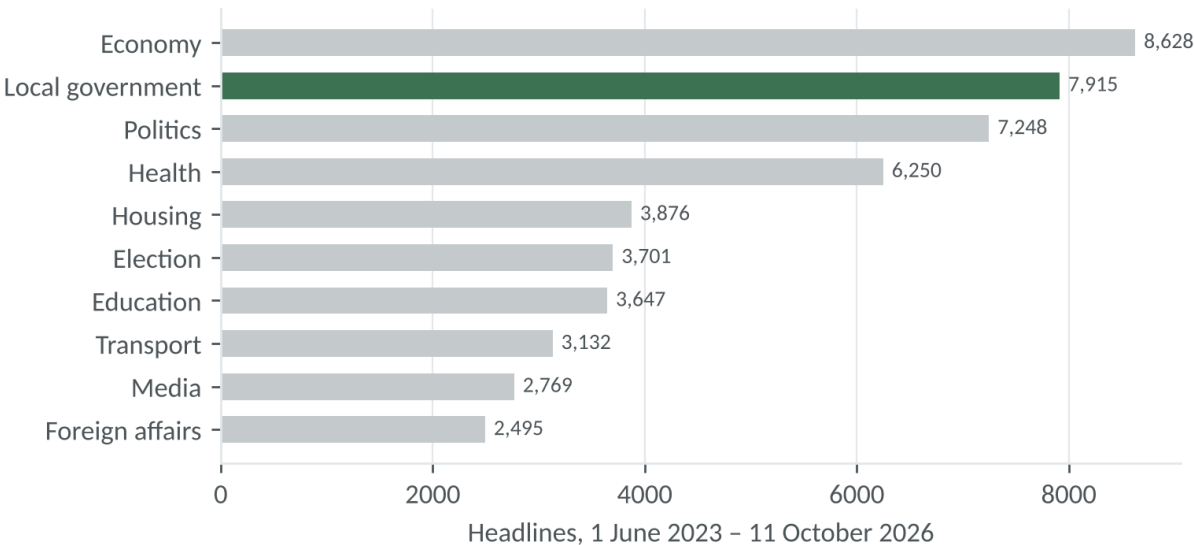
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1 Executive summary

This report examines what New Zealand’s media told—and enabled New Zealanders to understand—about local government between 1 June 2023 and 11 October 2026. It analyses 7,915 local government headlines from 140 outlets. Local government made up 9.2% of the 86,191 headlines in the Social Herds record and was the second most reported topic over the period, behind only the economy. In 2025, the year of the local elections, it was the most reported topic of all.

FIGURE 1



Ten most reported topics in the Social Herds record. Topics are the parent classifications in the record; local government stories filed under other topics are not counted as local government.

The coverage did not describe one local government. It moved among water pipes and wastewater failures, rates rises and council debt, mayors and their conduct, Māori wards, transport projects, council-owned assets, amalgamation and, in 2026, deadly natural hazards. Above all, it concentrated on one city. Wellington appeared in 38.6% of local government headlines that named a place, although the Wellington region holds 10.2% of New Zealand’s population. Auckland, with a third of the population, received under a quarter of the place-specific coverage; Waikato, with one New Zealander in ten, received 3.4%.

The reporting showed a central government taking an increasingly active role in local affairs. During the period the Government repealed Three Waters and replaced it with Local Water Done Well, reinstated binding polls on Māori wards, rejected the Future for Local Government review, told councils to return to “basics”, appointed a Crown observer to Wellington City Council, announced a cap on rates rises from 2029, pushed councils towards amalgamation and then halted the programme, and moved to bar appointed members from voting on council committees. The share of local government headlines naming central government rose from 3.0% in June 2023 to 19.9% between July and October 2026.

1.1 The capital set the agenda—and one mayor dominated it

Wellington’s dominance had identifiable causes. The capital is home to Parliament and much of the national press gallery, and The Post, a Wellington-based paper, produced 42.0% of all Wellington local government headlines. The city also generated a run of genuine crises: failing water pipes, a collapsed cinema deal, a failed airport share sale, Government intervention and, in 2026, the Moa Point wastewater failure. Its mayor from 2022 to 2025, Tory Whanau, was named in 220 headlines—59% as many as Auckland Mayor Wayne Brown (373), whose region is more than three times as populous.

Region	Share of local government headlines	Share of population
Wellington	38.6%	10.2%
Auckland	22.6%	34.1%
Canterbury	7.8%	13.1%
Otago	7.7%	4.8%
Waikato	3.4%	10.0%

Shares of the 5,736 local government headlines that named a region. Population: Stats NZ subnational population estimates at 30 June 2025 (provisional).

The pattern is a capital-and-the-rest divide more than a north–south one. The South Island received 22.1% of place-specific coverage, close to its 23.6% share of the population, and Otago and Southland were covered well above their size. The regions with the least coverage relative to their size were in the North Island: Waikato, Manawatū-Whanganui, Hawke’s Bay and Auckland itself.

1.2 Local government is squeezed out at election time

Local government is a steady presence in the news until a general election arrives. In the 2023 campaign its share of all headlines fell from 9.3% in June to 4.2% in October, and in the final fortnight before polling day it was 1.7%. The same squeeze is under way now. Local government held 7–8% of headlines through August 2026, fell to 6.8% in September and to 4.0% in the first eleven days of October, while election coverage rose to 29.7%. Within the Election category, local policy had limited visibility: of 1,212 headlines since June, three dealt directly with local or regional policy, while eleven reported councillors or former mayors standing for Parliament. Council responsibilities may also have appeared in campaign reporting classified under other topics.

1.3 Māori representation was the defining democratic contest

The fight over who sits at the council table produced 298 headlines, more than any other question of local democracy. It peaked in August and September 2024, when every council with a Māori ward had to

decide whether to keep it and face a binding poll. Coverage was unusually accessible—89% free to read—and was carried mainly by Local Democracy Reporting and RNZ. Headlines voicing criticism of the Government’s change outnumbered those carrying its case by about 46 to 13, largely because those reacting on the record were councils and Māori ward councillors. Only four headlines in more than three years looked at what Māori ward councillors had experienced or changed.

1.4 What was measured, and what was dropped

The headline record provides an uneven account of whether councils were delivering better services or better value. The report’s keyword search identified explicit outcome or measurement language in 115 headlines—1.5% of local government coverage—but this is not a complete count of outcome reporting. Other headlines reported repairs completed, water losses reduced and infrastructure remaining in poor condition without using the selected words. The more important question is whether such reporting gave readers a continuing account of what changed, what it cost and whether the improvement lasted.

The record makes political decisions, institutional conflict and individual leaders highly visible. It also reports on service delivery and infrastructure performance, but the selected case studies suggest uneven continuity between decisions, implementation, and results. Readers could follow many disputes more readily than they could establish whether the resulting changes improved services, controlled costs or strengthened representation.

These gaps leave six challenges requiring continuing scrutiny:

- I. whether voters outside Wellington—especially in fast-growing Waikato, Canterbury and Auckland—receive enough local reporting to judge their councils;
- II. whether local issues receive any hearing in the general election campaign, given that councils deliver much of what national parties promise;
- III. whether the rates cap and the water reforms will pay for the infrastructure councils are responsible for, without reducing services or pushing costs into fees and debt;
- IV. whether amalgamation and reform proposals are tested on evidence of better services and lower costs, rather than on who gains or loses control;
- V. whether warnings about natural hazards and failing assets reach decision-makers and the public before a disaster rather than after it; and
- VI. whether removing Māori wards and appointed committee members changes who is represented at the council table, and with what effect.

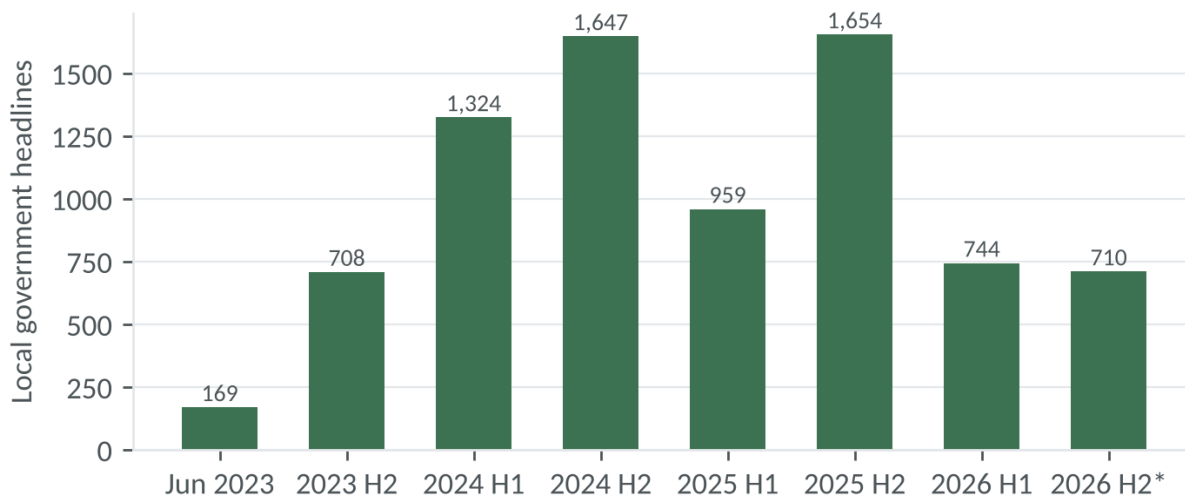
Local government conflict was made highly visible. What the reporting did not resolve was whether New Zealanders were getting better local services for the rates they pay.

2 Background

2.1 Local government is a persistent public issue

Local government was one of the most consistently reported topics in the Social Herds headline record. Between 1 June 2023 and 11 October 2026, 7,915 of the 86,191 recorded headlines—9.2%—were classified under local government: 877 in the partial 2023 period, 2,971 in 2024, 2,613 in 2025 and 1,454 in 2026 to 11 October. Local government ranked fourth by volume in 2023, second in 2024, first in 2025 and, in an election year, fourth again in 2026 behind politics, the economy and the election itself.

FIGURE 2



Local government headline counts by half-year. June 2023 covers one month and 2026 H2 runs only to 11 October; source coverage is also incomplete in January and March 2025. The bars show recorded volume, rather than directly comparable rates of attention.

RNZ carried the largest number, with 1,509 local government headlines, followed closely by The Post (1,484), the New Zealand Herald (860), Local Democracy Reporting (849), Stuff (646) and the Otago Daily Times (488). Local Democracy Reporting, a publicly funded service that places reporters in regional newsrooms, supplied more than one headline in ten and was the leading source for several smaller regions.

Most coverage was conventional reporting: 6,411 headlines (81.0%) were classified as Reporting, 583 as Analysis, 499 as Opinion and only 421 (5.3%) as Alarm—less than half the Alarm share of health coverage (11.6%). The tone sharpened in the second half of 2026, when coverage of deadly hazard events and their reviews lifted the Alarm share to 11.7%. Access narrowed throughout: the paywalled share of local government headlines rose from 23.3% in 2023 to 44.5% in 2026, and at 35.3% over the whole period it was well above the 24.0% for health.

Frequency and tone do not show whether councils performed better or worse. They do show that local government was a large and steadily reported public issue, that it was reported calmly for most of the period, and that a growing share of it sat behind paywalls.

2.2 One topic contains many local stories

Local government is often discussed as though it were a single institution. In practice New Zealand has 78 councils—regional, city, district and unitary—with different responsibilities, funding bases, populations and problems. Ratepayers need reliable water, roads and services at a cost they can manage. Councils need to fund ageing infrastructure from a narrow rating base. Central government needs councils to deliver housing growth and infrastructure while restraining costs. Communities, including iwi and hapū, need to be represented in decisions that affect them.

These expectations can reinforce one another, but they can also conflict. Capping rates may relieve households while delaying investment in pipes. Amalgamation may reduce duplication while weakening local voice. Removing Māori wards may be argued as equal treatment while reducing Māori representation. Selling council assets may avoid rates rises while removing future income.

For that reason a single figure—a rates rise, a council's debt, a referendum result—says little on its own. What matters is which communities a decision affects, which service it changes, which institution is responsible and how its effect will be measured.

The measurement gap

To test this, headlines were searched for outcome or measurement language—results, data, figures, surveys, evidence, targets, improvement or decline. Across all local government headlines the share was 1.5% (115 headlines), against 4.8% for health on the same test, and the lowest in the series. It was lowest for climate, hazards and resilience (1 of 262 headlines), rates and council finances (6 of 938) and housing, planning and growth (3 of 391).

Some reporting did make those connections. The Post reported nearly 4,000 Wellington water leaks repaired in November 2024, but also that less than one kilometre of pipes rated “very poor” had been fixed that year. In July 2025 it reported that leak repairs had reduced daily water loss by 11 million litres. These headlines distinguish immediate repairs from renewing the underlying network and show why a simple search for measurement words cannot capture all performance reporting.

Local government headlines made decisions and costs visible. The harder question is whether reporting connected those decisions to a sustained account of service performance and value for ratepayers.

2.3 What the Government inherited and what it set out to change

The headline record begins in June 2023, in the final months of the previous Government. Several unresolved issues shaped what followed. The Three Waters reforms, which would have moved council water services into large regional entities, had been strongly opposed by many councils. The Future for Local Government review was completing its work. Rates were rising quickly as councils faced ageing infrastructure, inflation and higher interest costs.

The incoming Government's changes each came with a stated rationale. Three Waters was repealed in early 2024 and replaced with Local Water Done Well, which kept water assets under council ownership while requiring financially sustainable delivery; the Government argued this restored local control. Polls on

Māori wards were reinstated, which the Government presented as returning the decision to voters. Ministers told councils to focus on core services—the Prime Minister’s message to councils in August 2024 was “get back to basics”—and argued that ratepayers needed protection from rising rates. The intervention in Wellington City Council was justified by ministers as a response to a run of poor decisions, and amalgamation was promoted in 2026 as a route to a more efficient system.

Each decision received intense coverage of its politics—who gained power, who lost it and who objected. Less coverage followed the changes through to their effect on services, costs and representation. The sections that follow trace that pattern.

What the official figures show

Local authority rates and payments rose 8.8% in the 12 months to the June 2026 quarter, against 4.1% for the consumers price index as a whole. In the year to the March 2026 quarter the comparison was 8.8% against 3.1%.

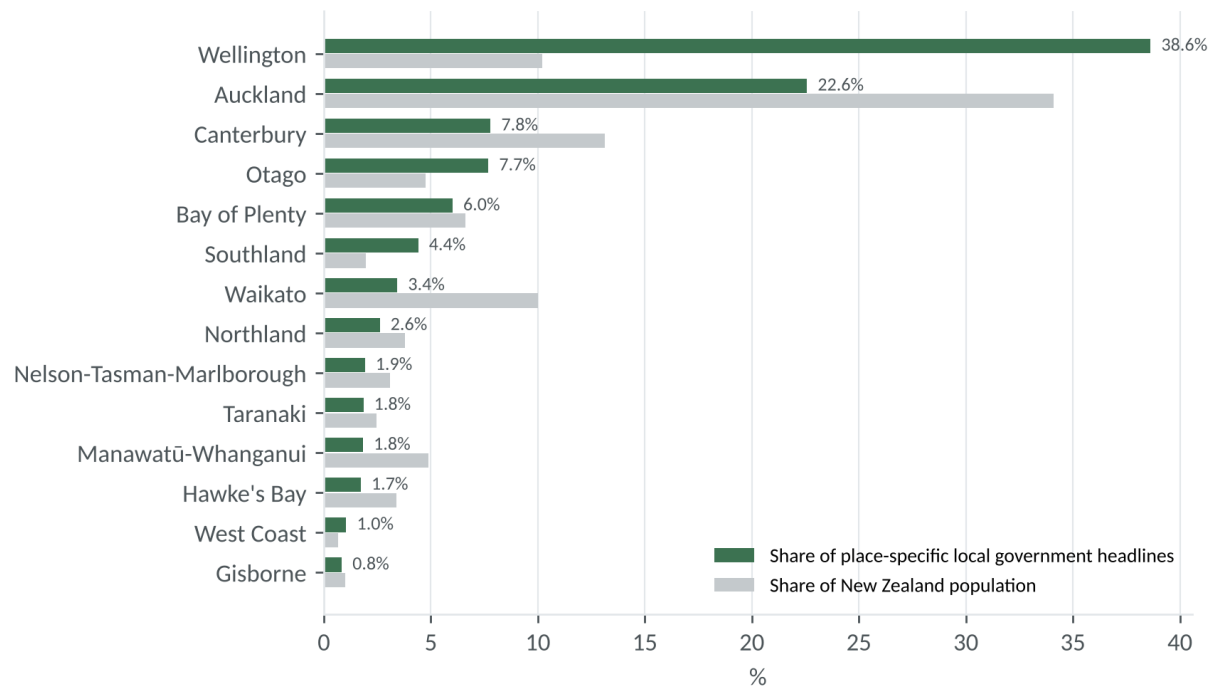
Turnout at the October 2025 local elections was 39.4%, similar to 2022. At the same elections 42 councils held binding polls on their Māori wards or constituencies, and 24 voted to remove them for the 2028 and 2031 elections.

Sources: Stats NZ, Consumers price index: March 2026 and June 2026 quarters; LGNZ, final voting numbers (19 October 2025); Te Ao Māori News (17 October 2025).

3 Where the coverage went: the capital and the rest

Of the 7,915 local government headlines, 5,736 (72.5%) named a region, city, district or a figure closely identified with one. Comparing those headlines with where New Zealanders live shows how unevenly the country's local story was told.

FIGURE 3



Regions identified by keyword searches of headline text and the Child and Subcategory fields; a headline can name more than one region. Population: Stats NZ subnational population estimates at 30 June 2025 (provisional).

3.1 Wellington: one region, two in five headlines

Wellington was named in 2,216 local government headlines—38.6% of the place-specific total and almost four times its share of the population. Across all topics in the record, more headlines named Wellington (3,741) than Auckland (3,440). Wellington's local coverage was also among the least accessible: 46.4% of it was paywalled, compared with 28.8% for Auckland and 14.5% for the Bay of Plenty.

Three factors explain most of the concentration. The first is where newsrooms sit. The Post produced 930 of the 2,216 Wellington headlines (42.0%), and 62.7% of everything The Post published on local government concerned Wellington. RNZ, also headquartered in the capital, added 385. The second is that Wellington's problems were also national stories: its water network failed in public, its council sought Government help, and the Government intervened. The third is that the source of the record, the Democracy Project's daily briefings, is compiled in Wellington and draws heavily on national and capital-based outlets; some of the concentration may reflect that selection as well as the media itself.

This comparison measures regional visibility within the selected headline record. Population provides a useful benchmark, but coverage need not be proportional to population: institutional importance, major events and newsroom resources also affect attention. The finding raises a question about which regional

stories reach the national political conversation; it does not establish how much local reporting residents could obtain from sources outside the record.

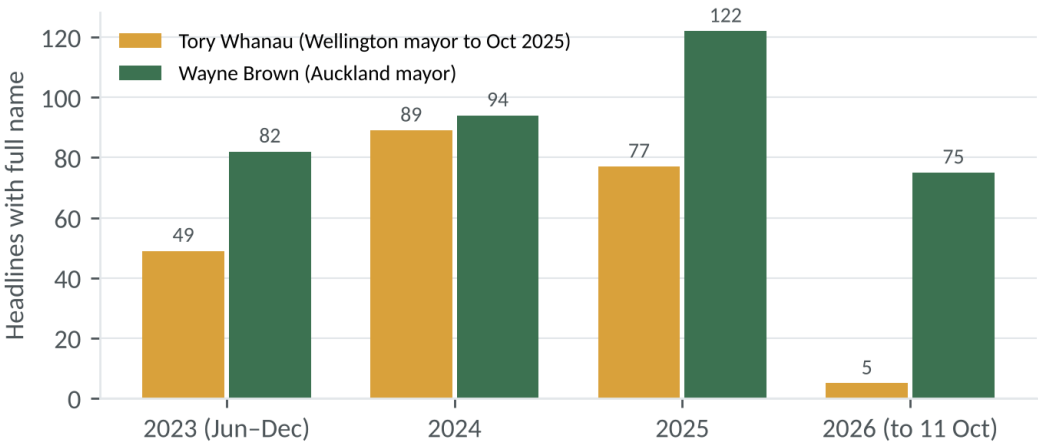
The first factor matters for how the finding is read. Much of the imbalance is a product of which outlets cover local government at all: one city has a daily paper whose local government reporting is overwhelmingly about its own council, and few other regions have an equivalent that reaches the national record.

Wellington’s topic mix reflected a city in repair. Water services and transport and infrastructure—including the Golden Mile and the end of Let’s Get Wellington Moving—each accounted for 19% of its local government headlines, and council assets 6%, driven by the failed Reading Cinema deal and the unsuccessful attempt to sell the council’s airport shares. In October 2024, after the airport share sale collapsed, the Local Government Minister appointed a Crown observer.

3.2 Tory Whanau: a mayoralty under the microscope

Tory Whanau was a prominent subject of local government coverage, with headlines extending beyond council decisions to her conduct, health, political standing and the abuse directed at her. Across all topics, her full name appeared in 220 headlines: 49 in the partial 2023 period, 89 in 2024, 77 in 2025 and five in 2026. Wayne Brown’s full name appeared in 373 headlines over the same period.

FIGURE 4



Headlines containing each mayor’s full name across all topics. Counts measure explicit full-name visibility, not every reference to either mayor. Tory Whanau ceased being Wellington mayor in October 2025.

The coverage addressed several different themes. Keyword searches identified at least 40 headlines on council decisions and city issues, including water, the Reading Cinema deal, airport shares, the long-term plan and the Crown observer. At least 51 concerned conduct, health and private life, including the restaurant bill, her acknowledgement of an alcohol problem, her ADHD diagnosis and interviews in September 2024. At least 40 concerned political standing, including her withdrawal from the 2025 mayoral race, and at least 28 concerned abuse, gossip and harassment, including the Ray Chung email in July 2025. These keyword groups overlap and do not classify every headline. Their counts identify examples of each theme; they do not establish that personal coverage outweighed reporting on council decisions.

The coverage was not driven only by Wellington outlets. Of the 220 headlines containing Tory Whanau’s full name, the New Zealand Herald carried 80, Stuff 31, RNZ 30 and The Post 23. The frames comprised 183 Reporting, 22 Analysis, 10 Opinion and five Alarm headlines. Late in her term, Whanau described politics as having become far more toxic, especially for wāhine Māori (RNZ, May 2025). In May 2026, she told the Waitangi Tribunal that racism, sexism and abuse had driven her out of the country (Herald).

The record contains both scrutiny of serious council problems and substantial attention to the mayor’s personal circumstances. The important distinction is what each kind of coverage helped readers understand: council decisions, leadership conduct, or the pressures faced by an elected representative. Establishing whether Whanau received disproportionate personal scrutiny would require comparison with other mayors using the same categories and equivalent periods in office.

The record contains scrutiny of council decisions alongside attention to the mayor’s conduct, personal circumstances and experiences of abuse. Assessing the balance requires a complete classification of coverage and comparison with other mayors over equivalent periods.

3.3 North and south: a smaller divide than it appears

The South Island received 1,269 place-specific local government headlines—22.1% of the total, against 23.6% of the population. Within it, coverage was uneven but not consistently low: Otago (7.7% of headlines, 4.8% of population) and Southland (4.4% and 2.0%) were reported well above their size, largely through the Otago Daily Times, Local Democracy Reporting and sustained stories about Gore District Council and Invercargill’s mayor. Canterbury, the fastest-growing region, received 7.8% against 13.1% of the population.

The largest gaps were in the North Island. Waikato, home to one New Zealander in ten and to fast-growing Hamilton, received 3.4% of place-specific coverage. Manawatū-Whanganui (1.8% against 4.9%), Hawke’s Bay (1.7% against 3.4%) and Auckland itself (22.6% against 34.1%) were also under-represented. The divide in the record is between the capital and everywhere else, not between north and south.

What was done	Wellington City Council received a Crown observer; councils across the country faced water, rates and representation changes set nationally.
What received scrutiny	Wellington’s council, its mayor, its water network and its asset decisions; the conduct and standing of individual mayors.
What remained under the radar	Local government in fast-growing regions, especially Waikato, Canterbury and Auckland’s suburbs; how councils outside the capital performed.
The accountability test	For each region: is there enough local reporting for voters to judge their council’s performance?

4 What each region was told

Each region's local story had a different shape. The heatmap shows the share of each region's local government headlines in each area of coverage. Areas were identified by keyword searches and overlap, so a headline about a water rates rise counts in both water and rates.

FIGURE 5

	Northland	Auckland	Waikato	Bay of Plenty	Wellington	Canterbury	Otago	Southland
Water services	11	6	14	6	19	8	5	5
Rates and council finances	7	14	9	11	9	12	11	4
Central government relations	12	8	9	8	8	7	5	4
Governance, conduct and leadership	6	5	11	10	8	9	16	20
Elections and democracy	31	12	22	18	10	6	9	6
Housing, planning and growth	2	7	5	5	3	7	6	4
Transport and infrastructure	7	20	6	12	19	13	8	8
Amalgamation and reform	11	2	13	8	5	6	5	8
Assets and commercial decisions	1	6	1	9	6	4	2	1
Climate, hazards and resilience	2	3	4	11	2	3	4	3
Community services and amenities	1	8	2	8	5	7	3	3
Te Tiriti and Māori partnership	27	2	9	7	2	1	1	3

Percentage of each region's place-specific local government headlines falling in each area; darker green means a larger share. Eight regions with at least 150 such headlines. Areas overlap; columns do not sum to 100.

4.1 Auckland: transport, rates and a combative mayor

Auckland's local government coverage was led by transport and infrastructure (20% of its headlines) and rates and council finances (14%), with Mayor Wayne Brown a constant presence. Housing, planning and growth accounted for 7%—among the highest shares of any region, but not the dominant theme. Across all topics in the record, 37.6% of headlines naming Auckland were classified as local government, 17.1% as transport and 9.0% as housing. Housing therefore featured more prominently in Auckland's coverage than in Wellington's (5.6%), but transport and the council's finances featured more prominently still.

Mr Brown's relationship with central government ran through the period. He opposed making Auckland a test case for water reform (Herald, July 2023), negotiated a water deal that avoided a 25.8% water-charge rise (TVNZ, May 2024), signed an Auckland City Deal with the Prime Minister in April 2026 and, by September 2026, was telling the Government to "butt out" and warning that Auckland could quit the deal over the ban on Houkura members voting (Herald, Stuff).

4.2 Wellington: water, transport and a council under watch

Water and transport dominated Wellington’s story (19% of headlines each), from leaking pipes in 2024 to the catastrophic failure of the Moa Point wastewater plant in February 2026 and the troubled start of the new water entity, Tiaki Wai. In September 2026 a Government review found that systemic failures, not a single mistake, caused the collapse, and that a vital warning never reached decision-makers (The Post, Herald). In October, Greater Wellington laid charges against the city council and Tiaki Wai.

4.3 The regions: representation, hazards and governance

Outside the two largest cities, regional stories were narrower. In Northland, elections and democracy (31%) and Te Tiriti and Māori partnership (27%) led the coverage, reflecting long disputes over Māori wards in the Far North and Kaipara. In the Bay of Plenty, climate, hazards and resilience accounted for 11%, the highest of any region, after the Mauao landslide in January 2026; a review later found decades of warnings had gone unheeded. In Southland, governance, conduct and leadership made up 20%, driven by disputes at Gore District Council and controversy around Invercargill’s mayor; Otago followed at 16%. In Waikato, elections (22%), water (14%) and amalgamation (13%) led a thinly covered region, including Hamilton’s 19.9% rates rise in 2024.

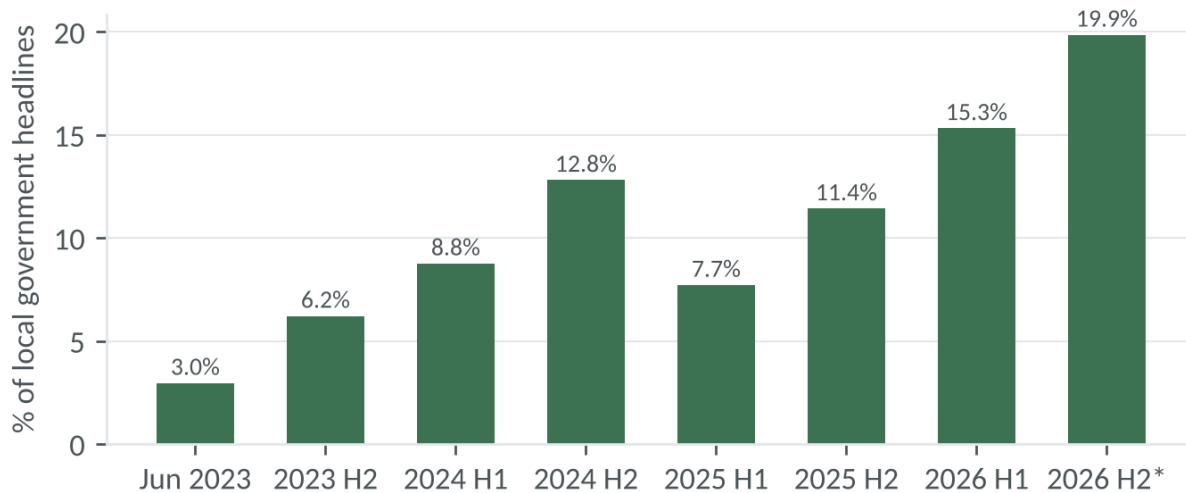
The regional examples show how disputes, controversial decisions and disasters brought councils into the selected record. They do not establish whether local reporting between those events was sustained. The question for further scrutiny is whether routine information on service reliability, infrastructure condition and council performance reached the wider public conversation before problems became crises.

What was done	Councils set rates, managed water and transport, and responded to hazards under different local pressures.
What received scrutiny	Auckland’s transport and finances; Wellington’s water and council; regional disputes over Māori wards, governance and disasters.
What remained under the radar	Routine council performance in most regions; how hazard and infrastructure risks were being managed before they became emergencies.
The accountability test	Report the same core measures for every region: rates, service reliability, infrastructure condition and hazard readiness.

5 Central government and councils

Relations between central and local government became one of the defining local stories of the period. Of the 7,915 local government headlines, 894 (11.3%) named central government, ministers or national policies directly. The share rose from 3.0% in June 2023 and 6.2% in the second half of 2023 to 15.3% in the first half of 2026 and 19.9% between July and 11 October 2026.

FIGURE 6



Share of local government headlines naming central government, ministers or national local government policies, by keyword search. The record's "GovtLinked" field is not used because its coding changed sharply from July 2026. June 2023 is a single month; *2026 H2 runs to 11 October.

The relationship was mostly reported straight: only 4.7% of these headlines were framed as Alarm, although 35.5% were paywalled. Open conflict language—"overreach", "slams", "clash", "fuming", "butt out"—appeared in 37 of them, half in 2026 alone, as the amalgamation push, the rates cap and the appointee voting ban landed in the same year.

5.1 Water: from Three Waters to Local Water Done Well

Water reform was the first major test. In early 2024, after the Three Waters repeal, councils were placed on negative credit watch and Aucklanders were told to expect a 25% rise in water charges. Within months Auckland secured a deal under Local Water Done Well, while Newsroom reported that the repeal was hitting the Far North hard (May 2024). By 2026 the new entities were operating, and Wellington's Tiaki Wai was apologising to residents billed for water they could not use (RNZ, August 2026).

5.2 "Back to basics" and the limits of local choice

In April 2024 a minister told councils to prioritise must-haves over nice-to-haves; in August 2024 the Prime Minister told councils to "get back to basics". Mayors hit back, one warning of a slide to mediocrity (Local Democracy Reporting, August 2024). In July 2024 the Government rejected the recommendations of the Future for Local Government review (RNZ), and in December 2024 the Herald summarised the new direction as roads in, social housing out.

5.3 Intervention, rates caps and amalgamation

The Wellington intervention in October 2024 established that the Government was prepared to step into a council’s affairs. The rates cap extended central control to every council. After months of debate—an RNZ-Reid Research poll in September 2025 found 75% of voters supported a cap, while the Treasury warned that rates were below sustainable levels (BusinessDesk)—the Government announced in December 2025 that caps linked to economic growth would apply from 2029 (The Post). Credit rating agencies warned that a cap could squeeze council budgets and core services and raise borrowing costs (Herald, December 2025; The Post, April 2026).

In 2026 attention moved to amalgamation. Newsroom described a carrot-and-stick approach in which some councils were backed to merge while others fought for survival (May 2026). Taupō’s mayor called one proposal a “hostile takeover” (RNZ, August 2026). In September 2026 the Local Government Minister halted the reform programme, leaving mayors fuming (Herald) and councils accusing the Government of wasting ratepayers’ time and money (The Post).

The coverage established clearly that many councils and mayors regarded the Government’s approach as overreach, and that the Government regarded councils as overspending and under-delivering. It did less to establish whether the changes would improve water quality, reduce costs or strengthen local democracy.

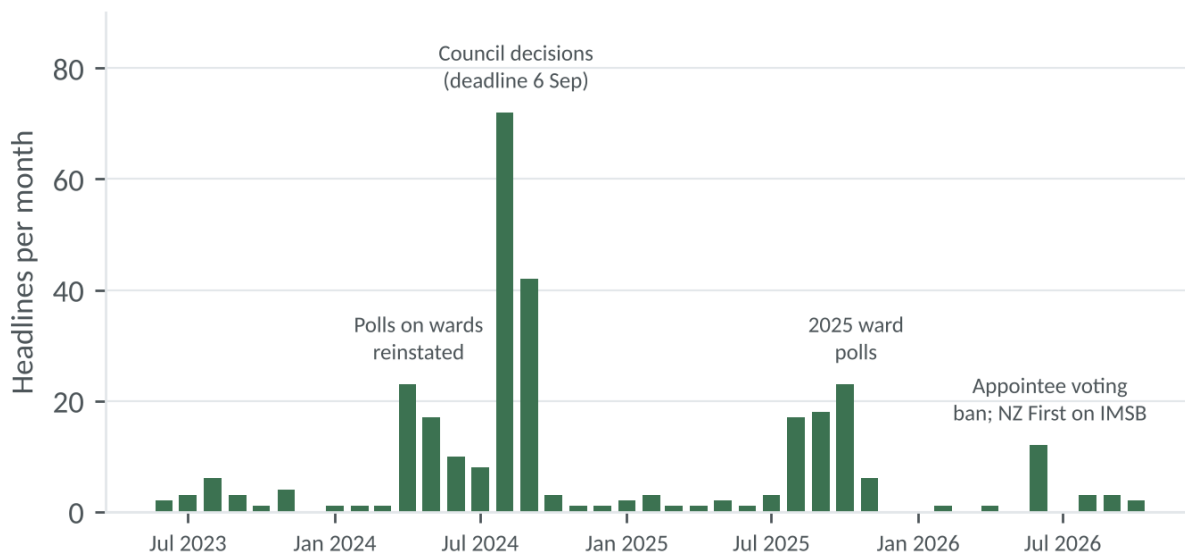
What was done	Three Waters repealed; Local Water Done Well introduced; Wellington Crown observer appointed; rates cap announced; amalgamation pursued and then halted.
What received scrutiny	The politics of each change: council objections, ministerial statements, credit warnings and the Wellington intervention.
What remained under the radar	Whether water entities are delivering better services at sustainable cost; the service effects of a rates cap; the evidence base for amalgamation.
The accountability test	For each reform: what will ratepayers receive, at what cost, and how will they know whether it worked?

6 Māori representation: who sits at the council table

No question about local democracy received more coverage than Māori representation on councils. Across all topics, 298 headlines concerned Māori wards and constituencies, iwi and mana whenua appointees, or Auckland's Independent Māori Statutory Board, now Houkura. The story is worth following closely because it is the clearest case in the record of a national decision about local democracy, and because the reasons offered on each side were rarely set out side by side.

6.1 How the story unfolded

FIGURE 7



Headlines per month on Māori wards and constituencies, iwi and mana whenua appointees and Houkura/IMSB, across all topics. October 2026 runs to the 11th.

The record opens with the question already contested. In August 2023, ACT pledged to scrap Māori wards, while National set out its own position, which MāoriPlus reported as National eyeing their repeal. Through late 2023, councils such as Central Hawke's Bay and Hutt City were still voting to establish wards.

In April 2024 the coalition Government announced that councils which had created wards without a poll would have to hold one or disestablish the ward. In May 2024, the Waitangi Tribunal held an urgent inquiry and found the plans in breach of the Treaty. The bill passed its third reading at the end of July 2024.

The peak came in August and September 2024, with 113 headlines in two months, as councils met the 6 September deadline to decide. Most kept their wards and accepted a binding poll at the 2025 elections; Kaipara District Council disestablished its ward early, prompting Ngāti Whātua to file High Court proceedings. A second, smaller peak came with the 2025 polls, and a third in June 2026, when the Local Government Minister announced that unelected members would no longer vote on council committees and New Zealand First said it would campaign to scrap the Independent Māori Statutory Board.

The coverage was unusually accessible. Only 10.7% of these headlines were paywalled, against 35.3% for local government generally, and Local Democracy Reporting (78) and RNZ (61) carried far more than the

Herald (21) or The Post (16). Te Ao Māori News (22) was a significant source. For once, a local government story reached readers in the regions it concerned.

6.2 The arguments behind the choices

The two sides argued from different principles, and the coverage reported both—though not evenly.

The case for the change. The Government and its supporters argued that wards should exist only with local voters' consent. Councils had been able to establish Māori wards without a poll since a 2021 law change by the previous Government, which removed the right of residents to demand one; reinstating polls was presented as restoring that right and treating all wards alike. Headlines carried this as restored democracy and “if you want to keep Māori wards, vote for them” (Newstalk ZB, April 2024), as polling showing majority support for local referendums (Press, June 2024), and as a broader objection to representation by appointment rather than election, which underpinned the 2026 ban on appointees voting. Opinion pieces argued that dedicated seats could weaken the influence they were meant to protect (Herald, September 2025).

The case against. Councils, Māori ward councillors and iwi argued that the change singled out Māori representation for a test applied to no other ward, overrode decisions councils had made after consultation, and imposed polling costs on ratepayers while the Government was telling councils to cut nice-to-haves. The Waitangi Tribunal found a Treaty breach. Headlines carried this as overreach, as cost, as a “kick in the guts” for Māori communities, and in some cases as racism. Two in three mayors and chairs urged the Government to reconsider (Stuff, May 2024).

How headlines framed the change	Headlines	Main outlets
Critical of the change: racism or discrimination, Treaty breach, overreach, cost of polls, harm to Māori	46	Local Democracy Reporting, RNZ, Te Ao Māori News, Stuff, Herald
Carrying the case for the change: voter consent, equal treatment, criticism of wards or appointees	13	Herald, Newstalk ZB, Te Ao Māori News
Council decisions, poll results and process	about 55	Local Democracy Reporting, RNZ

Hand-checked classification of keyword matches in the 298 Māori representation headlines. Categories do not cover every headline. Treat as directional.

The imbalance should not be read simply as bias. The change was imposed on councils, and in each district, the councillors and iwi affected were the ones with a reason to go on the record. The Government stated its rationale chiefly when it announced decisions, and it was then carried mainly by opinion and talkback rather than by reporting that tested it. As a result, readers saw the reaction to the policy far more often than its reasoning, and rarely saw the two weighed against each other.

6.3 How the outcome was told

At the October 2025 elections, 42 councils held binding polls and 24 voted to remove their wards from 2028. The same result was reported in two ways. RNZ’s final-results headline reported that more than half of Māori wards had been axed; The Post and Te Ao Māori News reported that wards were more popular than ever, with more than 400,000 votes to keep them—almost twice as many as voted to remove them. Newsroom identified an urban–rural split. Each framing was accurate. Taken together they suggest that the result depended on where one looked: more voters nationally chose to keep wards, but more councils—many of them rural and provincial—voted to remove them.

6.4 What the coverage did not follow

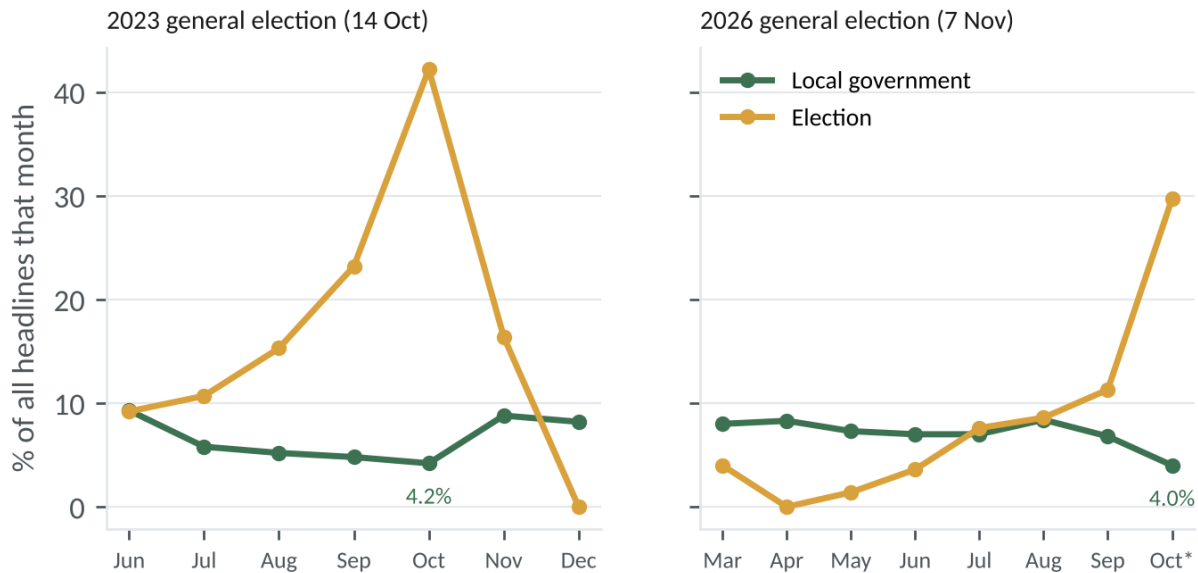
Three questions went largely unasked. The first is what Māori wards had achieved. Across more than three years, four headlines looked at the experience or effect of Māori ward councillors—in Nelson, Marlborough and Whangārei, and one in which ward councillors described proving their worth at the table. The second is what became of the legal challenges. The Tribunal’s finding and the Kaipara High Court proceedings drew 10 headlines between May and September 2024; no headline in the record reports the outcome. The third is what the 2026 appointee ban will mean in practice for councils such as Auckland and Tauranga that had given iwi representatives voting seats on committees.

What was done	Polls on Māori wards reinstated (2024); 24 of 42 councils voted to remove wards in 2025 polls; appointed members barred from voting on council committees (announced June 2026).
What received scrutiny	Council decisions, the reaction of Māori ward councillors and iwi, the Tribunal’s finding, the cost of polls and the 2025 results.
What remained under the radar	What Māori wards had changed in council decisions; the outcome of legal challenges; the practical effect of removing appointees’ votes.
The accountability test	Who is represented at the council table after these changes, and does it change what councils decide?

7 Local government at election time

A general election should be the moment when local needs and national policy meet: much of what parties promise on housing, water, transport and resilience is delivered through councils. The record shows instead that local government is pushed aside as the campaign begins.

FIGURE 8



Local government and election headlines as a share of all headlines recorded each month. *October 2026 runs to the 11th. Election is the record's classification for general-election coverage; 2025 local election coverage is classified as local government.

7.1 A repeat of 2023

In 2023, local government's share of all headlines fell from 9.3% in June to 5.8% in July, 4.8% in September and 4.2% in October, while election coverage rose from 9% to 42%. In the ten recorded days before polling day on 14 October, nine local government headlines appeared—1.7% of the total. Within weeks of the election, local government was back to 8.8%.

The 2026 pattern is following the same course. Local government held 7.0–8.4% of headlines each month from March to August. As the campaign gathered pace it fell to 6.8% in September and to 4.0% in the first eleven days of October, while election coverage rose from 8.6% in August to 29.7%. The number of local government headlines fell from about 7.4 a day in September to 4.0 a day in October. The pattern holds across outlets: The Post, RNZ and the Herald each recorded fewer local government headlines in September than in August.

The squeeze comes on top of a lower base. Local government made up 9.4% of all headlines in 2024 and 12.4% in 2025, a local election year, but 7.2% in 2026 to date.

7.2 Local policy had limited visibility in election headlines

A decline in coverage classified as local government would matter less if the same issues became visible elsewhere in the campaign. Within the 1,212 headlines classified as Election between 1 June and 11 October 2026, the report identified only three dealing directly with local or regional policy, compared with eleven about councillors or former mayors standing for Parliament. This suggests limited visibility within the Election category. It does not establish that council responsibilities were absent from campaign reporting classified under housing, transport, water or other topics.

Meanwhile the local government decisions with the largest consequences for households—the rates cap, the future of the water entities, amalgamation, the appointee voting ban and the visitor levy—remain live. Local government coverage framed these issues as disputes between councils and ministers, but the Election-category search found few headlines presenting them as policy choices for voters.

7.3 Why it matters

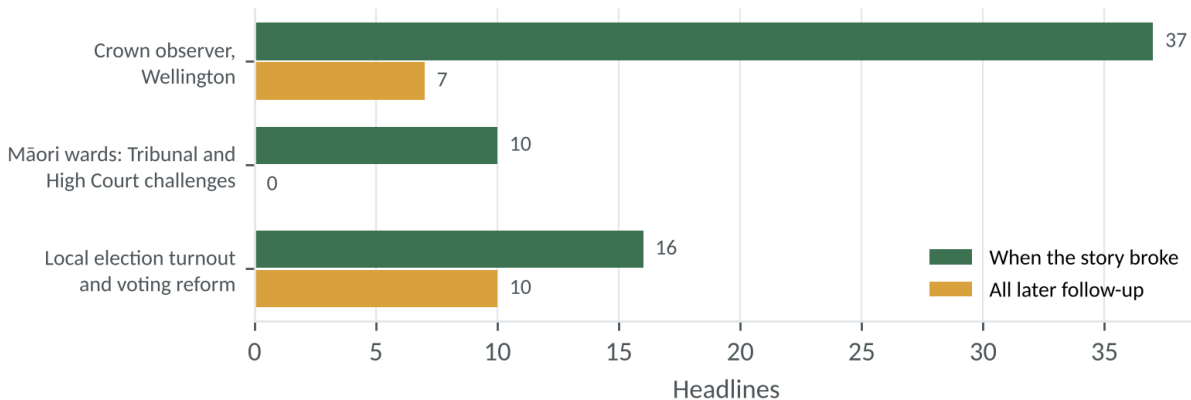
Local government became less prominent in the selected record as general-election coverage expanded. Its recorded daily headline count also fell between September and the first eleven days of October 2026, indicating that the change was not solely a fall in percentage share. The concern is whether voters could compare parties’ approaches to council funding, infrastructure and representation when choosing the government that would shape those arrangements.

What was done	Local government reform, the rates cap, water entities and the appointee voting ban were all set or announced before the campaign.
What received scrutiny	The national campaign: leaders, polls, tax and the cost of living.
What remained under the radar	How each party would fund local infrastructure, whether it would keep the rates cap, and what it would do about amalgamation and representation.
The accountability test	Before polling day: what does each party propose for councils, and who pays?

8 Stories that dropped out of the news cycle

Several consequential stories received substantial initial attention but limited later coverage in the record. The test is whether a subsequent headline reported a review, ruling, result or consequence—not simply whether attention declined after the announcement. If no such headline appears, it indicates a gap in this selected record; reporting outside the daily briefings may still have followed the story.

FIGURE 9



Headlines when each story broke and in all later coverage to 11 October 2026. Crown observer: August–December 2024 against 2025–2026. Legal challenges: Waitangi Tribunal inquiry and Kaipara High Court proceedings, May–September 2024, against all later coverage. Turnout: 12–31 October 2025 against November 2025–October 2026, local government headlines only. The Crown observer’s seven later headlines include three highlighted in section 8.2 concerning the final assessment and its implications; the chart measures all later attention, not only coverage of the verdict.

8.1 The Future for Local Government review

The independent review of what councils are for, how they should be funded and how they should work with central government and iwi was the most comprehensive examination of local government in a generation. It reported in June 2023. The record contains two headlines about it: one on its recommendation that central government do more to fund the mandates it places on councils, and one, in July 2024, on the Government’s rejection of its recommendations. The debates that dominated the following two years—funding, amalgamation, representation, the division of responsibilities—were the questions it had addressed.

8.2 The Crown observer’s verdict

The appointment of a Crown observer to Wellington City Council drew 37 headlines between August and December 2024 and was described as a warning to every council. When the observer reported in August 2025, recommending only a watching brief, the finding drew three headlines. One asked whether the observer had been needed at all (The Post). Nothing in the record since has assessed whether the intervention improved the council’s decisions, although it was the precedent for the Government’s wider approach to councils.

8.3 The legal challenges to the Māori ward changes

The Waitangi Tribunal's urgent inquiry and finding of breach drew five headlines in May 2024, and Ngāti Whātua's High Court challenge to Kaipara's early removal of its ward drew five more between August and September 2024. No headline in the record reports how the court proceedings ended or how the Government responded to the Tribunal. Kaipara's decision to end its formal iwi relationship agreements in October 2024 drew a single headline.

8.4 Turnout and how local elections are run

The 39.4% turnout at the October 2025 local elections drew 16 local government headlines in the fortnight after polling day, with calls for urgent change and for voting to move online. In the following year there were ten. The issue returned mainly through the Papatoetoe local board case, in which a judge found that voter fraud had infected the election and ordered a rerun; police later closed their investigation for insufficient evidence, and Auckland Council voted in September 2026 to abandon postal voting. Errors that left Māori ward candidates' profiles out of voting packs in at least three districts in September 2025 drew six headlines on voting-pack errors and no reported follow-up.

8.5 Disaster recovery, buyouts and climate adaptation

Decisions that will shape what councils must do and pay for after the next flood were made during the period and reported briefly. The end of Category 3 buyouts after Cyclone Gabrielle (December 2025), the Ombudsman's investigation of Hawke's Bay Regional Council's role in a post-cyclone buyout (one headline), and the requirement that councils prepare climate adaptation plans (July 2026) were reported mostly under the Climate topic: of 51 such headlines since June 2025, three were classified as local government. The question of who pays—households, councils or the Crown—was raised repeatedly by mayors and insurers but never resolved in the coverage.

8.6 Drinking water safety

Drinking water safety appeared in several discrete episodes: Gore residents told not to drink their tap water because of nitrate levels (July 2025), Wellington Water falling short of fluoride dosing guidelines (May 2026), a new water chief accused of working to discredit scientists over unsafe drinking water findings (June 2026), and a law change that delayed registration of a water supply where children contracted E. coli (September 2026). The Gore warning was followed by a headline the next day reporting that residents could drink the water again. That provided an immediate resolution, but did not itself explain the cause or whether recurrence had been prevented. The other examples raise similar questions about whether coverage followed the initial warning through to corrective action and continuing assurance of drinking water safety.

8.7 The stories that were followed

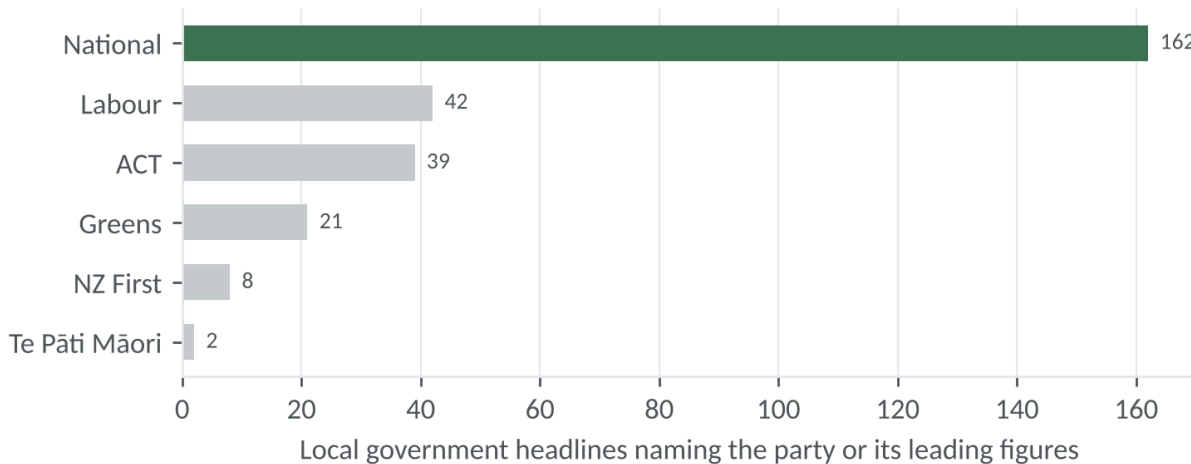
The contrast is instructive. The Moa Point wastewater failure and the Mauao landslide each drew about 100 headlines from early 2026, including detailed coverage of the reviews, the costs to ratepayers, the warnings that never reached decision-makers and, for Moa Point, charges laid in October 2026. That is what sustained follow-up looks like. In this period it happened after people had died or a city had been left with a failed sewage plant.

The media followed local government disasters through to their consequences. It rarely followed the decisions, reviews and warnings that come before them.

9 Local government as a political contest

With a general election on 7 November 2026, local government is a point of difference between the parties, though a less visible one than it should be. Local government headlines naming National or its leading figures (162) far outnumbered those naming Labour (42), ACT (39), the Greens (21), New Zealand First (8) or Te Pāti Māori (2).

FIGURE 10



Directional name-matching of party names and leading party figures in local government headlines. Mentions of Wellington Mayor Andrew Little, a former Labour leader, are not counted for Labour.

National's visibility peaked in 2024 (67 headlines), the year of "back to basics", the Māori ward polls and the Wellington intervention, and rose again in 2026 (58) with amalgamation, the rates cap and the appointee voting ban. In August 2026 the Government ruled out a regional bed tax it had earlier been open to, a decision Queenstown's mayor called policy made in panic (1News), and in September it offered councils a share of the international visitor levy instead (Herald).

The other parties' positions were reported less often. Labour leader Chris Hipkins said in July 2025 that a rates cap would make things worse (RNZ); in August 2026 Labour agreed to support the rates cap bill to its first reading (The Post), and it promised to keep conservation costs off councils (Newsroom). ACT argued that costs had to be controlled before rates could be capped (RNZ, July 2025) and proposed a local tourism dividend as an alternative to a bed tax (RNZ, August 2026). The Greens campaigned on giving councils powers to fill empty city-centre shops (September 2026). New Zealand First's local profile came mainly through Shane Jones's regional spending and its campaign to scrap the Independent Māori Statutory Board; Te Pāti Māori's through Māori wards.

The contest therefore centred on a small number of questions:

- whether rates should be capped, and how councils would fund infrastructure under a cap;
- who controls water services and how their costs reach households;
- whether councils should be merged, and who decides;
- how Māori are represented in local decisions; and
- how tourism and growth should help pay for local infrastructure.

Counts measure visibility, not the quality of proposals. Headlines reported announcements and disagreement, but rarely compared parties against a common test: which services would improve, for whom, at what cost, and how progress would be measured.

What was done	The governing parties set the local government agenda through reform, intervention and the rates cap. Opposition positions emerged late, mainly in 2025 and 2026.
What received scrutiny	Government decisions and council reactions dominated; opposition alternatives received limited coverage.
What remained under the radar	The costing and service consequences of each party's approach; how parties would fund water and transport infrastructure.
The appropriate comparison	Whether each party offers a funded, measurable plan for local infrastructure and services, and a clear view of who decides.

10 What the headline frames reveal

Reporting dominated, accounting for 6,411 of the 7,915 headlines. Analysis (583) and Opinion (499) together made up 13.7%. Local government was framed as Alarm far less often than health, but more often negatively than the calm framing suggests: 14.7% of headlines to June 2026 were coded Negative in direction. The profile compares headline framing, access and the visibility of selected measurement words across areas of coverage.

Area of coverage	Headlines	Alarm	Negative*	Paywalled	Outcome language
Transport and infrastructure	1,101	5.4%	15.9%	37.5%	13 (1.2%)
Elections and democracy	1,032	3.4%	10.3%	28.7%	38 (3.7%)
Rates and council finances	938	6.4%	19.7%	38.5%	6 (0.6%)
Central government relations	915	4.9%	11.5%	34.9%	11 (1.2%)
Water services	860	9.8%	19.8%	39.4%	12 (1.4%)
Governance, conduct and leadership	651	5.4%	15.6%	33.9%	7 (1.1%)
Amalgamation and reform	508	7.3%	15.7%	38.8%	5 (1.0%)
Community services and amenities	438	5.9%	19.1%	34.7%	5 (1.1%)
Te Tiriti and Māori partnership	395	3.0%	12.4%	14.2%	5 (1.3%)
Housing, planning and growth	391	7.2%	17.9%	41.7%	3 (0.8%)
Assets and commercial decisions	370	5.1%	13.2%	45.4%	7 (1.9%)
Climate, hazards and resilience	262	12.2%	24.0%	30.5%	1 (0.4%)
All local government	7,915	5.3%	14.7%	35.3%	115 (1.5%)

**Negative direction measured to 30 June 2026 because the code's use changed across the dataset from July 2026. Areas overlap. Outcome language is a directional keyword search for results, data, figures, surveys, evidence, targets, improvement or decline. Central government relations here uses the area word list; section 5 uses a broader keyword measure.*

Hazards carried the sharpest signals, with the highest Alarm and Negative shares, followed by water; they are where failures cost most. Assets, housing and water were the most often paywalled. Te Tiriti and Māori partnership coverage was the most freely available (14.2% paywalled) and among the least alarmed. Matches to the selected measurement words were uncommon across all areas. Elections, where turnout and results are themselves measures, had the highest share at 3.7%. These percentages indicate the visibility of that vocabulary, rather than the full extent of outcome reporting.

Following responsibility over time would require the media to return to five sequences:

- **Water:** asset condition → investment plan → charges to households → service reliability → health and environmental results.
- **Rates:** council budget → rates and fees set → services delivered → ratepayer satisfaction and value.
- **Growth:** population change → infrastructure planned → consents and homes delivered → congestion and costs.
- **Hazards:** risk identified → warning reported to decision-makers → action taken → harm avoided.
- **Representation:** decision on wards or appointees → who sits at the table → whose interests are reflected in decisions.

11 Conclusion

The dataset record explains why local government remained one of New Zealand's most prominent public issues. It showed councils under financial pressure, ageing infrastructure failing in public, and a central government determined to reshape how councils are funded, governed and represented. It also exposed disagreement about what local government is for: delivering core services at the lowest cost, or representing and building local communities.

The principal concern is the continuity and distribution of scrutiny. Wellington dominated the selected record, although newsroom concentration and the selection of stories for the daily briefings explain part of that prominence. Individual headlines did report service improvements and infrastructure performance, but the case studies show gaps between initial controversy and later findings. Local government also became less visible as general-election coverage expanded. Together, these patterns raise questions about whether the record supplied a sufficiently connected account of responsibilities, funding, delivery and results.

Set against independent evidence, the emphasis matters. Rates rose more than twice as fast as prices, fewer than two in five eligible voters took part in the 2025 local elections, and hazard warnings went unread until people died. These are the conditions in which voters most need clear, comparable local information, and they are the conditions in which the record shows it was hardest to find.

Future scrutiny should concentrate on a small number of connected measures:

- rates and fees, set against the services delivered for them;
- water service reliability, safety, charges and investment by entity;
- infrastructure condition and the investment needed to maintain it;
- hazard risks identified, reported and acted upon;
- housing and infrastructure delivered against population growth;
- turnout, representation and who sits at the council table; and
- the costs and benefits of amalgamation and reform proposals.

Media organisations have an important continuing role. Individual headlines exposed failing pipes, a collapsed asset sale, ignored hazard warnings and the abuse faced by elected members. Stronger accountability will require following those stories over time, reporting councils beyond the capital, returning to reviews and court cases when they conclude, and keeping local choices in view during national campaigns.

Political parties should be assessed against the same standard. The relevant question is not which party promises the lowest rates or the fewest councils. It is which proposals provide a credible, funded pathway to reliable local services, and make clear who is responsible if they fail.

Local government received substantial attention in this record. Stronger scrutiny would connect decisions to the services people receive, bring a wider range of regional experiences into the national conversation, and keep local policy choices visible during general-election campaigns.

12 What local government policies need to cover

The findings provide a common test for assessing local government policies across parties. A credible policy need not solve every problem through one programme, but it should identify the problem it addresses, connect its intervention to a deliverable outcome and make its costs and risks visible.

Define the problem and the communities affected

State whether the policy addresses rates, water, transport, housing growth, hazards or representation, and identify the councils and communities affected. Quantify the starting position.

Fund the infrastructure

Show how water, roads and resilience will be paid for under any rates cap, including the role of debt, fees, central funding and tourism levies.

Measure services, not just costs

Report what ratepayers receive for their rates—service reliability, infrastructure condition, drinking water safety and response times—alongside the rates themselves.

Test reform on evidence

For amalgamation or restructuring, publish the expected savings, service changes and transition costs, and how local voice will be protected. Say how the proposal relates to the findings of the Future for Local Government review.

Protect and explain representation

Show how changes to wards, committees and appointed members will affect who is represented, including Māori, rural and smaller communities, and how the effect will be reviewed.

Make hazards and accountability visible

Require risk warnings to reach elected members and the public, name the organisation responsible for each stage from risk identified to harm avoided, and say who pays when homes must be abandoned.

Applied consistently, this test allows different political approaches to be compared without assuming that one model of funding, governance or organisation is inherently correct. It asks whether each proposal is matched to an evidenced need and offers a credible, funded and accountable route to better local services.

13 Appendix: scope and method

13.1 Source data

The source is the Social Herds headline workbook (tbl_data_raw_AllData_2026.xlsx), built from the Democracy Project's daily news briefings and classified under the SocialHerd schema. The version analysed contains 86,191 headlines from 1 June 2023 to 11 October 2026. The local government subset comprises the 7,915 headlines with LocalGovt as the parent topic. Local government stories filed under other topics are not included except where stated: sections 3.1 and 4.1 compare regions across all topics, and sections 6 to 8 search all topics. Context on events before June 2023 and official statistics are drawn from the sources named in the text.

13.2 Limits

- **Unit of analysis:** the headline, not the full article. Counts measure visibility and repetition, not readership, persuasion or the quality of the underlying reporting.
- **Source selection:** the record reflects the outlets and stories selected for the Democracy Project's daily briefings, which are compiled in Wellington. Some regional concentration may reflect that selection.
- **Partial periods:** 2023 runs from June and 2026 to 11 October. January and March 2025 are only partly covered in the source data, and recorded days vary between months; daily rates in section 7 are per recorded day.
- **Regions:** identified by keyword searches of headline text and the Child and Subcategory fields. Headlines can name more than one region; 27.5% name none. Regional shares are of place-specific headlines. The word lists were revised for this version, so regional figures differ slightly from draft v1.
- **Areas of coverage and argument classification:** identified by keyword searches, with the Māori representation and election-coverage classifications checked by hand. Headlines can fall into several areas, so counts should not be added together.
- **Follow-up test:** a story is treated as not followed up when no later headline in the record reports its outcome. Coverage outside the briefings may exist.
- **Direction and government-link coding:** the share of headlines coded Negative, and the share coded as linked to central government, both changed sharply across the dataset from July 2026. Negative direction is measured to 30 June 2026, and central government links are measured by keyword search rather than the coded field.
- **Party and minister visibility:** based on name-matching in headline text; treat as directional. Mayor visibility in Figure 4 and sections 1.1 and 3.2 counts headlines containing "Tory Whanau" or "Wayne Brown" across all topics. Matching is case-insensitive and includes the obvious typing error "Wayne Brown3". References using only a first name or surname are excluded.

- **External data:** population estimates, rates inflation, turnout and Māori ward poll results are official or published figures shown for context. They are not part of the headline analysis, and their reporting periods differ from it.