

PROTECT MĀORI WARDS

A PEOPLE-POWERED REPORT

ActionStation
people powered change



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Local decision-making is essential to daily life. It affects the water from our taps, the roads and footpaths we travel on and the special places we love to visit. Councils also help weave the political and social fabric of our communities. They give us the power to have a say and a stake in the places we call home, while growing our sense of community and belonging. The way our local council is made up, and who we elect to represent us, makes a difference in our everyday lives.

That's why we worked with community groups from 2018-2021 to push for changes to the Local Electoral Act 2001, to break down discriminatory barriers stopping Māori from having a fair and formal say in local decision-making.

Yet the proposed reversal of this legislation by the Coalition Government seeks to forcefully unravel the fabric that has been carefully woven over previous decades. In the lead up to the urgent Waitangi Tribunal claim on legislation affecting Māori wards, we gathered the real-life stories of **218 local community members**. Despite most Māori wards still being early in their term, we believed that local communities had experiences to share that would deepen our understanding of the impact of these roles.

What we heard from community members around the country:

- Referendums or polls are a harmful and divisive tool when used on issues affecting Māori
- Māori wards have offered pathways to strengthen relationships with local iwi and hapū, and deepen engagement with Māori communities generally
- Māori wards rebalance local decision-making power in response to historical inequity and align us closer to Te Tiriti o Waitangi
- Whole communities have benefited from Māori ward councillors contributing to local decision-making

Over the following days, this Coalition Government will make a choice whether they destroy the progress to honour Te Tiriti o Waitangi and strengthen local decision-making. Councils that have already decided to implement the wards will be forced to either disestablish existing wards, or take it to referendums that have proven to be harmful, an unnecessary distraction and expensive for ratepayers.

We stand behind the local communities who have already decided that these roles are a positive contribution, and call on the Coalition Government to **protect Māori wards and stop the proposed changes**.

Let's let Māori ward councillors get on with the job; to look after the essentials of local life and keep weaving together our communities so our towns, cities and regions can thrive.

Naku noa, nā



Kassie Hartendorp

Ngāti Raukawa, Ngāti Pareraukawa, Ngāti Tuwharetoa

Director - ActionStation



THE HISTORY: PEOPLE POWER & MĀORI WARDS



In December 2020, a rōpū of passionate people from across Aotearoa delivered a petition that was signed by over 11,000 people in support of Māori wards. They called on then-Local Government Minister Nanaia Mahuta to remove a discriminatory law that enabled the establishment of Māori wards to be put to a referendum - something that other wards are not subject to in order to be set up.

A cross-party group of Māori MPs from Labour, Te Pāti Māori and the Greens received the petition in a kete. The petition called for Māori wards to be treated the same as any other ward (e.g. rural or urban) so that Māori could be given a fair go at making it to the table where decisions are made about their whānau, future and whenua.

In 2021, the government changed the law and removed the provision for Māori wards to be put to referendum. Since then, Aotearoa has gone from having just three councils with Māori wards to 49 that either have them or will have them by 2025.

That's a 1500% increase and covers 58% of local authorities.

It's because of the ordinary acts of everyday people that Aotearoa has been able to make incredible progress towards becoming a more participatory and inclusive democracy that better reflects Te Tiriti o Waitangi.

11,200+

People signed the 2020 petition for Māori wards to be given a fair go

230+

People contributed to the Waitangi Tribunal claim to save Māori wards

52

Mayors and Chairs signed an open letter to protect Māori wards

10,000

People made submissions on Māori wards in just five days



MĀORI WARDS BRING BALANCE TO OUR UNBALANCED WORLD

Most of us know that to make any partnership work we need to share decision making over the really important things in life - how we live, how we save and spend money, how we look after our home and how we care for our loved ones. The same applies to the Treaty partnership. The Crown makes better decisions when those decisions are made with Māori.

Unfortunately, for generations, the decisions that have been made on, and about, Māori lands, languages and lives have largely been made by non-Māori without Māori. This is unfair. It's discrimination. And it's built into the system.

When systems and institutions are based on the knowledge and values of one dominant culture while ignoring or excluding others, discrimination and privilege is built in. In Aotearoa, this looks like systems that privilege white British culture and ways of doing things over Māori and other minority communities' knowledge systems and ways of life.

Academics call this “**structural racism**” because it determines how our systems and institutions are resourced, designed and run. While people often think of racism as having to do with individual beliefs and actions, there are different levels of racism, and all of them cause harm. Structural racism is racial discrimination that isn't about individual acts but has been built into our systems. Only changes to the way those systems are built and run will improve outcomes. This means looking carefully at the systems that govern and shape our lives and working together to redesign them in a way that works for all of us while honouring Te Tiriti o Waitangi.

When listening to the stories from local communities for this report, we heard that **Māori wards are one of the ways people and councils have been working to improve and change systems.** They provide pathways for Māori to bring the baskets of knowledge contained within the Māori world together with the baskets of knowledge contained within the non-Māori world so that all of Aotearoa and the people that call this place home can thrive. Māori wards are important for many reasons - but one of the most important is that they provide a pathway for Māori to better protect Te Tiriti, te taiao, whānau, hapū and iwi.

STORIES OF RACISM, DISCRIMINATION & DIVISION FROM PREVIOUS POLLS

In April 2024, we collected 218 real-life stories and experiences of Māori wards from 129 Māori voters, five Māori councillors, eight non-Māori councillors and 76 voters. We asked people for stories about their experiences during previous polls on Māori wards. Here are some of their stories:

“I am a resident of Whakatāne. We had a poll in our area in 2018, following a majority decision by the Whakatane District Council to establish Māori wards in 2017. Hobson’s Pledge, and others who were outside of our rohe, opposed all Māori wards and managed to secure a poll. The national politicalisation of Māori wards by non-residents of Whakatāne brought to the forefront the ability of well funded and mobilised national bodies promoting a mono ethnicity approach to local and national politics. ... The poll emboldened racists to rant and rave publicly and denigrate Māori and our interests and rights, not just in terms of Māori wards but also any other issues pertaining to Māori e.g. Treaty of Waitangi settlements. While the messages were not new, the reach was wide due to social media and local reporting. Our children were exposed to this racism, and in my family my 5 year old daughter asked me “why do the Pākeha hate us?”

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“In 2015 New Plymouth District Council participated in a referendum about New Plymouth having a Māori ward. It was a divisive time in our community. Many of us had no issue with the Māori Ward. We saw it as a way of providing greater access for Māori in local government. What this did do was highlight to so many of us the underlying racism in our community. It caused upheaval and upset and a deep sense of hurt amongst those of us who see the Māori ward as an intrinsic part of our partnership with Māori. Our Mayor at the time was Andrew Judd and he was treated appalling by our community for recognising the importance of equity in council.”

“When Māori wards were being considered for the second time by the Far North District Council **every single councillor received abusive emails** from Hobson’s Pledge, members of the Sovereign Citizen group and angry people across the country for even daring to consider Māori [wards]. **Some even received death threats.**”

“The Coalition lobby groups systematically engage in conducting polls and surveys across various social media platforms. This pattern has continued since the debates over 3 Waters, Māori wards, and Māori street naming within local government, extending to recent electoral activities. These initiatives frequently distribute content that is hateful, harmful, racist, and misleading. Under the pretence of expressing concern for election integrity, these groups often ignore more pressing issues affecting community well-being, such as the harm inflicted upon us. This relentless spread of misinformation is especially prevalent on platforms like Twitter, mail drops and email - is unbearable.”

“We had a referendum in Whakatū-Nelson in 2012. It resulted in ill-informed and frequently racist public discourse that was so stressful to iwi, it put them off trying for a Māori seat again in the future, unless there was a change to the legislation. I know because I was a Nelson City Councillor who was eager for us to have another crack at it. **Hearing from Māori leaders that they did not want to try again under the old legislation was heartbreaking.** It's worth pointing out, however, that the day Nelson did adopt a Māori Ward was a great day for our city. I was on Council then and it was incredibly moving to hear from iwi what the change meant to them. It felt really healing and it felt like the start of a new, more respectful, and more just future for the city. The idea that we could be about to lose that is appalling. It will knock our city backwards and cause a huge amount of completely unnecessary grief.”

“As a second term District Councillor, I was subjected to racial insults, death threats both online and in person.”

“From my own personal experience as a second term District Councillor, I was subjected to racial insults, death threats both online and in person. Being the second Māori ever to be elected to the New Plymouth District Council in a hundred years, it wasn't due to the lack of Māori running for council, on the contrary. In the two previous New Plymouth local body elections in 2013, and 2016, there were over 30 Māori candidates who ran for the New Plymouth District Council. Many Māori candidates with a longstanding history of community and charitable work. Some with extensive business degrees, Master's degrees, professional, legal and accounting backgrounds. One would assume having these credentials would be enough 'merit' to be elected to Council; however, not one of the Māori candidates were elected. When investigating the population numbers in the 2018 census, the New Plymouth District demographic based on ethnicity shows 17.8% of the district's population whakapapa Māori, while 85.4 % of the population are of European descent. Based on the data collected, it becomes extremely difficult to argue in support of Hugh Johnson's sentiments that people should be elected 'based on their own merit' **when the reality is, merit didn't matter.**”

“As a Pākehā New Zealander, observing referendums and discussion on referendums on Māori wards around the motu ... was deeply troubling. The division, harm, and racial tension it ignited was disheartening to witness. We had racist misinformation in our mailbox that was organised nationally and it was very distressing. **Instead of fostering unity and understanding, referendums seemed to exacerbate existing divides, creating a sense of resentment and animosity.** What saddened me most was the damage it inflicted on relationships, sending a message that Māori voices and perspectives were not valued or respected. This not only strained individual connections but also fractured the cohesion of our community as a whole. Moreover, referendums and discussions around referendums provided a platform for bigotry and prejudice to thrive, legitimising harmful stereotypes and attitudes. This toxic environment allowed racism to flourish unchecked, perpetuating cycles of discrimination and inequality. Moving forward, it is imperative that we focus on healing these wounds. This entails actively challenging racism, promoting inclusivity, and recognising the importance of Māori representation in local decision-making processes. This should be guaranteed under Te Tiriti o Waitangi. And in no instance should the majority be responsible for deciding what is right for a minority, especially Tāngata Whenua. Only through concerted efforts to address these issues can we truly move towards a more just and equitable society for all New Zealanders.”

STORIES OF HOPE & UNITY FROM MĀORĪ WARDS

The following is a collection of quotes and stories that we collected of people's positive experiences with Māori wards and Māori wards councillors:

“Most Māori I have grown up with have always thought it was a waste of time voting until the Māori wards were created. Now they are voting because it is seen as a vote for one of our own, someone who understands who we are and where we come from.”

“We have a Mana Whenua representative who has made valuable contributions to the Invercargill City Council. She recently suggested that some funds be used for better accessibility to a community hall which other councillors supported. Her perspective and insight benefits the community and ratepayers. I support Māori Wards because it generates new ideas and perspectives.”

“I support Māori Wards because it generates new ideas and perspectives.”

“The Māori ward councillor in Marlborough District has demonstrated incredible leadership and cohesion amongst our wider communities while ensuring iwi voices are sought, and upheld in line with Te Tiriti.”

“As a result of Māori wards, we now have a signed a partnership agreement with all three councils and eight iwi across Te Taihū.”

“Having a Māori ward councillor provides access to Māori advisory committees and feedback that gives us the ability to assess the quality of concerning matters such as the Waikato River joint management, developments around sites of cultural and historical significance to Māori, and the shared administration of land reserves returned to iwi by way of Treaty Settlement.”

“I live in Nelson and it feels good to have someone in local council that represents someone like you/your whānau. The majority are all Pākehā and it makes a difference to have Māori like you there, representing. I'm a homeowner, I pay rates, I contribute in many ways to this community and yet I feel like an outsider. Having representation on [our] local council helps me feel like I can belong in more ways than just paying my rates.”

“In the previous four decades Māori often stood for Council with little success. When talking to Council recently I was heartened to support a friend making a submission in te reo Māori and to be answered in her language by councillors, who then translated for everyone there. Emergency management is an area where our rohe is beginning to work with mana whenua. They have many marae and inclusive processes to support us all when a crisis occurs.”

“Our Māori ward councillor is the only one who is prepared to help our community fight the ridiculous proposal to build a waste incinerator close to our schools, homes and businesses.”

“Te Tai Tokerau across the four councils have 10 Māori ward councillors. In that, you have some of the most prolific community activists, [a] former CEO of NGOs, mangai of te reo Māori, Māori business owners, political activists, Māori content creators, [an] internationally recognised Māori environmentalist, [an] iwi chair, Māori media executives, lawyers and hapū leaders. This is worth highlighting.”

“The Māori councillors have provided a direct line to information, advocacy and communication between Māori and the Council. It has also exposed how excluded Māori have previously been from Council decision making, and has meant that Council must actively demonstrate that they accurately represent ALL members of their constituency. This has not been the case for the Whakatāne District Council until now.”

“The Māori ward councillors of the Far North District Council were crucial in negotiating the ending of the Patia o Matariki occupation at Whatuwhiwhi/Tokerau Bay. Our Māori ward councillors met with all parties (marae, ngā hapū and landowner) to seek a respectful way forward. One which didn't require police intervention or divide a community. That's just one example of why having Maori ward councillors is beneficial and works.”

“When our Māori ward representative was elected by our people, there was a huge number of Māori in attendance at her induction to Council, the Chamber was packed, so much so the mayor was brought to tears. **Our Māori ward wouncillor has bought a presence to the Council table that has been non existent and indeed refreshing.** She is eloquent, without adding embellishment, in the debating chamber and steadfast in her strategic approach to any issues in our rohe.”

“Our Māori ward councillor brings cultural safety. He has mana and this has made navigation - what could be yucky issues - much easier. Māori engage with us and there is a level of trust that was not previously there. Referendums will do damage.”

“Māori engage with us and there is a level of trust that was not previously there.”

“The positive impact of our two Maaori ward councillors is immense. Not only do they bring a very vital and important voice to the decision making table, they also enable Council to develop stronger relationships with Iwi, Hapuu and all Maaori in our communities. When we have hui with our Iwi and Hapuu partners, the presence of our Maaori ward councillors ensures these hui are tika and the level of trust in our Te Tiriti relationships has grown.”

“We have seen increased active participation by Māori to submissions/hearings/hui/consultation/council app's etc, I have been told by the community [this] is a direct result of Māori wards, because the public believes that a group now exists at the Council whom they can relate to and their concerns will not fall on not listening ears. Māori ward councillors are accessible at marae, hui, within communities, sports codes, small business, and tangihanga.”

WHAT THE WAITANGI TRIBUNAL FOUND

In May 2024, the Waitangi Tribunal granted an urgent inquiry into the Coalition Government's proposal to require councils to remove Māori wards or put them to a referendum at the 2025 local elections.

Here is what the Tribunal found:

- 1** **Whole communities have benefited** because of the improved and strengthened relationships between Māori and councils as a result of having Māori represented at the decision-making table.
- 2** **The failure to consult Māori about removing Māori wards is a clear breach of the Treaty.** The government's decision-making process has been particularly harmful given it reverses a change that was made to remove discriminatory barriers to Māori representation in the first place.
- 3** The **most significant harm to Māori will be the likely dramatic reduction of dedicated Māori representation** once the amendments come into effect.
- 4** **There was no discussion or analysis of the Coalition Government's Treaty obligations** in the Cabinet paper on which the decision to remove Māori wards or put them to a referendum was made.
- 5** **The polls are likely to have divisive effects on communities, including exposure of Māori to racist rhetoric,** as described in the evidence received of people's experiences of previous referendums.
- 6** **Waikato-Tainui are likely to be significantly impacted** as nearly 20% of the wards established since 2021 are in their rohe and region.

The Tribunal recommended that the Crown stop the process to allow proper consultation between the Treaty partners with a view to agreeing how Māori can exercise their tino rangatiratanga at the local level.

KEY POINTS



What are Māori wards?

Māori wards are like the local government equivalent of the Māori seats in Parliament. They help ensure that councils represent the diversity in the communities that elect them and guarantee Māori a seat at the decision-making table. Some councils also have for example rural and urban wards but, unlike Māori wards, they aren't subject to a referendum.

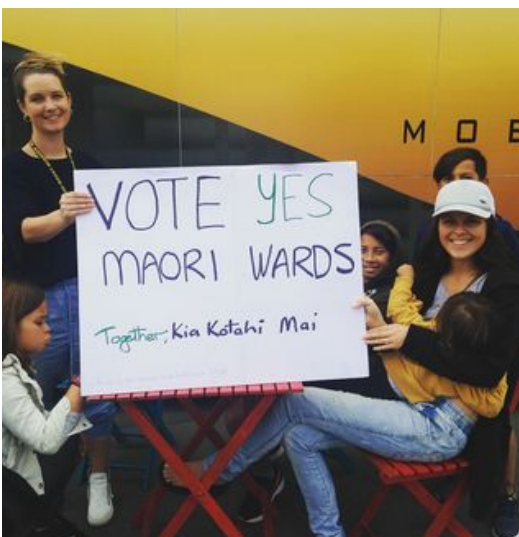
Referendums/polls are not the right tool

While referendums as a tool for democracy can be useful, when used on topics related to Māori, they increase the likelihood of harmful and divisive rhetoric and actions. Māori are forced to bear the brunt of violent threats; however, council members of any background who support Māori wards have also been targeted.



Māori wards rebalance historical injustice

In New Plymouth, Dinnie Moeahu is the second ever Māori councillor to be elected in 100 years. Not because Māori weren't standing for Council but because the odds are stacked against Māori in any environment where the majority of voters are non-Māori. Māori wards help rebalance this.



Whole communities benefit from Māori leadership

During the Select Committee submission process, Len Salt, Mayor of Thames District Council, talked about how in extreme weather events, iwi and marae have been at the front and centre of community responses - opening up their doors and laying out the mattresses for everyone - no matter their background.

TREATIES ARE MEANT TO BE HONoured

Not settled

MOANA JACKSON

THREE WAYS YOU CAN TAKE ACTION

Read the Tribunal Report in full
WAI3365

**Email your local councillor or mayor
and tell them you support Māori wards**

Find their details on your local
council's website

**Volunteer or donate to the ongoing
work for Te Tiriti justice**

<https://donate.actionstation.org.nz/donate>

Published 20 June, 2024 by
ActionStation Aotearoa in collaboration
with Te Raukura O'Connell Rapira.

Ngā mihi nunui to the communities who
shared their stories, the team involved in
the urgent Waitangi Tribunal Claim WAI
3365, and our Māori ward councillors
around the motu who persevere in service
to their communities.