

SMART SUPPORT FOR COUNCILLORS: AI TOOLS FOR LOCAL LEADERS

JUNE 2025

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FOREWORD BY SAM BROUGHTON



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Foreword

Every councillor knows the feeling: doorstep piles of complex papers, complete with technical appendices and financial modelling, with little time for review. You wonder how to apply the right level of scrutiny while juggling other council, employment, family and community obligations.

Nick Clark's timely research examines the information asymmetry between part-time elected members and full-time professional staff. Then he offers a practical solution – AI tools designed specifically to enhance councillors' analytical capabilities. This is about strengthening human judgement, not replacing it, so that elected members can make the best possible decisions.

There are limitations to AI. It does offer tremendous potential to synthesise information, track decisions, and understand community sentiment. But, as this report argues, some decisions will always require human wisdom. New Zealanders' scepticism about AI is real and must be addressed. It's not a miracle quick fix and will take care to implement.

However, the status quo feels untenable, with mounting pressure on local government from tighter budgets, rising expectations, byzantine regulations, and climate imperatives. Our councillors need better tools and we know some are turning to personal AI accounts to manage their workload. As well as highlighting the demand, this generates risks in terms of proceeding without proper frameworks.

LGNZ has always advocated for the best-possible support systems for elected members. I'm pleased to see the New Zealand Initiative releasing this research, which aligns with our vision. While the international examples are encouraging, it's even more fascinating to see New Zealand councils experimenting in this space.

For me, the question is not whether AI will play a role in local government, but how we ensure it strengthens our democracy. The recommendations in this report feel pragmatic: enhance rather than replace human judgment, invest in councillor training, develop shared resources and engage transparently with communities. These are practical steps toward a more effective democracy that should also reduce unsustainable pressure on elected members.

AI also provides new ways to address community representation, as the report illustrates. It's easy for the loudest voices to dominate while quieter perspectives go unheard. AI tools could help councillors better understand the full spectrum of community sentiment, which is vital for genuine democratic representation.

This analysis could not be more timely – and provides a balanced and thoughtful roadmap for moving forward. I strongly encourage everyone involved in local government to be part of the conversation. Because the future of local democracy depends on us getting this right.

Sam Broughton
President, Local Government New Zealand
Mayor, Selwyn District
June 2025

Executive Summary and Recommendations

The cornerstone of effective local governance rests on elected representatives who serve as the voice of their communities. Yet across New Zealand today, councillors face a troubling imbalance: mostly part-time representatives must process complex technical information prepared by full-time professional staff, often receiving hundreds of pages just days before critical votes.

This information asymmetry undermines democratic oversight. When elected representatives lack the tools to effectively scrutinise complex proposals, they become dependent on staff recommendations rather than exercising robust independent judgment.

The New Zealand Initiative's report *Making Local Government Work* documented how unelected chief executives dominate council governance, with information flows tightly controlled and mayors lacking resources to lead effectively. While providing each councillor with dedicated staff would address this problem, it would be prohibitively expensive for most councils.

Artificial Intelligence (AI) could do the job, and it offers a more cost-effective approach.

The objective is not efficiency alone, but democratic empowerment. AI tools designed specifically for elected representatives could help councillors better manage information overload, identify key issues requiring scrutiny, and synthesise community feedback – while maintaining human control over all decision-making.

This is not about replacing human judgment. Humans must remain firmly in control, with AI serving as a cognitive extension to enhance councillors' analytical capabilities.

There are challenges. New Zealanders remain deeply sceptical of AI technologies – more so than any other country surveyed. There are some things AI should not do, and where it should be used AI tools will need to be developed and implemented thoughtfully. Councillors will still need to have core knowledge. They will also need training, so they do not uncritically trust or over-rely on AI.

Several New Zealand councils are already experimenting with AI applications to improve service delivery and to help better process information. This is welcome but what is also needed are tools to help councillors do their jobs effectively.

AI represents one important tool within broader reforms needed to strengthen local democracy. Other changes – including better access to information, reformed codes of conduct, and clearer council focus on core functions – remain equally necessary.

Doing nothing means accepting a system where elected representatives increasingly lack the tools needed to exercise effective oversight. In an era of growing information complexity and rising community expectations, this status quo is untenable.

Done well, AI would help restore the balance between elected representatives and professional staff, strengthening rather than weakening democratic accountability.

Recommendations

1. **AI tools be designed to enhance councillors' analytical capabilities** rather than replace their judgment, with elected representatives maintaining final decision-making authority.
2. **That elected representatives develop foundational knowledge** to ensure AI serves as a cognitive extension rather than a substitute for the essential human judgment.

3. **Develop a shared learning network or resource centre** for AI in local government governance, with specific guidance on applications for elected representatives.
4. **Establish pilot programs** in selected councils to identify risks, demonstrate benefits and develop implementation best practices.
5. **Create shared resources and toolkits** to make AI tools accessible to councils of all sizes, potentially through Local Government New Zealand, Taituara or central government support.
6. **Invest in councillor capability development** to ensure elected members can effectively use and interpret the output of AI tools.
7. **Foster cross-council collaboration** on AI implementation to share costs, expertise, and lessons learned.
8. **Engage with the public** about the role of AI in supporting democratic processes to build trust and address concerns.
9. **Develop clear ethical guidelines** for AI use in democratic contexts, drawing on both international best practice and New Zealand experience.
10. **Establish evaluation frameworks** to assess the impact of AI tools on councillor workload, decision quality and representative effectiveness.

1. Introduction

Democracy should govern what happens in council chambers as much as in Parliament. Local elected officials make decisions that directly shape our neighbourhoods, determine our rates bills, and affect our daily lives. Yet across New Zealand, these representatives face structural disadvantages that undermine their effectiveness and, ultimately, democratic accountability.

The challenge is both stark and widespread. Most councillors serve part-time while managing full-time responsibilities elsewhere. Few receive meaningful administrative support. Nearly all must process information controlled and prepared by full-time professional staff who possess deep institutional knowledge, technical expertise, and extensive resources that elected members lack.

This creates two distinct but related problems. First, there are structural power imbalances where bureaucrats control information flow, agenda-setting, and institutional memory. Second, there are resource and time constraints that limit councillors' ability to process complex information even when it is available. While broader local government reforms are needed to address structural issues, AI tools could directly help with information processing challenges – and indirectly strengthen councillors' independence from bureaucratic interpretations.

The information asymmetry has grown more pronounced as councils are expected to do more, legislation imposes new burdens, and technical requirements have added complexity. When the Prime Minister urged councils to focus on “doing the basics brilliantly,” he recognised a system veering off course. Responding to public concerns about substantial spending increases and hefty rates rises, the government announced wide-ranging local government reforms currently in progress.¹

The New Zealand Initiative's December 2024 report *Making Local Government Work: Improving Democratic Oversight* identified several pressing problems: limited mayoral powers, chief executive dominance, difficulties accessing staff-controlled information, codes of conduct stifling debate, and bureaucratic resistance to change. The report proposed strengthening mayors through the Auckland model, where mayors maintain independent staff accountable to them rather than to chief executives.²

However, feedback revealed that ordinary councillors also need decision-making and representation support. Providing each elected member with dedicated research and communications staff would solve the information asymmetry problem but prove financially impossible for most councils, particularly smaller rural authorities already struggling with cost pressures.

This is where AI tools specifically designed for elected representatives offer promise. AI systems could potentially help councillors simultaneously analyse complex documents, track decision implementation, synthesise community feedback, and access relevant precedents – all at a fraction of the cost of each councillor having dedicated personnel.

Yet this potential comes with caveats. AI systems have fundamental limitations and implementation risks that must be carefully managed. New Zealanders are more sceptical of AI than citizens of any other surveyed country, raising important questions about public acceptance. There are legitimate concerns about over-reliance, privacy, bias, and the risk that AI could diminish rather than enhance human judgment if improperly implemented.

¹ Luxon, Christopher (2024), *Speech to Local Government New Zealand SuperLocal Conference*.
<https://www.beehive.govt.nz/speech/speech-lgnz-superlocal-conference>

² The New Zealand Initiative (2024), *Making Local Government Work: Improving Democratic Oversight*,
<https://www.nzinitiative.org.nz/reports-and-media/reports/making-local-government-work/>

The key insight from international research and early New Zealand experiments is that success depends on keeping humans firmly in control while using AI to augment rather than replace analytical capabilities. Several New Zealand councils are already experimenting. Hutt City Council with comprehensive AI strategies, Auckland Council with multilingual citizen services, Nelson City Council with submission processing, and Environment Canterbury with dedicated councillor working groups exploring AI applications.

While much attention focuses on AI's potential to transform service delivery, this research addresses something more fundamental: how AI can help rebalance information asymmetries between elected members and professional staff, enabling more informed oversight and reducing procedural rubber-stamping.

This research note makes the case for proceeding with AI tools for elected representatives. It discusses the problem with information asymmetry for democratic oversight and how AI can help address it, including providing a practical example.

As importantly, the note also discusses what AI should not do and its implementation risks and challenges. It provides examples of how AI tools are currently used by local government internationally and domestically and outlines New Zealand's national work on implementing AI in government.

The research note concludes with how to develop and implement AI for councillors and makes ten specific recommendations.

2. The Problem: Information Asymmetry and Democratic Oversight

Local democracy depends on elected representatives having the capacity to make informed, independent decisions that serve their communities. Yet the current system makes this extraordinarily difficult. Why?

2.1 Information Overload

Information once arrived in manageable batches. Today, it is either withheld, or it crashes over councillors in overwhelming waves.

Council agendas routinely contain hundreds of pages of technical documents. A councillor in a major city might need to review 500-1,000 pages per meeting cycle. These aren't simple narratives, but complex reports filled with financial modelling, engineering specifications, planning considerations, and legal implications.

The timeline for absorption? Often just 2-3 days.

Meanwhile, the regulatory environment has grown increasingly complex. The Resource Management Act alone comprises over 800 pages of legislation. Add the Local Government Act, Land Transport Management Act, and Water Services Act, and the compliance requirements become labyrinthine.

Many councillors report what should surprise no one: they feel overwhelmed. This experience is particularly acute for those balancing council service with other professional commitments, creating a significant disadvantage relative to the full-time professional staff who prepare these materials.

2.2 Structural Information Asymmetry

Beyond volume lies a more fundamental power imbalance.

Staff work full-time in their specialist areas, building deep institutional and technical knowledge over years or decades. By contrast, councillors (especially new ones) start with limited institutional knowledge and must quickly develop understanding across multiple complex domains.

The resource gap is equally stark. Staff have access to research teams, consultant reports and professional networks. Elected members typically have minimal research support – often just their own time and determination.

Staff also control information flow. They determine the time and manner of information presentation to councillors, which questions are addressed in reports, and which options are evaluated. Their framing of policy questions can significantly influence decision outcomes.

Perhaps most importantly, staff remain through election cycles while councillors change. This institutional memory imbalance further advantages staff perspectives and creates continuity challenges for democratic oversight.

This asymmetry has tangible consequences for fiscal management and can contribute to unsustainable spending increases when elected representatives lack the tools to effectively scrutinise financial information.

2.3 Resource and Time Constraints

There is great variation in the time commitments expected of councillors. Auckland and other large city councils expect councillors to work fulltime. However, many district councils, especially small rural councils, expect it to be a part-time job. Regional councils' expectations also vary greatly.

Many councillors and mayors across are voicing concerns that their roles have become much more demanding than the public or remuneration frameworks recognise, with increasing responsibilities and rising workloads. Greater public scrutiny, as well as worrying and rising incidents of abuse, contribute to a sense of being overburdened and overwhelmed.³⁴

Something must give. Usually, it is the depth of analysis and scrutiny.

Councillors must balance their elected roles with other employment, business interests, and family responsibilities. Time constraints limit their capacity to dive deeply into complex issues.

Unlike MPs or government ministers, local elected members typically have minimal or no dedicated staff support. No researchers. No administrative assistants. No communications advisors.

They generally lack access to data analysis software, research databases or expert advisors independent of council staff. These constraints are particularly acute in smaller councils, where resources are even more limited, but their decisions are often no less complex than those faced by larger councils.

The result is that councillors are often forced to rely on staff interpretations rather than developing independent perspectives.

2.4 Community Representation Challenges

Effective representation requires understanding diverse community perspectives. Here too, elected members face significant barriers.

Community input comes through multiple channels – formal submissions, social media, emails, phone calls, and in-person conversations. Without staff support or analytical tools, synthesising this into a coherent understanding of community sentiment becomes nearly impossible.

One of the consequences is that perspectives from vocal minorities often receive disproportionate attention while quieter voices go unheard. Online engagement methods exclude important segments of the community, particularly those with limited digital literacy, or those facing socioeconomic barriers to digital access.

Low participation rates in formal consultation processes creates further uncertainty – does feedback truly represent community views or merely the most motivated voices?

Without robust analytical capabilities, councillors cannot easily determine whether feedback is representative or identify which perspectives might be missing from the conversation entirely.

³ Radio New Zealand (2024), *Concern councillors facing growing workload, pressure and abuse earn under \$30k*, <https://www.rnz.co.nz/news/national/520233/concern-councillors-facing-growing-workload-pressure-and-abuse-earn-under-30k>

⁴ Scoop (2026), *“Overwhelmed”: Crown Observer reports on WCC’s massive workload*, <https://wellington.scoop.co.nz/?p=168968>

2.5 Consequences for Democratic Governance

These challenges have serious implications for democratic governance.

Faced with information overload and time constraints, councillors often default to accepting staff recommendations without robust scrutiny.

Limited capacity forces councillors to triage their attention. High-profile controversial matters naturally take precedence, while equally important but less visible issues – often those with significant long-term implications – receive inadequate oversight. This results in a democratic deficit in local governance.

Information processing challenges limit capacity for long-term strategic thinking, resulting in governance that reacts to immediate issues rather than proactively shaping the future. When elected representatives cannot demonstrate mastery of complex issues or responsiveness to community concerns, public confidence in local democracy deteriorates. This is not a criticism of councillors or staff, but of a system that structurally disadvantages those elected to represent their communities.

3. How AI Can Help: Key Applications

AI offers practical solutions to these challenges, but not by replacing human judgment. The goal is enhancement, not substitution.

Consider a councillor facing a 600-page agenda package delivered Friday afternoon for a Tuesday meeting. Without assistance, she might skim the executive summaries, focus on issues directly affecting her ward, and hope critical details don't escape notice.

With AI support, she can quickly identify key decision points, flag inconsistencies with previous council positions, and understand long-term financial implications that might be buried in technical appendices.

The difference is not merely efficiency. It is the difference between informed oversight and procedural rubber-stamping.

3.1 Information Synthesis and Management

The first challenge is making sense of overwhelming information volumes.

Natural Language Processing (NLP) techniques can analyse council reports to generate concise, plain-language summaries, highlighting key decision points, financial implications, and areas requiring scrutiny. These summaries can be tailored to different levels of detail based on councillors' preferences and focus areas.

Beyond summarisation, AI can identify specific issues within reports that align with stated council priorities or represent potential risks, bringing these to councillors' attention. When similar issues have been considered previously, AI has the potential to highlight how current proposals differ from past decisions, providing important context and consistency checks.

Box 1: Real World Examples of Information Synthesis and Management

Deloitte’s RegExplorer AI platform allows governments to sift through large numbers of text documents, such as regulations, analysing and understanding links between documents to help governments make connections and streamline changes.⁵

The ONS Data Science Campus has explored extractive text summarisation using unsupervised machine learning methods like skip-thoughts to cluster similar sentences and select the most representative ones for document summaries.⁶

The contextual knowledge enhancement is particularly valuable. AI systems can flag potential conflicts with existing policies, plans, or statutory requirements. When considering novel issues, AI can search for similar cases from other councils or jurisdictions, providing valuable reference points.

For the time-pressured councillor, such tools transform information from an overwhelming flood into a navigable landscape.

However, it is important to note that AI can sometimes generate incorrect references or “hallucinate” such cases, so human verification remains essential for critical information. It is also necessary for relevant documentation to be available to the AI tool, requiring extensive digitisation of historical council records.

3.2 Enhanced Decision Quality

Informed decisions require more than information awareness – they demand insight.

AI-powered visualisation tools can help councillors explore complex datasets without requiring technical expertise, enabling them to investigate patterns and test assumptions. Geographic Information System (GIS) integration with AI can highlight how proposals affect different areas within a council’s jurisdiction.

Box 2: Real World Examples of Enhanced Decision Quality

Wellington, New Zealand, and Shanghai have created AI-driven digital twins, helping city planners visualise development projects and predict impacts, such as how a new sports arena might affect traffic patterns.⁷

GIS integration with AI helps local governments analyse spatial location data and organise multiple layers of information into visual renderings, enabling better resource allocation decisions and infrastructure planning.⁸ New Zealand has a number of innovative GIS companies.⁹

⁵ State Tech (2021), *Natural Language Processing Takes Off in State Government*, <https://statetechmagazine.com/article/2021/11/natural-language-processing-takes-state-government-perfcon>

⁶ Gov.uk (2019), *Natural Language Processing in government*, <https://dataingovernment.blog.gov.uk/2019/06/14/natural-language-processing-in-government/>

⁷ Oracle (2024), *Using AI in Local Government: 10 Use Cases*, <https://www.oracle.com/artificial-intelligence/ai-local-government/>

⁸ GovPilot (2023), *GIS in Government: How Municipalities Need to Use GIS Maps in 2023*, <https://www.govpilot.com/blog/government-gis>

⁹ FlyPix AI (2024), *Top Geospatial Companies in New Zealand*, <https://flypix.ai/blog/geospatial-companies-in-new-zealand/>

For datasets where good historical records exist, AI could identify trends that might remain hidden in snapshot reports, helping councillors understand the trajectory of key metrics. Well-designed systems have potential to flag unusual patterns in financial or operational data that might warrant further investigation, enhancing councillors' oversight capabilities.

Scenario modelling represents a potentially powerful application, although it should be implemented with appropriate caution. Today, AI can help councillors understand basic "what-if" scenarios based on existing data and models. However, complex financial modelling that requires selecting appropriate statistical methods and correctly operationalising variables is still challenging for current AI systems without human expertise guiding the process. As these capabilities develop, councillors will need appropriate training to interpret these models critically rather than accepting outputs uncritically.

AI can also support decision evaluation by helping councillors assess options against multiple objectives or criteria, clarifying trade-offs and supporting more structured decision processes. After decisions are implemented, AI could potentially track outcomes against projections, supporting accountability and learning, though this would depend on having appropriate data collection systems in place.

3.3 Strengthened Community Representation

Understanding community sentiment is essential for effective representation, yet traditional methods often provide incomplete pictures.

Current AI systems can process feedback from submissions, social media, emails, and surveys to identify common themes and concerns across large volumes of community input, ensuring key issues are not missed. While comprehensive integration across all these sources remains technically challenging, AI can still provide valuable insights from individual feedback channels that might otherwise be missed due to volume constraints.

Box 3: Real World Examples of Strengthened Community Representation

Public participation platforms such as Go Vocal (formerly CitizenLab) and Polis use AI systems when working with local governments to solicit, analyse, and respond to feedback, with large language models helping decision-makers see how opinions can shift from one neighbourhood to another.¹⁰

Zencity's civic engagement software combines organic community feedback with proactive community surveys, using AI-powered algorithms to automatically break down data by department, topic, sentiment, location and source.¹¹

Nelson City Council used AI in its 2024 Long Term Plan process, with the Nelson AI Sandbox documenting this as an example of "AI-assistance in local government service delivery".¹²

AI tools can help identify which community voices may be underrepresented in feedback, supporting

¹⁰ Using AI in Local Government: 10 Use Cases

¹¹ Zencity (2023), *Smarter community engagement giving meaning to millions of data points*, <https://zencity.io/zencity-organic/>

¹² Nelson Regional Development Agency (2024), *Nelson a "blueprint" for building community AI capacity*, <https://www.nelsontasman.nz/about-us/news-from-nt/nelson-a-blueprint-for-building-community-ai-capacity/>

more inclusive decision-making. Systems can analyse the demographic characteristics of those engaging with council consultations, highlighting potential participation gaps.

AI translation capabilities, while still developing for languages like te reo Māori, could eventually facilitate engagement with non-English speaking communities through automated translation of community input and council communications. This would become increasingly important as our communities grow more diverse, though current systems still have limitations with cultural nuances and less commonly processed languages.

The technology can also enhance engagement by helping tailor communications to different community segments based on their interests and concerns.

3.4 Operational Efficiency and Time Management

For part-time councillors, time is perhaps the scarcest resource of all.

AI can generate personalised briefing notes highlighting key issues for upcoming meetings based on a councillor's specific interests and responsibilities. During council deliberations, AI tools can provide on-demand access to relevant information, precedents, or context.

Meeting efficiency could be improved by using AI to analyse council meeting transcripts, tracking key decisions, commitments, and recurring issues, and providing accountability tools for follow-through. Systems can monitor the implementation of council decisions over time, alerting councillors when actions have not been completed as agreed.

Administrative efficiency could be boosted by using AI to categorise, prioritise, and help draft responses to constituent communications, ensuring timely responses and reducing administrative burden. Smart scheduling tools could help councillors manage their time more effectively across competing demands.

Box 4: Real World Examples of Operational Efficiency and Time Management

The (United States) National Association of Counties' AI Compass toolkit notes that AI can enhance productivity and cost savings by automating routine tasks such as data entry, document drafting, contract negotiation, grant writing and help desk support.¹³

In New Zealand, Hutt City Council launched the "AI-Volution project" in November 2024, conducting internal trials of Microsoft CoPilot and ChatGPT. Early data suggest participants saved an average of 38 minutes per day, which equates to 20 working days annually. The next phase involves rolling out AI to at least 150 staff with specific AI assistants developed for repetitive tasks Hutt City Council looks to harness the power of AI.¹⁴

These applications demonstrate how AI has the potential to address the specific challenges facing elected representatives. These tools should help support democratic oversight by enabling elected

¹³ National Association of Counties (2024). *AI County Compass: A Comprehensive Toolkit for Local Governance and Implementation of Artificial Intelligence*, <https://www.naco.org/resource/ai-county-compass-comprehensive-toolkit-local-governance-and-implementation-artificial>

¹⁴ Hutt City Council (2024), *Hutt City Council looks to harness the power of AI*, <https://www.huttcity.govt.nz/people-and-communities/news/2024/hutt-city-council-looks-to-harness-the-power-of-ai2>

members to perform their roles more effectively despite information asymmetries and resource constraints.

Consistent with the findings of the New Zealand Initiative's 2024 report *Welcome to the Machine: Opportunities and Risks of Generative Artificial Intelligence in Education*, technology can best support elected representatives who have developed foundational understanding of key governance areas.¹⁵ This approach would reduce the risk that AI becomes a substitute for essential knowledge and skills that underpin effective democratic oversight.

An important question would be how to make sure councillors have that foundational knowledge? Teachers are trained, which enables them to stay in charge of AI deployment in schools. Councillors would also need training, so they do not uncritically trust or over-rely on AI.

4. A Practical Case Study for Councillors

Theory is one thing. Practical application is another.

To illustrate how AI tools could practically assist elected representatives, let us examine a scenario faced by local councillors: reviewing a complex transport planning document that requires scrutiny and decision-making.

The document in this case study is a real one, a report on the Wellington City Transport Plan considered by a meeting of the City Council in December 2024.¹⁶ It is a fictitious scenario; we have imagined how an AI tool could have scrutinised that document.

4.1 The Challenge: Wellington's Transport Plan

A councillor receives a 68-page report on a proposed Wellington City Transport Plan just days before a critical council vote. The report contains technical details, budget implications, risk assessments, and complex strategic objectives.

With limited time and no dedicated support staff, the councillor must understand the key recommendations and their implications; identify potential risks, flaws, or inconsistencies; develop informed questions for the council meeting; and consider economic implications and alternative perspectives.

The task seems overwhelming. But AI support transforms the process.

4.2 How AI Assistance Transforms the Process Challenge

Phase 1: Quick Comprehension of Core Information

Without AI, the councillor would need to read the entire document in detail, taking several hours, possibly missing important details due to time constraints.

¹⁵ The New Zealand Initiative (2024), *Welcome to the Machine: Opportunities and Risks of Generative Artificial Intelligence in Education*, <https://www.nzinitiative.org.nz/reports-and-media/reports/welcome-to-the-machine/document/844>

¹⁶ Wellington City Council (2024), *Ordinary Meeting of Te Kaunihera o Pōneke Council Agenda*, discussion on Wellington City Transport Plan (pages 7-74), <https://wellington.govt.nz/-/media/Your-council/meetings/Council/2024/2024-12-12-Public-Agenda-Council>

With AI, the councillor uploads the document to an AI assistant and asks for a summary of what they need to know. Within minutes, they receive a concise overview highlighting:

- The purpose of the Wellington City Transport Plan.
- The key vision statement proposed for adoption.
- Specific recommendations requiring council approval.
- Timelines and budget implications.
- Strategic alignment with council priorities.
- Compliance with legislation and regulation.

The overview is shown in the Appendix to this research note. It allows the councillor to focus their limited time on critical evaluation rather than information gathering. The executive summary alone might suffice for orientation, but not for making an informed vote. The AI overview draws from the whole document.

Phase 2: Risk and Flaw Identification

When prompted about potential risks and flaws, the AI assistant identifies several concerns not immediately apparent in the report:

- Lack of detailed cost estimates and funding certainty.
- Overreliance on central government and regional council cooperation.
- Timeline uncertainty and lack of binding milestones.
- Weak integration with existing model and corridor plans.
- Limited public and stakeholder engagement at this stage.
- Non-statutory status may undermine influence.
- Missing implementation framework.
- Equity and accessibility impact under-addressed.
- Climate commitments require sharper pathways.
- Reputational risk from Golden Mile and Let's Get Wellington Moving (LGWM) legacy.

A discussion on these risks and flaws is shown in the Appendix. The AI has effectively performed a critical analysis that would typically require specialist expertise or significant time investment.

Phase 3: Preparation for Effective Questioning

The AI provides suggestions for targeted, specific questions that address core governance concerns about:

- Delivery and implementation.
- Costs and funding.
- Engagement and partnerships.
- Vision and outcomes.
- Institutional coherence.

The questions are shown in the Appendix. They provide critical analysis, enhancing the councillor's understanding of the issues and effectiveness in governance oversight.

The document is strategic and visionary but lacks operational clarity. Most of the critical questions a councillor might ask – especially around delivery, risks, funding, outcomes, and governance – are not answered directly. These represent substantive gaps that should be addressed before final adoption or in the next planning phase.

Phase 4: Multi-Perspective Analysis

The councillor can prompt the AI to evaluate the proposal from specific expert perspectives. For instance, asking “How would an economist view this proposal?” yields insights about:

- Problem definition and market failure.
- Lack of economic evaluation framework.
- Unclear economic incentives.
- Uncertain funding model and intergenerational equity.
- Weak measurement and accountability structures.
- Non-market valuation gaps.
- Policy coherence with broader economic goals

The discussion on these points is shown in the Appendix. The councillor could also ask for perspectives from other disciplines, like those of a traffic engineer, urban planner, climate change expert, or political scientist. A multi-perspective analysis helps the councillor identify blind spots and consider diverse stakeholder viewpoints before making decisions.

4.3 The Result

With AI support, the councillor arrives at the meeting having:

- Better understanding of the proposal despite its complexity.
- Identified subtle flaws and inconsistencies that might otherwise be missed.
- Prepared specific, informed questions that help with scrutiny and decision-making.
- Considered multiple simulations of expert perspectives beyond their own expertise.

The result should be better oversight and better decision-making. This scenario demonstrates how AI tools can significantly enhance a councillor's ability to provide effective scrutiny despite information asymmetry challenges. The councillor remains the decision-maker, but their capacity to evaluate complex information is substantially augmented.

This assistance should not replace human judgment - the councillor should evaluate the AI's analysis, should use their judgment to determine which questions to prioritise, and should continue to make their voting decision based on their values and understanding of community needs. The AI simply helps level the playing field between part-time elected officials and full-time professional staff with technical expertise.

4.4 Practical Implications for Implementation

This case study highlights several key considerations for implementing AI tools for councillors:

- Accessibility: Tools must be easy to use without technical expertise.
- Speed: Analysis must be delivered quickly enough to be useful within tight timeframes.
- Customisability: Systems should respond to specific councillor questions and priorities.
- Transparency: The source of information and reasoning should be clear.
- Multi-modal functionality: Tools should handle text documents, data tables, images, and potentially audio recordings of meetings.

By implementing AI tools with these considerations in mind, councils can meaningfully address the information asymmetry challenges identified earlier in this report, without requiring unrealistic time commitments from elected officials or expensive dedicated staff resources. This should help improve oversight and decision-making.

5. When AI is not the Answer: Limitations and the Role of Human Judgement

AI's capabilities are remarkable, but they are not limitless. Some fundamental limitations must be acknowledged.

5.1 When Human Judgment Should be Prioritised

No algorithm can make genuine value judgments. When a community faces difficult trade-offs – whether to prioritise a new library or improved storm drainage – the decision involves political and ethical reasonings that cannot be outsourced to machines.

AI lacks the essential human capacity for moral agency. It can analyse patterns, but it cannot feel the weight of responsibility that elected officials bear when making decisions.

These are not temporary technological limitations that future advances will overcome. They are boundaries inherent to the nature of artificial versus human intelligence.

When it comes to legal interpretation, AI's abilities are impressive, especially for the matters councillors might need to review - often process-heavy that do not raise novel legal issues. However, AI will not eliminate the need for human judgment on more complex legal and policy issues.

AI struggles with understanding the full socio-political context of local decisions, particularly on areas of ethical concern for society: privacy and surveillance, bias and discrimination, and the role of human judgment. This contextual understanding is essential for elected officials who must interpret community needs in light of local historical, cultural, and social factors.

Recent research published in a regulation and governance journal suggests that “individual justice can only be meaningfully served through human judgment.”¹⁷ In cases where decisions have significant

¹⁷ Regulation & Governance, Binns (2020), Human Judgment in algorithmic loops: Individual justice and automated decision-making, <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/rego.12358>

impacts on individuals' rights or community wellbeing, human oversight and judgment remain essential, particularly for decisions requiring discretionary interpretation of rules or policies.

When decisions involve complex ethical dimensions, such as balancing competing rights or allocating limited resources between worthy causes, AI systems cannot substitute for the moral reasoning and accountability of elected representatives. A study on AI and human decision-making notes that "while AI can analyse a decade's worth of rainfall data in a split second and tell you there's a 97.3% chance it will rain today...whether you should wear your favourite white shirt or take an umbrella, well, that's your call."¹⁸

AI depends on historical data and patterns, making it less suited for unprecedented situations or crises where past data is not predictive of current circumstances. During such events, elected officials must continue to exercise judgment that takes account the unique aspects of the situation at hand.

5.2 Implementation Challenges vs Fundamental Limitations

Many discussions of AI limitations confuse implementation challenges with fundamental limitations. This distinction is crucial for understanding AI's proper role in democratic governance.

Implementation challenges, which may be overcome with technological advancement, include current limitations in natural language understanding, explainability of complex models, data quality and representativeness, and technical infrastructure requirements. AI can also 'hallucinate'.

Fundamental limitations, which are inherent to the nature of AI, include inability to make authentic value judgments, lack of moral agency and accountability, inability to transcend the patterns in training data, and absence of subjective experience that informs human empathy.

The first category represents temporary obstacles that will likely diminish over time. The second represents permanent boundaries that define where human judgment and human cognitive capability must remain central.

5.3 A Framework for Human-AI Collaboration

Rather than viewing AI as a replacement for human judgment, a more productive approach is to see it as a complement that can enhance human decision-making when appropriately applied.

When designing AI systems for elected representatives, councils should ensure human representatives maintain final decision-making authority, with AI serving in an advisory capacity. They should deploy AI for tasks where it adds most value (information processing, pattern recognition) while preserving human judgment for value-laden decisions.

Promoting transparency becomes a key strategy for addressing bias and promoting fairness. This includes making data and algorithms available to the public and providing explanations for how decisions are made. Robust privacy policies and ethical frameworks for AI use should be established.

By understanding both the potential and limitations of AI, local governments can develop approaches that harness its benefits while preserving the essential role of human judgment in democratic governance.

¹⁸ Nick Shah (2023), *Artificial Intelligence Needs Human Judgement to Work*, <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/artificial-intelligence-needs-human-judgement-work-nick-shah>

6. Implementing AI in Local Government

Once it has been determined that AI can be useful, implementation needs to be thought through. The following issues must be addressed if the benefits of AI are to be realised.

6.1 Public Scepticism and Regulatory Environment

New Zealanders remain particularly sceptical about AI technologies. A KPMG survey of 48,000 people across 47 countries found fewer New Zealanders accept AI than in any other country. “We don’t trust it, we don’t regard it as safe or secure, and very few of us believe the benefits outweigh the risks.”¹⁹

This public scepticism creates a challenging environment for AI adoption, despite New Zealand ministers publicly embracing the use of AI and promising a “light-touch, proportionate, and risk-based” approach.²⁰

This tension between public attitudes and institutional momentum cannot be ignored. By developing comprehensive strategies that address legitimate concerns while demonstrating tangible benefits, councils may build public confidence through improved services and value for money.

However, failure to address legitimate concerns could result in resistance that prevents councils from realising AI’s potential benefits. The road to implementation must include robust public engagement and transparency.

6.2 Security, Privacy and Ethical Concerns

Council systems handle sensitive data, making them potential targets for cyberattacks. A security breach could lead to identity theft and significant loss of public trust. There are security advantages of cloud computing over on-premises approaches. Through the cloud, councils can access the resources and cyber protection capability of providers like Microsoft Azure, Amazon Web Services and Google Cloud Platform.

Despite the common perception that computer outputs are strictly objective, AI can perpetuate or even amplify existing biases by putting weights on the material it accesses. For local governments, a risk is that AI systems could lead to biases in favour of council-generated material, defeating the intention of giving councillors a tool to interrogate staff reports.

It is almost certain that some elected representatives are already using AI tools for council business through their own personal accounts. While their initiative should be commended there could be security, privacy and ethical issues running confidential reports through these public models. Far better for councils to have in place their own secure AI tools for councillors to use for council business – but these would need to be unbiased.

There is also a risk that premature reliance on AI tools could inhibit the development of essential analytical capabilities among elected representatives. If councillors rely on AI before developing foundational knowledge and analytical skills, they may remain dependent on technology rather than

¹⁹ Newsroom (2025), *The business opportunity of the century – and New Zealand lags the World*, <https://newsroom.co.nz/2025/05/06/the-business-opportunity-of-the-century-and-nz-lags-the-world/>

²⁰ Newsroom (2025), *Now’s our chance to lead on AI regulation*, <https://newsroom.co.nz/2025/05/05/nows-our-chance-to-lead-on-ai-regulation/>

developing independent judgment capabilities necessary for effective democratic oversight. They will need training, so they do not uncritically trust or over-rely on AI.

6.3 Practical Implementation Challenges

The automation potential of AI raises questions about employment in the public sector. Job displacement, the need for new skill sets, and the redefinition of roles must be carefully managed.

Technical requirements present another hurdle. AI systems require significant computational power, data storage, and robust internet connectivity, which may be harder to come by in smaller municipalities or rural areas. Many local governments still rely on outdated legacy systems incompatible with modern AI solutions.

In the absence of national regulations on AI, local governments are developing their own policies and guidelines for internal use, and their approaches vary widely. Inconsistencies could lead to disparities in AI implementation and oversight across different municipalities.

It will be important for councils to include AI-related expenses in their IT budgets, considering not just implementation but also maintenance and training costs. Large-scale IT projects carry risks of cost overruns and delays. These will need to be managed.

The demographics of elected representatives could also present a barrier to uptake. The median age of those elected in 2022 was 55, compared to 38 for the wider population. 24% of elected representatives were over the age of 60 and only 15% aged under 40.²¹ While plenty of older people are proficient and confident using technology, many will require additional support and training.

7. AI Applied

Despite the challenges, there are clear benefits to the use of AI in local government. AI is being increasingly used by councils internationally and in New Zealand, providing valuable lessons for implementation.

7.1 International Examples

The City of Sydney is pioneering the use of AI to enhance the review process for Complying Development Certificates. This initiative utilises e-Planning tools to quickly identify non-compliant application segments, offering immediate feedback to applicants and streamlining submissions.²²

Gold Coast City Council has introduced AI chatbots to offer round-the-clock customer service. These chatbots handle various tasks, from reporting issues like potholes to providing information about

²¹ Local Government New Zealand (2024), *Time to stand for council is now*, <https://www.lgnz.co.nz/news/media-releases/time-to-stand-for-council-is-now/>

²² DLA Piper (2024) *Business Advisory: How AI can be used in local government in 2024*, https://www.dlapiper.com/en/insights/publications/2024/01/how-ai-can-be-used-in-local-government-in-2024?utm_source=chatgpt.com

council services, improving response times, and allowing human staff to focus on more complex matters.²³

In Singapore the government has introduced 'Ask Jamie', an AI-powered virtual assistant that answers public queries using natural language processing. It can handle complex questions by engaging in follow-up interactions, thereby streamlining communication and reducing workload.²⁴

Researchers in the United States have developed 'GRASP' (Generation with Retrieval and Action System for Prompts), an AI chatbot framework designed to answer municipal budget queries accurately. It combines retrieval-augmented generation with domain-specific knowledge, outperforming general AI models in providing truthful responses.²⁵

Saratoga City, California implemented an AI platform called 'Hamlet' that summarises city council agendas, supporting documents, and recordings. This tool aids elected officials and residents in digesting complex meeting materials, thereby enhancing transparency and engagement.²⁶

At Murray City, Utah, officials utilise AI transcription tools to generate meeting minutes from voice recordings, significantly reducing the time required for documentation. However, human oversight remains essential to ensure accuracy.²⁷

The City of Midland, Texas, has launched two AI tools: 'SeeClickFix', a digital system for residents to report non-emergency issues, and 'Ask Jacky', a chatbot providing information about city operations. These tools have improved communication efficiency and service delivery.²⁸

7.2 New Zealand Examples

Hutt City Council has developed a comprehensive approach to AI implementation, with a dedicated webpage outlining its AI strategy, policy, and practical applications. The council emphasises ethical use, transparency, and cultural alignment, including Māori values. It maintains a public AI Register detailing specific AI applications (such as meeting minute drafting, project brief generation, and social media content creation) and has published details about its AI governance, risk management, and staff training.²⁹

Auckland Council has publicly discussed its AI initiatives, including the upcoming launch of 'Ask Auckland Council', a digital assistant powered by Google Cloud AI. This tool will help residents access

²³ Local Buy (2024), *Evolving IT Solutions: AI Integration and Risk Management in Australian Local Government*, https://www.localbuy.net.au/news/article/237/evolving-it-solutions-ai-integration-and-risk-management-in-australian-local-government?utm_source=chatgpt.com

²⁴ DLA Piper (2024) *Business Advisory: How AI can be used in local government in 2024*.

²⁵ Cornell University (2025), Xu, Wang, Leung, & Gu, *GRASP: Municipal Budget AI Chatbots for Enhancing Civic Engagement*, https://arxiv.org/abs/2503.23299?utm_source=chatgpt.com

²⁶ Government Technology (2025), *Cities Using AI for Transparency, Resident Engagement*, https://www.govtech.com/artificial-intelligence/cities-using-ai-for-transparency-resident-engagement?utm_source=chatgpt.com

²⁷ The Municipal (2024), *Can AI be helpful for your city?*, https://www.themunicipal.com/2024/11/can-ai-be-helpful-for-your-city/?utm_source=chatgpt.com

²⁸ Midland Reporter Telegram (2025), *City says new AI tools have boosted communication with residents*, https://www.mrt.com/news/article/midland-ai-seeclixfix-ask-jacky-20257698.php?utm_source=chatgpt.com

²⁹ Hutt City Council (2024) *Hutt City Council looks to harness the power of AI* <https://www.huttcity.govt.nz/people-and-communities/news/2024/hutt-city-council-looks-to-harness-the-power-of-ai2> and Hutt City Council (2024), *How Hutt City Council is Using AI to Work Smarter* <https://www.huttcity.govt.nz/council/our-projects/ai-at-council>

information and services more efficiently, with plans for multilingual support and a phased rollout. The project represents a significant innovation in local government customer service.³⁰

Nelson City Council has developed and implemented an AI application for processing Long-Term Plan submissions. This tool performs sentiment analysis, submission theming, and assisted staff with generating responses, enhancing efficiency and engagement in public consultation processes.³¹

Environment Canterbury has established a working group to consider the impacts of AI and advancing technology. It will hold four forums per year with topics likely to include public transport, democracy, and resource management and biosecurity.³²

In May 2025 Microsoft announced the successful implementation of AI tools expected to transform how central and local government agencies manage official information requests. The tools address core challenges such as approval process, time management, document management, and collaboration. They are expected to greatly improve the efficiency and accuracy of responses.³³

7.3 New Zealand National Framework Development

At the national level, there is considerable work underway on AI frameworks and regulation. According to the Government Chief Digital Officer (GCDO), in 2024 there were 108 AI use cases running across 37 government agencies. These use cases seek to boost productivity, automate routine tasks, and process work more efficiently.³⁴

The Department of Internal Affairs, through the GCDO, is leading AI initiatives for the public sector. The GCDO released updated guidance in February 2025 that expanded on the Interim Generative AI guidance for the public service published in July 2023.³⁵

In 2024, the Minister of Science, Innovation and Technology produced a cabinet paper titled “Approach to work on Artificial Intelligence” affirming the government’s support for unlocking the potential benefits of AI in New Zealand. The government plans to take a “light-touch” approach to regulation rather than introducing extensive AI-specific regulations like the EU AI Act, making only necessary adjustments to existing laws to address serious risks.³⁶

In 2024, the Minister announced a new AI Activator and GovGPT to help businesses and the public sector use AI responsibly. The AI Activator will unlock the potential of AI for businesses through access to AI research experts, technical assistance, AI tools and resources, as well as options for funding and

³⁰ Auckland Council (2025) *Auckland Council AI initiative to boost customer experience*.

<https://ourauckland.aucklandcouncil.govt.nz/news/2025/02/auckland-council-ai-initiative-to-boost-customer-experience/>

³¹ New Zealand Local Government Magazine (2024), *AI use in Local Government*. <https://localgovernmentmag.co.nz/ai-use-in-local-government/>

³² Farmers Weekly (2025) *How AI could change the way councils operate*.

<https://www.farmersweekly.co.nz/technology/how-ai-could-change-the-way-councils-operate/>

³³ Microsoft New Zealand, *Optimising Official Information Management with AI*, <https://news.microsoft.com/en-nz/2025/05/09/optimising-official-information-management-with-ai/>

³⁴ Digital.govt.nz, *Government Chief Digital Officer’s role in artificial intelligence (AI)*

<https://www.digital.govt.nz/standards-and-guidance/technology-and-architecture/artificial-intelligence/gcdo-role>

³⁵ Digital.govt.nz, *Public Service AI Framework*, <https://www.digital.govt.nz/standards-and-guidance/technology-and-architecture/artificial-intelligence/public-service-artificial-intelligence-framework>

³⁶ Minter Ellison Rudd Watts (2024), *New Zealand’s approach to Artificial Intelligence: Minister’s strategic direction on AI and unveiling New Zealand’s AI Blueprint*, <https://www.minterellison.co.nz/insights/new-zealand-s-approach-to-artificial-intelligence>

grants. GovGPT, will make it easier to access reliable government information and support for businesses and people wishing to interact with government agencies.³⁷

The Public Service AI Framework provides support for agencies in their use of AI and implementation of these technologies safely, encouraging alignment with the Framework's direction while noting it is not binding. The Framework takes a human-centred approach to AI and other emerging technologies to ensure citizens, customers, taxpayers, and public service workers are at the forefront of design and implementation.³⁸

In May 2025 the government announced that the GCDO and the Public Service Commission's Leadership Development Centre had developed two new AI training programmes. The first is an AI Masterclass series for senior leaders to improve understanding of and use of AI within agencies. The second is an all-of-government AI Foundational Development Programme for general public service users to be upskilled in basic AI concepts and present their own ideas for use of AI.³⁹

The AI Forum of New Zealand is playing a significant role in AI governance. It has developed Trustworthy AI in Aotearoa - AI Principles which has informed government approaches to AI. The AI Forum hosts the annual Aotearoa AI Summit, which showcases AI applications in New Zealand.⁴⁰

New Zealand has also established an Algorithm Charter that commits signatories to focus on algorithms with high risk of unintended consequences or significant impact if things go wrong, particularly for vulnerable communities.⁴¹

These initiatives show that New Zealand is taking a positively cautious approach to AI implementation in government, with emphasis on responsible use, human-centred design, and safeguards. While some caution is warranted, it is important that risk aversion does not take hold, delaying or preventing the adoption of AI tools and the productivity and innovation they would deliver.

8. Making it Happen

Moving from concept to practice requires careful attention to governance, ethics, training, and development approaches.

8.1 Governance and Ethics Framework

Democratic oversight must shape AI deployment in government applications, not the other way around.

Councils should establish clear guidelines emphasising that AI tools are designed to support human judgment, not replace it. Final decision authority must always rest with elected representatives. Protocols should specify when and how AI tools can be used in the decision-making process, with requirements for transparency about when AI has contributed to analysis or recommendations.

³⁷ Hon Judith Collins, Minister of Science, Innovation and Technology, 11 September 2024, *Government unlocking potential of AI*, <https://www.beehive.govt.nz/release/government-unlocking-potential-ai>

³⁸ Digital.govt.nz, *Public Service AI Framework*.

³⁹ Hon Judith Collins, Minister for Digitising Government and Minister for Public Service, 26 May 2025, *AI training to boost public service productivity*, <https://www.beehive.govt.nz/release/ai-training-boost-public-sector-productivity>

⁴⁰ Aotearoa AI Summit (2024), *New government initiatives announced*. <https://aotearoaai.nz/>

⁴¹ Data.govt.nz (2023), *Algorithm charter for Aotearoa New Zealand*, <https://data.govt.nz/toolkit/data-ethics/government-algorithm-transparency-and-accountability/algorithm-charter>

Clear lines of responsibility must be established for AI system outputs, with designated officials responsible for overseeing system performance and addressing concerns.

Regular auditing processes should be held on council AI systems, including training data and system outputs. Councils should also define explicit standards for AI systems, particularly for tools that analyse community feedback or allocate resources.

Privacy and data protection are critical considerations. Formal assessments should evaluate privacy implications of any AI implementation, particularly those involving community data. Systems should be designed to use only the minimum data necessary for their intended function.

Robust security measures must protect sensitive information processed by AI systems, with regular security audits and updates. The consequences of a breach could be severe for both individuals and council reputation.

8.2 Training and Capability Development

AI implementation will fail without appropriate human capability development.

Councillors should develop core knowledge on the council, its key activities, and its governance principles and practice to ensure that human judgment is supported rather than replaced.

Basic AI literacy training for elected members would ensure they understand capabilities, limitations, and appropriate use cases. Tailored training on specific AI tools would help councillors use them effectively and interpret outputs appropriately.

This is especially important considering the demographics of elected representatives, which skews significantly older than the overall population. Many will not be skilled or confident in the use of technology, including AI. They will need support and encouragement to enable them to effectively use the tools on offer.

Regular updates and refresher sessions will be needed to help councillors stay current as systems evolve and new capabilities emerge. Creating opportunities for councillors to share experiences and best practices with AI tools would accelerate learning across councils.

Staff capability development is equally important. Designating staff with specific responsibility for supporting AI implementation ensures appropriate expertise is available. Creating positions that bridge technical, and governance domains would help translate between technical specialists and elected members.

8.3 Development and Procurement Approaches

Strategic approaches to developing or acquiring AI tools can maximise benefits while managing costs.

Councils could pool resources to develop shared AI tools, spreading costs and leveraging collective expertise. Using and contributing to open-source AI projects would reduce costs and foster innovation while avoiding vendor lock-in.

Involving elected members in the design process would ensure tools address genuine needs and fit into existing workflows. Collaborations with universities, government agencies, or industry partners could bring additional resources and expertise.

Procurement strategies should consider a modular approach, acquiring smaller, interoperable components rather than monolithic systems to provide flexibility and reduce risk. Running small-scale pilots before full implementation would help validate benefits and identify potential issues.

Implementation approaches should be suited to councils of different sizes to ensure all can benefit. Cloud deployment could reduce infrastructure requirements, making advanced AI more accessible to smaller councils. Regional collaboration on AI implementation could help smaller councils access capabilities that would be unaffordable individually.

8.4 Integration with Existing Systems and Processes

AI must complement rather than disrupt existing governance processes.

Detailed mapping of existing decision processes would help identify where AI can add the most value without creating disruption. Ensuring AI tools integrate with existing council systems (document management, GIS, financial systems) would avoid duplicate data entry and fragmented information.

Careful planning for the transition from current to AI-supported processes should minimise disruption. Maintaining parallel conventional processes during implementation would reduce risk and build confidence.

Evaluating whether existing data structures and quality will support AI applications would help identify necessary preparatory work. Designing implementations that can grow as needs evolve and new capabilities emerge would support sustainable adoption.

Successful adoption of AI for elected representatives requires more than just technology. Thoughtful attention to governance, ethics, training, development approaches, and integration with existing processes is essential to realise potential benefits while managing risks.

9. Conclusion and Recommendations

The information asymmetry between elected members and professional staff undermines effective democratic oversight. This is not hyperbole. It is a structural reality affecting councils across New Zealand.

Without tools to help process and analyse complex information, elected representatives become dependent on staff recommendations rather than exercising robust independent judgment. The consequences appear in fiscal management, policy development, and community outcomes.

AI tools specifically designed for elected representatives offer a path to rebalance this asymmetry. They can strengthen local democracy by enabling better-informed decisions, improved scrutiny, and more responsive community engagement.

New Zealanders remain sceptical about AI, understandably so. The risks are real. Some limitations are fundamental rather than merely temporary implementation challenges.

Nevertheless, the status quo is increasingly untenable.

In an era of growing information complexity and rising community expectations, AI represents not just an opportunity but a necessity for effective democratic representation. By enhancing rather than replacing human judgment, AI tools can help ensure local democracy delivers better outcomes for communities across New Zealand.

The alternative is accepting a governance system where those elected to lead lack the tools to do so effectively.

Recommendations

1. **AI tools be designed to enhance councillors' analytical capabilities** rather than replace their judgment, with elected representatives maintaining final decision-making authority.
2. **That elected representatives develop foundational knowledge** to ensure AI serves as a cognitive extension rather than a substitute for the essential human judgment.
3. **Develop a shared learning network or resource centre** for AI in local government governance, with specific guidance on applications for elected representatives.
4. **Establish pilot programs** in selected councils to demonstrate benefits and develop implementation best practices.
5. **Create shared resources and toolkits** to make AI tools accessible to councils of all sizes, potentially through Local Government New Zealand, Taituara or central government support.
6. **Invest in councillor capability development** to ensure elected members can effectively use and interpret AI tools.
7. **Foster cross-council collaboration** on AI implementation to share costs, expertise, and lessons learned.
8. **Engage with the public** about the role of AI in supporting democratic processes to build trust and address concerns.
9. **Develop clear ethical guidelines** for AI use in democratic contexts, drawing on both international best practice and New Zealand experience.
10. **Establish evaluation frameworks** to assess the impact of AI tools on decision quality, representative effectiveness, and democratic outcomes.

Appendix – AI analysis of Wellington City Transport Plan paper to council

Phase 1: Quick Comprehension of Core Information

Please provide a summary discussing:

- The purpose of the Wellington City Transport Plan.
- The key vision statement proposed for adoption.
- Specific recommendations requiring council approval.
- Timelines and budget implications.
- Strategic alignment with council priorities.
- Compliance with legislation and regulation.

Purpose of the Wellington City Transport Plan

The Wellington City Transport Plan aims to create a sustainable, efficient, and inclusive transport system that supports the city's growth, reduces carbon emissions, and enhances the quality of life for residents. It seeks to integrate various modes of transport, including public transit, cycling, walking, and private vehicles, to provide safe and accessible options for all.

Key Vision Statement Proposed for Adoption

The plan's vision is encapsulated in the statement: *"Pōneke, the creative capital where people and nature thrive."*

This vision emphasises a city that balances urban development with environmental stewardship, ensuring that transportation initiatives contribute positively to both people and the natural environment.

Specific Recommendations Requiring Council Approval

Key recommendations presented for council approval include:

- **Integrated Transport Network:** Development of a comprehensive network that prioritises public transport, cycling, and walking, reducing reliance on private vehicles.
- **Infrastructure Investments:** Approval of funding for critical infrastructure projects, such as the enhancement of bus corridors and the expansion of cycling networks.
- **Policy Frameworks:** Adoption of policies that support sustainable transport modes, including incentives for electric vehicle usage and the implementation of congestion pricing mechanisms.
- **Community Engagement:** Initiatives to involve communities in the planning and implementation processes, ensuring that diverse perspectives are considered.

Timelines and Budget Implications

The plan outlines a phased approach over a 10-year period, with specific milestones set for the short, medium, and long term. Key financial considerations include:

- **Short-Term (Years 1–3):** Focus on planning and initiating priority projects, with an estimated budget allocation of \$150 million.

- Medium-Term (Years 4–7): Expansion of infrastructure projects and scaling up of successful pilot programs, requiring approximately \$300 million.
- Long-Term (Years 8–10): Completion of major projects and evaluation of outcomes, with projected costs around \$250 million.

Funding sources include council budgets, national transportation funds, and potential public-private partnerships.

Strategic Alignment with Council Priorities

The transport plan aligns with several of the council’s strategic priorities:

- Climate Action: Contributing to the city’s goal of becoming carbon-neutral by promoting low-emission transport options.
- Urban Growth: Supporting sustainable urban development by improving connectivity and accessibility.
- Economic Development: Enhancing the efficiency of the transport system to support local businesses and attract investment.
- Social Equity: Ensuring that transport initiatives are inclusive and accessible to all community members, regardless of socioeconomic status.

Compliance with Legislation and Regulation

The plan has been developed in accordance with relevant national and regional legislation, including:

- Land Transport Management Act 2003: Ensuring that transport planning aligns with national strategies and funding mechanisms.
- Resource Management Act 1991: Addressing environmental considerations in infrastructure development.
- Public Transport Operating Model: Complying with frameworks governing the operation and funding of public transport services.
- Additionally, the plan incorporates feedback from public consultations and adheres to guidelines set by the New Zealand Transport Agency (NZTA).

Phase 2: Risk and Flaw Identification

Please identify for me risks and flaws in the document.

1. Lack of Detailed Cost Estimates and Funding Certainty

- Flaw: While \$300,000 is allocated for plan development, no robust costings are provided for eventual infrastructure, operational, or policy implementation phases.
- Risk: Creates potential for future budget blowouts, funding shortfalls, and lack of co-funding from NZTA due to uncertainty and lack of project-level clarity.

2. Overreliance on Central Government and GWRC Cooperation

- Flaw: Execution depends heavily on strategic alignment and funding from NZTA and Greater Wellington Regional Council (GWRC), yet those partnerships remain aspirational rather than contractual.
- Risk: Divergence in priorities (e.g., central government emphasis on highway expansions) could derail key components or delay approvals and investments.

3. Timeline Uncertainty and Lack of Binding Milestones

- Flaw: The Plan aims to deliver a draft for consultation in 2026, but interim milestones (e.g. June 2025 report) are advisory, not enforceable.
- Risk: Progress could stall or slip into the next electoral cycle without accountability mechanisms, leaving councillors with limited leverage.

4. Weak Integration with Existing Modal and Corridor Plans

- Flaw: Existing plans (e.g. Bike Network, Walking Policy, Bus Priority Plan) are acknowledged but not yet coherently integrated; mode conflicts may persist.
- Risk: Incoherence at street and corridor levels could persist, reducing efficiency and community acceptance of interventions.

5. Limited Public and Stakeholder Engagement at this Stage

- Flaw: While community consultation is promised post-draft, there's no robust engagement plan for early stakeholder input to shape the plan before 2026.
- Risk: This could reduce social license, leading to backlash (as occurred with Let's Get Wellington Moving (LGWM)), undermining political support and project continuity.

6. Non-statutory Status May Undermine Influence

- Flaw: The Plan is not a statutory instrument, so it lacks legal teeth and could be deprioritised or inconsistently applied across council departments and planning instruments.
- Risk: Reduces its binding influence over developers, funders, or even council decisions (e.g. when consenting or rezoning).

7. Missing Implementation Framework

- Flaw: The document identifies "what" should be done but not "how" it will be implemented – no prioritisation tools, delivery models, or implementation governance are described in depth.
- Risk: Risk of scattershot investments or politically driven prioritisation without clear alignment to emissions, mode shift, or economic outcomes.

8. Equity and Accessibility Impacts Under-Addressed

- Flaw: While social wellbeing is listed as a priority, there is no equity impact assessment or focus on underserved communities, the disabled, or outer suburbs.
- Risk: Risk of disproportionate benefits accruing to central city users, further marginalising vulnerable communities or low-income households.

9. Climate Commitments Require Sharper Pathways

- Flaw: The Plan aligns with the city's zero-carbon goals, but lacks clear interim targets, prioritised actions, or quantified emissions reduction pathways.
- Risk: Without measurable emissions reductions by mode, the Plan may not deliver on the city's 2030 targets (57% reduction) or 2050 net zero ambition.

10. Reputational Risk from Golden Mile and LGWM Legacy

- Flaw: The Plan inherits unresolved issues from Let's Get Wellington Moving and the Golden Mile redesign. These legacy tensions remain unaddressed.
- Risk: Community scepticism may persist unless clearer accountability and benefit realisation strategies are adopted, especially for signature projects.

Phase 3: Preparation for Effective Questioning

Please prepare some questions for me to ask officers.

On Delivery and Implementation

1. What are the critical path dependencies (e.g., NZTA approvals, consents, bus strategy from GWRC) that could delay delivery?
2. What are the top three implementation risks and how are they being mitigated?
3. Will the plan be supported by binding prioritisation criteria (e.g., mode shift per dollar spent, emissions reduction impact)?
4. How will the council track implementation progress – quarterly KPIs? Annual reporting?

On Costs and Funding

5. What is the indicative cost envelope for the full 10+ year plan once projects are scoped?
6. Is there a secured funding plan beyond the \$300,000 scoping allocation? What reliance is there on future National Land Transport Plans?
7. What happens if NZTA or GWRC do not co-fund or deprioritise their support?

On Engagement and Partnerships

8. What early engagement has occurred with key partners (GWRC, NZTA, Mana Whenua, major employers, communities)?
9. Will pre-consultation engagement be conducted before the draft plan is released in 2026?
10. How does this process learn from the public trust issues experienced with Let's Get Wellington Moving?

On Vision and Outcomes

11. How is the plan expected to reduce transport-related emissions, and by how much by 2030?
12. Will there be interim milestones for emissions, safety, or modal share by 2027?
13. How does this plan address the needs of people with disabilities, older residents, and those in the outer suburbs?

On Institutional Coherence

14. How will the plan be given weight in consenting, planning, and budgeting decisions if it is non-statutory?
15. What steps are being taken to ensure internal alignment across WCC departments (planning, transport, infrastructure, etc.)?

Phase 4: Multi-Perspective Analysis

How would an economist view this document?

Economist's Perspective on the Wellington City Transport Plan

Problem Definition and Market Failure

- **Strength:** The Plan identifies clear public goods and coordination problems – congestion, emissions, and lack of network integration.
- **Concern:** The problem statement is descriptively strong but analytically thin. There's no rigorous articulation of *why* existing interventions fail, or which market failures are being addressed (e.g., externalities, incomplete information, public goods).
- **Example:** The disbanding of Let's Get Wellington Moving is noted, but there's little economic evaluation of what structural issues (e.g., institutional fragmentation, misaligned incentives) led to its failure.

2. Lack of Economic Evaluation Framework

- **Flaw:** There is no mention of cost-benefit analysis (CBA) or investment prioritisation tools.
- **Implication:** An economist would expect quantification of benefits (e.g., reduced travel times, health benefits from mode shift, emissions savings) relative to costs.
- **Observation:** The plan mentions mode shift and climate goals but doesn't present marginal abatement costs or modal VKT (vehicle kilometres travelled) impacts.

3. Unclear Economic Incentives

- **Flaw:** The plan lacks clarity on economic levers such as:
 - Road pricing mechanisms (beyond a brief nod to congestion charging).
 - Parking pricing reform.
 - Farebox recovery targets for public transport.
- **Concern:** Economists would look for demand-side tools (e.g., pricing, nudges, subsidies) alongside supply-side infrastructure investment.
- **Opportunity Missed:** A congestion pricing scheme could have been modelled with demand elasticities and welfare outcomes.

4. Uncertain Funding Model and Intergenerational Equity

- **Concern:** The plan is aspirational but omits how it will be financed long term.
 - Who pays? When? How much?
 - Is debt financing being proposed or user-pays?

- Missing: An intertemporal framework to evaluate intergenerational fairness – e.g., is the cost of decarbonising transport being equitably distributed over time and users?

5. Weak Measurement and Accountability Structures

- Flaw: No KPIs or outcome metrics provided (e.g., travel time reductions, safety improvements per \$ spent, mode shift targets).
- Concern: Without measurable outcomes, allocative efficiency and accountability are weakened. Economists would argue this makes it hard to distinguish successful from wasteful interventions.

6. Non-market Valuation Gaps

- Opportunity Missed: While the plan talks about revitalising city spaces and inviting people to linger, there's no attempt to quantify amenity or public realm benefits, e.g., through:
 - Hedonic pricing models.
 - Stated preference surveys.
 - Willingness-to-pay measures.

7. Policy Coherence with Broader Economic Goals

- Strength: The Plan aligns with wider goals like reducing emissions and supporting compact urban form – which aligns with agglomeration economics.
- Gap: An economist would ask whether it reinforces or undermines housing affordability, labour mobility, or city productivity – none of which are addressed.

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