Exploring Local Government Best Practices in Bay of Plenty Toi Moana, Aotearoa

2026 Local Government Management Association Exchange Report
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Learning Objectives

Openness to sharing, learning and collaboration is a strength of the local government sector. As managers, we have the privilege and responsibility of carrying that legacy forward through the continuous improvement of our profession. In preparation for the September 2026 exchange to Aotearoa/ New Zealand, I met virtually with my exchange partner and her staff to develop a travel itinerary and identify meeting opportunities centered on three learning objectives:

1. **Asset management**
   What do local government staff consider to be best practices in asset management implementation? What level of maturity are the asset management programs and what practices are in place to maintain the organization's commitment?

2. **Indigenous Relations and Reconciliation**
   How are Māori rights and title incorporated into decision making at the local level? What are the strengths and challenges to the Regional Council's approach? The National Government's approach?

3. **Community engagement and consultation practices**

   Is growing civic distrust in government institutions experienced at the local level? How does this impact the work of the local government and how are leaders responding to that?

This exchange highlighted three practices with direct relevance to local government in the Cowichan Valley: sustained leadership and regular assessment are essential to mature asset management; Indigenous participation is most effective when embedded in governance, staffing, partnerships, language and everyday operations; and public trust grows when engagement processes are transparent about what communities can influence, the constraints decision makers face and how public input will be used. These lessons reinforce the value of integrating technical systems, enduring relationships and clear communication into organizational practice.

About My Host and Host Organization

I was graciously hosted by Kataraina O'Brien who is the General Manager of Strategic Engagement for the Bay of Plenty Regional Council (BOPRC) Toi Moana. The "BOP" is a stunningly beautiful region on the northeastern part of Aotearoa/New Zealand's north island. The region stretches a long shoreline with 18 offshore islands within its boundaries. There are an estimated 334,140 people living in the region based on the 2023 census, 33%

are Māori. Māori in the BOP are members of 39 iwi (or tribes), 260 hapu (subtribes) and 180 marae (or community settlements).

In Aotearoa/ New Zealand there are three types of local government and throughout the country these include a total of 78 territorial, regional and unitary Councils.[i] There are 11 Regional Councils of which the BOPRC is one. The central government describes the purpose of Regional Councils to, "play a core role in the management of natural resources including land, air and water; supporting biodiversity and biosecurity; providing regional transport services and building more resilient communities in the face of climate change and natural hazards."

The other forms of local government include district or territorial Councils/authorities which are City councils serving both urban and rural areas which include roads and a wide range of local services. Unity authorities would be the third form of local government of which there are six throughout the country; these are a combination of both other forms of government. My host and her team are leaders in vital relationship building with the Māori iwi(tribes) and hapu (subtribes), as well as advisors to decision makers and colleagues. The strategic engagement team advises staff and decision makers regarding important strategies that balance resourcing requirements with the need to uphold legal and statutory obligations under treaty and various agreements. I am incredibly grateful to my host and exchange partner for her generous hospitality. Learning more about Aotearoa, its unique history, political landscape and the Māori culture from her, her family, colleagues and community leaders was beyond my hopes and expectations for the exchange experience. Forever grateful – kia ora Kataraina for reminding me why I love this sector so much, even through the challenging times!





Picture 1: My new friend and I on the beach at Mt. Maunganui. ***Fun fact –*** *the Tauranga Port is a thriving economic driver close by and the BOPRC holds a majority share which provides a much-needed revenue stream for regional services.*

Picture 2 (above): Alongside, senior staff and elected leaders at the Tauranga BOPRC office.

A Shifting Political Landscape for Regional Government in Aotearoa

The BOPRC is governed by a Council of 14 elected representatives and provides regional and subregional environmental services across a diverse region. As noted, the BOPRC services are focused primarily in the environmental or risk mitigation field, including drinking water protection, watershed management, drainage, flood mitigation, pest control and emergency management.

Head Start, Rates Capping and Resource Management Reform

The Aotearoa/New Zealand Regional Council governance model is distinct and is currently preparing for major reform, as directed by the federal or "central government" as it is referred to. In May, 2026 the central government announced the *Head Start* initiative intended to streamline local government through amalgamation. Local councils were invited to submit proposals for reorganization before the reform is instituted in 2028. By the time of writing this report, Cabinet has announced that more time is needed to review the proposals, with further announcements expected in early 2027.[ii] The Honourable Chris Bishop, the Attorney General and Minister Responsible for Housing, Infrastructure and Transport spoke at the Taituara conference on September 11th, 2026 and shared with the

attendees that his government was “hungry for change” and he expressed frustration with the pace of local government “consents” or permitting processes.

Regional Councils were not invited to submit consolidation proposals to the central government and based on discussions with staff and officials, it appears that there is a common sentiment that the process is rushed and there may be unintended consequences for fiscal sustainability of services as well as upholding commitments through statutory and partnership agreements with Māori communities. The BOPRC staff and officials have not had a clear indication of the path forwards, but there does seem to be an understanding that the Regional Councils will be not be retained in their current form, although their services are vital for environmental protection and community safety. The central government’s process may also be more broadly felt to be inadequate in the community; local and national candidate election signage refers to “taking the power back” and being “ready to scrap for the Bay of Plenty.

The current government has also signaled that they intend to bring in legislation (if re-elected) to cap rates at 4%, which will require Councils to make hard choices and significant tradeoffs to maintain their levels of service and current asset portfolios. I understand from speaking with other local government leaders at the conference that rates cap policies are common in Australia and this top-down method of local service and taxation restraint may have now caught on in Aotearoa/New Zealand. Lobbying has been occurring by local rate payer associations but unfortunately, the divisive narrative that the bureaucracy or vanity projects are solely to blame for cost escalations beyond inflation are feeding public distrust and a narrative that is damaging to the morale of staff and elected officials alike.[iii]

Simultaneously, the central government had announced legislative amendments to the broader resource management regime which were enacted soon after I departed the country, in late September, 2026. The Government replaced the 1991, Resource Management Act (1991) with new legislation intended to facilitate “a new planning system that delivers on its commitment to unlock infrastructure and housing development, support New Zealand’s primary industries and drive significant growth while protecting what is important.”[iv] Replacing the legislation were two new Acts intended to create a more streamlined regime to coincide with the major local government restructuring.

Exploring Best Practices in the Three Focus Areas: Asset Management, Reconciliation and Community Engagement

Despite this highly disruptive environment created by planned local government reforms, the staff and leadership of the BOPRC are maintaining a strong, resilient and supportive

corporate culture, which is commendable under these challenging circumstances. The uncertainty of change is tangible, but staff across the country continue to innovate and their passion for community service is clearly a motivator which was made clear through each conversation I had during the exchange visit.

The learning engagements I participated in included:

- Cowichan Valley and BC Regional District presentation to BOPRC staff and elected officials with discussion and Q&A.
- Presentations by BOPRC staff with discussion and Q&A based on the learning objectives of asset management, reconciliation and communications.
- Office tours and informal staff discussions at two BOPRC offices in Tauranga and Whakatane.
- Participation in a Leadership Team meeting to understand corporate priorities and strategies.
- Attendance at the Taituara Conference in Taranaki/New Plymouth including two preconference days, a full day Māori only staff forum and a full day Leadership Forum and presentations on asset management themes.
- Visits to Rotorua and several tourist sites, one of which was Te Puia a thriving indigenous owed attraction and cultural center that offered enriching cultural experiences such as the traditional powhiri, a traditional Māori welcome that included wero(challenge), karanga (call), karakia (incantations) and waitata (songs). Traditional Māori carving, weaving, jewelry making and other art is taught on site through a tribe owned, self-funded operation.

Asset Management

Asset management and risk mitigation were central topics to many discussions during the exchange, during one-on-one conversations as well as at the Taituara conference sessions. Some of the conversations and activities at the local government level have been influenced by a recent tragedy that occurred in January, 2026 on Mt. Maunganui where sadly six people were killed when a landslide occurred above a campsite, after days of intense rainfall; in August, 2026 the *Davison Report* was accepted by the local Tauranga City Council, who manage the site, providing damning recommendations about operational failures that could have prevented the deaths.[v] In the aftermath of the Davison report, there is a keen interest amongst senior leaders to clarify roles and responsibilities as well as systems for escalating decisions on critical hazard information. The tragedy has raised the profile of hazard response and the need to ensure that systems overseeing public health and safety are operating efficiently and that critical natural hazard information is elevated to decision makers in a timely fashion. Service providers will need

to be transparent and well prepared to respond during a period of increased scrutiny from the public and decision makers.



Picture 3 (above): View of Mt. Maunganui from the air, the site of the January 2026 landslide tragedy.

On the exchange I had an opportunity to meet with the BOPRC Rivers and Drainage Asset Manager to learn more about the Regional Council's asset management program. Drainage and flood mitigation systems make up much of the asset portfolio for the Regional Council and their asset management maturity rating is intermediate, which is an accomplishment worth celebrating. The BOPRC maintains 350 kilometers of flood walls and dykes and leverages their investment in the Port of Tauranga to offset local taxation to cover these asset management and operational costs. Similar to our approach in Cowichan, the BOPRC is guided by international best practices for asset management; what stands out as unique in their approach is the Apopo Guide and their incorporation of Māori principles and worldview into the framework as well as the primary focus on natural assets. The interweaving of cultural principles and strong community partnership is incorporated into project design as the organization takes a leadership role in risk mitigation. An example of how this plays out in practice is exemplified by a recent partnership project in Whakatane, *Project Future Proof* a multi-year flood defense project led by BOPRC in partnership with the local District Council (municipality) and the Ngati Awa Māori Tribe. Substantial flood walls were installed to protect the community and riverbanks from hazardous flooding events that if not mitigated could have a disastrous impact on the downtown Commercial Business District.



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A commitment to learning from tragedy

Last week, the Tauranga City Council publicly released the findings of the external review into the tragic landslide at the Mount Maunganui Beachside Holiday Park on January 22, 2026.

A MESSAGE FROM
MAYOR MAHÉ
With Mahé Drysdale, Tauranga City Mayor

Before anything else, I want to acknowledge the six people who lost their lives, and the families and loved ones who continue to live with that loss every day.

While much has been said about the external review's findings and recommendations, and the failings of council's systems, processes and culture, it is paramount that we never lose sight of the people at the centre of this tragedy.

My commitment is genuine and resolute.

The day after the landslide occurred, I announced – with the support of my councillors – that there would be an independent review into what happened. We needed clarity, facts and answers. We owed that to those who died, their families, and our wider community.

Former High Court judge Paul Davison, KSO, KC, was appointed to lead that review.

In accordance with the review's terms of reference, Davison spent six months examining the facts, timeline and decision-making processes leading up to the landslide, the adequacy of risk assessments and monitoring systems, and the lessons that could be learned to strengthen future safety.

While his report does not attribute blame to any individual, Davison concludes that over many years, the Tauranga City Council missed opportunities that may have helped prevent this tragedy.

The report highlights weaknesses in the way risks were identified, managed and responded to, as well as shortcomings in the organisation's systems, processes and culture with regard to risk.

These conclusions are clear and deeply concerning. While it is a tough read, it is good to deliver the facts, clarity and answers to the families, our community, and our organisation, so quickly.

The Tauranga City Council has accepted Davison's findings and recommendations. Our responsibility now is to ensure meaningful change follows.

I and my councillors have directed the chief executive and executive team to provide a detailed plan showing how risk management processes will be strengthened and how systems, practices and organisational culture will improve as a result of Davison's review. We expect this work to be undertaken with urgency

Six people lost their lives in the January 22 landslide on Maunga.

The six people killed in the Maunga landslide were (clockwise from top left) Pahuranga College student couple Sharon Maccanico and Max Furse-Kee, both 15; Rotorua property manager Susan Doreen Knowles, 71; Morrinsville educator Lisa Anne Maclennan, 50; Swedish tourist Mans Loke Bernhardsson, 20; and Rotorua interior design store co-founder Jacqualine Wheeler, 71.

being implemented. I know trust in our organisation has been damaged and rebuilding it will take time. That trust will not be restored through words alone. It will be rebuilt through actions, accountability and an unrelenting commitment to doing things better.

Our community rightly expects us to learn from this tragedy and to demonstrate that those lessons are being acted on.

While we cannot change what happened on January 22, we can ensure that we face the findings honestly, act on the recommendations decisively, and do everything possible to prevent such a tragedy from happening again.

That is the commitment our council has made.

Picture 4 (above): Clipping from the August 28, 2026 newspaper The Weekend Sun, describing the Tauranga City Councils acceptance of the Davison report that provided recommendations on the Mt. Maunganui site.

The BOPRC asset management program is guided by a Strategic Plan as well as more detailed asset plans in areas such as rivers and drainage, coastal catchments, maritime assets and Rotorua Te Arawa Lakes.[vi] To maintain focus and progress towards full asset management maturity, the BOPRC performs regular audits and training to maintain a focus and build capacity for the program implementation. Their website has an excellent reference section to share status updates, level of service information and financial targets for each portfolio. The key learnings shared are that strong leadership and governance are critical for success and that continuous improvement requires regular assessment and monitoring to ensure accountability for progress; I have observed these same success factors at home in British Colombia. A key take away is that the operational focus needs a high degree of intensity to get over the data collection and planning requirements, which is critical to incorporate an assessment of risk and hazards into financial planning, with a consistent approach across asset portfolios. The BOPRC focus on incorporation of indigenous worldview and strong, regular, public communications demonstrates exemplary leadership in asset management, which is clearly an integral part of their organizational culture.

Picture 5 (below): Project Poster for Project Future Proof, displayed in downtown Whakatane.





Picture 6 (above): Floodwall along the oceanfront in Whakatane.

Reconciliation

The Taituarā conference featured speakers from across Aotearoa. Many local government staff and leaders are Māori, and the conference demonstrated how deeply Indigenous perspectives shape the management association's priorities and local government initiatives. By contrast, most of British Columbia remains without treaties although reconciliation is similarly, still a work in progress. In Aotearoa, the Crown and Māori iwi have worked within a treaty relationship for 186 years, although that relationship has faced significant challenges.

The Treaty of Waitangi known as Te Tiriti o Waitangi is the country's foundational constitutional document and has been in place since 1840. A translated document (from English into Māori), some of the concepts had significant differences when translated and it has been proposed that this has "led to misunderstanding and resentment and those choices still have repercussions today."[vii] The intentions and honour of the Crown in upholding the treaty is also a topic that is regularly discussed in the context of reconciliation and relationship building between communities. The Chair of the BOPRC, Matemoana McDonald, comments that Māori need to be "sitting at all tiers of decision making" and this resonates as an important component of reconciliation in Aotearoa.[viii] Upholding this perspective, several Māori speakers offered incredibly profound and motivating speeches at the Taituara conference, inspiring the attendees to continue on the challenging journey of reconciliation, including Nanaia Mahuta, former Minister of Foreign Affairs and long serving Member of Parliament.

Displayed in the Whakatane offices of the BOPRC is the Te Tiriti o Waitangi document (*see picture below*). A brief script, the core commitment is clearly partnership. Generations later, there have been many settlement agreements that aim to resolve issues caused by colonization and treaty rights infringements. Within this context, at the community level Māori and non-Māori are working alongside each other to give effect to Te Tiriti commitments and the very existence of the BOPRC and its strategic initiatives are an example of reconciliation in action. The BOPRC's primary responsibilities are environmental services, receiving delegated authority from central government to uphold and implement Te Tiriti and other legislative obligations on the ground, government to government.



The planned dissolution of the Regional Councils proposes a significant challenge for continuing to uphold treaty settlement and legislative obligations which as they stand, will need to be facilitated and overseen by another level of government, still to be determined. The Iwi (Tribal) Chairs have lobbied the Prime Minister, opposing government reforms that

may weaken Māori participation, undermine treaty protections or environmental safeguards and the genuine partnerships that are currently in place.[ix] There are real concerns expressed by BOPRC staff and leadership that the Māori voices, authority and partnership may be lessened through the proposed reforms and that the degree to which rights are incorporated into local decision making may be lessened. Although broad natural resource legislative amendments are causing mass concern amongst indigenous leadership, there are differing perspectives across the country on whether the local government reform and dissolution of Council governance will result in a service arrangement that will uphold Te Tiriti commitments. There is recognition amongst some Māori ward representatives that in terms of the structural change within local government, the change can be an opportunity to build governance structures that outlast political cycles.[x]

Regardless of which form of government upholds treaty obligations in the future, it is important to reflect on key principles that have enabled success at the regional government level as these should be considered in any revised service delivery model. The key elements of the Regional Council program delivery that embody the philosophy of indigenous participation at all levels and demonstrate a strong reconciliation approach include:

- **Inclusive governance:** three elected Māori constituency representatives sit on the 14-member board and the Chair is currently a Māori elected representative.

- **Representative and specialized staffing:** a high number of staff, including senior positions are Māori employees, bringing important indigenous perspectives into the full spectrum of the workplace as well as the design and delivery of programs and projects. A Cultural Advisor position is also in place to provide specialized advice and leadership for agreements with tribes and for broader educational initiatives within the organization.

- **Tangible partnerships:** capacity building and maintaining working relationships are core tenets of all programs and services with meaningful financial contributions to Māori engagement. Delivering outcomes of treaty settlement agreements is a core function of the Regional Council, primarily regarding environmental priorities such as watershed management, hazard resilience, pest management and cultural monitoring.

- **Māori culture and language is present and visible:** language and cultural protocols are extensively used and a part of day-to-day business. Many projects clearly incorporate Māori world view, priorities and perspectives, demonstrating

not only a commitment but an integration of indigenous perspectives into operations that actively influences priorities and decision making.

Community engagement and consultation

During my visit to the Whakatane BOPRC office, I had the opportunity to meet with the communications lead to discuss her experiences leading community engagement and consultation processes in the region. It was made clear that indeed, growing distrust in government institutions is a reality in the BOP albeit local observation suggests that the criticism and skepticism is more directed at the Central Government, District or City Councils. It was further shared that perhaps public frustration is more directed at other forms of government as services provided by those entities involve sectors such as housing, infrastructure, development and other local services where challenges are more pronounced; in addition, the general understanding of what the regional form of government does may not be high, both publicly and within the central government.

Residents are seen to be highly engaged with engagement in fact growing rather than declining (which was great to hear) but engagement is becoming increasingly challenging with residents demanding greater transparency and accountability with an undertone of distrust for decisions and provided information. Security concerns came up in my conversation with local representatives who also mentioned that security funding for local councils is a new program offering reimbursement for home security system installation for local elected officials. This program is a direct response to the rise in harassment, abuse and threats experienced by local officials across the country, due to the work they do as local elected representatives.[xi]

Another theme clearly expressed was that misinformation is growing, in part due to social media and online community dialogue. Social media backlash and criticism is considered to be bad and worse since the COVID pandemic, based on discussions I had with both staff and elected leaders. This seems to be a similar experience in the Canadian context as well, although the issues are reported as less pronounced at the Regional Council perhaps because of the limited scope of services provided.

Picture 8 (below): Shown with staff and Māori community leaders at the Whakatane BOPRC Office.



The current reality for communications and engagement has resulted in more resources being allocated to correct misinformation, clarify information, and spend increasingly more time providing context and rationale for decisions. Generally, face to face engagement results in positive engagement from residents (such as pop-up events) and online participation on engagement platforms is growing; the public requests convenient and meaningful engagement opportunities which require varied and innovative approaches.

A fundamental principle in communications is *building trust* which equates to a higher degree of focus on explaining decision making processes, managing expectations throughout the entire engagement process and correct misinformation that may present along the way. Communications professionals are focusing more on explaining the trade offs of an initiative, being honest about constraints and competing priorities that factor into the decision-making process. A key message shared specifically resonated with me that the BOPRC role is, “to create engagement processes that are honest about what can be influenced, transparent about constraints and respectful of time and knowledge…when we do that well, trust follows.”

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