Otago Local Government Reform

Survey Report

CENTRAL OTAGO DISTRICT COUNCIL

Clutha District Council

DUNEDIN CITY COUNCIL | kaunihera a-rohe o Ōtepoti

Otago Regional Council

QUEENSTOWN LAKES DISTRICT COUNCIL

Waitaki District Council
TE KAUNIHERA Ā ROHE O WAITAKI

INTRODUCTION

Significant change is coming for local government across New Zealand. On 5 May 2026, the Government announced its intended policy for local government reform, setting out two pathways. The Head Start pathway allows councils to develop their own proposals, with outline submissions due by 9 August 2026. The alternative is the Backstop pathway, under which the Government will legislate a solution in 2027.

Otago's councils commissioned this survey to hear directly from communities at an early stage in the reform process. The aim was to understand what matters most to people when it comes to the future of local government in our region. The survey was not about specific options or amalgamation models, it was an early opportunity for communities across Otago to have their say.

The survey ran for 19 days in May and June 2026 and received 1,820 responses from across the region. This report sets out what people told us.

ABOUT THIS SURVEY

The survey was conducted over a short timeframe and was not designed to achieve a fully representative sample. The demographic data provided by submitters shows that younger people under 30 are underrepresented, as are Otago residents of Asian origin. Given that it was an open survey, there could also be multiple entries from some submitters.

THE QUESTIONS

The survey asked the following questions:

Q1 Where do you live?
[select district and ward]

Q2 How do you feel about how local government reform might affect you and your community?
[free-text box, max 500 characters]

Q3 What is most important to you for local government?
[up to 5 choices from list]

Q4 Is there any other feedback you want to give about local government reform?
[open, free-text box, max 500 characters]

Q5 How old are you? (optional)
[select age group]

Q6 What is your ethnicity? (optional)
[multiple selection from list]

Q7 Interested in the results?
[optional email address collection for follow up]

Q1: WHERE DO YOU LIVE?

The survey received a total of 1,820 responses from across the Otago region, representing approximately 0.7% of the regional population. Central Otago and Waitaki districts returned the highest response rates relative to their populations (1.9% and 1.4% respectively), while Dunedin contributed the largest share of responses by number (34%). A small number of responses (35) came from outside the defined district areas.

	Responses	Share of responses	Population	Response rate (% of population)
Central Otago	492	27%	25,800	1.9%
Clutha	146	8%	18,800	0.8%
Dunedin	623	34%	132,800	0.5%
Queenstown Lakes	187	10%	53,800	0.3%
Waitaki	337	19%	24,600	1.4%
Other	35	2%		-
TOTAL OTAGO	**1,820**	**100%**	**255,800**	**0.7%**

Q2: HOW DO YOU FEEL REFORM MIGHT AFFECT YOU AND YOUR COMMUNITY?

About this question

Respondents were asked how they felt local government reform might affect them or their community. Responses were provided in free text and have been analysed for the main themes across the region.

The appendices on pages 9 to 19 provide a district-by-district breakdown of responses to this question, setting out the main themes for Central Otago, Clutha, Dunedin, Queenstown Lakes, and Waitaki.

What people told us

Responses to Q2 revealed a mixed picture, with genuine concerns about the implications of reform sitting alongside significant support for change in some parts of the region.

The table over the page shows the number and proportion of respondents who raised each theme. The regional results are shown in the first column. For the remainder of the table, purple text indicates where a response was significantly more likely for that district's respondents; orange text indicates where a response was significantly less likely. Raw response numbers are shown in italics.

	TOTAL OTAGO	Central Otago	Clutha	Dunedin	Q'town Lakes	Waitaki
Loss of identity	41% *729*	**49%↑** *243*	**50%↑** *73*	**38%↓** *231*	46% *82*	**30%↓** *100*
Pro-reform sentiment	37% *650*	**23%↓** *114*	**28%↓** *41*	**41%↑** *252*	42% *74*	**50%↑** *169*
Financial concerns	30% *532*	**43%↑** *211*	34% *50*	**26%↓** *156*	**15%↓** *26*	26% *89*
Wider impacts	17% *296*	19% *92*	**10%↓** *15*	**24%↑** *145*	15% *27*	**5%↓** *17*
Conditional/ anti-reform sentiment	13% *226*	**32%↑** *159*	16% *24*	**1%↓** *8*	**8%↓** *14*	**6%↓** *21*
Process concerns	10% *182*	**6%↓** *29*	4% *7*	11% *69*	10% *17*	**18%↑** *60*
District-specific concerns	4% *71*	0% -	3% *5*	**1%↓** *7*	**28%↑** *50*	3% *9*
Total responses	***1,762***	***492***	***146***	***610***	***177***	***337***

MOST RAISED: LOSS OF IDENTITY, PRO-REFORM SENTIMENT, AND FINANCIAL CONCERNS

Loss of identity was a key issue and was raised most strongly by respondents in Central Otago and Clutha districts. Primary concerns in this space relate to the loss of meaningful representation in a larger entity. Respondents want those making the decisions to have a clear connection to the area their decisions will affect.

37% of respondents expressed **pro-reform sentiment**, with Waitaki District and Dunedin City respondents significantly more likely to hold these views. Interestingly, the motivations for reform varied across local authorities. For example, support in Waitaki was driven by dissatisfaction with the current Council, while Queenstown Lakes District and Dunedin City respondents were more likely to seek efficiencies. Importantly, pro-reform sentiment was typically provisional on good implementation and the preservation of local voices.

Despite this support, respondents also raised **financial concerns** associated with reform, and these were highest among those in Central Otago. The primary worry within this theme relates to rate rises that may occur from restructuring. Other comments raised potential costs from incurring debt and infrastructure needs from other councils via amalgamation.

ALSO RAISED: WIDER IMPACTS AND CONDITIONAL/ANTI-REFORM SENTIMENT

At a slightly lower level, 17% of respondents noted concerns about the **wider impacts** of reform, and these were mostly observed in Dunedin. Specific mentions related to the risk of reduced environmental stewardship should ORC be removed. Mentions of job losses across the region and Māori representation were also common within this theme, predominantly within Dunedin.

A further 13% of respondents provided **conditional or anti-reform sentiment**, with respondents unsure which entities would merge and using Auckland City as an example of where amalgamation has underdelivered the promised services and outcomes. This theme was strongest among Central Otago respondents, reflecting concerns about amalgamation with neighbouring councils with significantly higher debt levels.

Less commonly raised: process and district-specific concerns

At a lower level, 10% of respondents expressed **process concerns**, specifically that the reform is rushed and there was insufficient time to unpack the implications. This theme was particularly strong among respondents in Waitaki, and lower among Clutha and Central Otago respondents.

There were also a number of **district-specific concerns** that respondents raised. While a number of these concerns related to environmental issues, e.g., flooding or catchment issues, Queenstown Lakes respondents specifically mentioned pressures stemming from significant population and tourism growth, and the resulting impact on local infrastructure. Key concerns were that these issues, which are already causing tension locally, will become obscured in a larger regional or rurally focused entity.

Q3: WHAT'S MOST IMPORTANT TO YOU?

About this question

Respondents were asked to select their top priorities from a list of options. Each respondent could select up to five responses. Percentages reflect the proportion of respondents who selected each option and do not sum to 100%.

What people told us

The table over the page shows the proportion of respondents in each district who selected each option. Results are ordered by the Otago-wide percentage, with **affordable rates** ranking highest (64%) and **economic growth** lowest (25%). A heat map highlights relative intensity across districts, with deeper blue shading indicating a higher number of responses.

Priority (select from list)	TOTAL OTAGO	Central Otago	Clutha	Dunedin	Q'town Lakes	Waitaki
Affordable rates	64%	70%	75%	58%	57%	64%
Quality services and infrastructure	58%	47%	54%	63%	67%	59%
Keep decisions local	54%	68%	63%	50%	48%	40%
More efficiency, less duplication	51%	52%	53%	49%	48%	53%
Rural areas and small towns are valued	40%	56%	66%	26%	31%	39%
Healthy environment	37%	28%	29%	43%	46%	35%
Urban growth is properly planned	34%	34%	18%	36%	66%	21%
Services are easy to access	30%	25%	35%	33%	18%	37%
Local character is protected	30%	37%	18%	27%	44%	22%
More transparency	28%	24%	25%	30%	27%	33%
Economic growth	25%	25%	21%	29%	11%	28%
Other	5%	4%	5%	6%	3%	5%

WHAT IS IN COMMON?

Affordable rates is the clear regional priority, chosen by nearly two thirds of respondents (64%). Below this, **quality services and infrastructure** (58%), **keep decisions local** (54%), and **more efficiency/less duplication** (51%) form a consistent second tier across the region. Beyond these four, support drops off notably - no other issue was selected by more than 40% of respondents.

WHAT IS DIFFERENT?

Variation across districts reflects local character and circumstance. **Affordable rates** is the top option in Clutha (75%) and Central Otago (70%), where it sits well above the regional average, while in Dunedin and Queenstown Lakes it ranks below **quality services and infrastructure**.

Keep decisions local is strongly valued in Central Otago (68%) and Clutha (63%) but is a lower priority in Waitaki (40%), Queenstown Lakes (48%) and Dunedin (50%). **Rural areas and small towns are valued** shows the sharpest geographic divide – selected by 56% in Central Otago and 66% in Clutha, compared to 26% in Dunedin.

Queenstown Lakes stands apart on **urban growth is properly planned** (66%), reflecting the district's distinctive development pressures. The district also had a high number of respondents asking that **local character is protected** (44%).

Healthy environment and **economic growth** show less variation across the region, though Queenstown Lakes records the lowest selection rate for economic growth (11%) while Dunedin records the highest (29%).

Q4: ANY OTHER FEEDBACK ON LOCAL GOVERNMENT REFORM?

About this question

Respondents were provided with an option to include any additional feedback about local government reform. The responses were captured in open text format and then categorised into themes.

A significant proportion of the feedback repeated or reinforced concepts that were established in Q2 of the survey. The table below focuses on the new themes that emerged from Q4.

What people told us

Six new themes emerged from Q4 responses. The table below shows the number and proportion of respondents who raised each theme. The regional results are shown in the first column. For the remainder of the table, purple text indicates where a response was significantly more likely for that district's respondents; orange indicates where a response was significantly less likely. Raw response numbers are shown in italics.

	TOTAL OTAGO	Central Otago	Clutha	Dunedin	Q'town Lakes	Waitaki
Transparency/accountability	14% *153*	9%↓ *24*	9% *7*	19%↑ *62*	9% *10*	15% *50*
Environmental priorities and iwi involvement	9% *105*	11% *29*	4% *3*	14%↑ *45*	14% *16*	4%↓ *12*
Need consultation/vote	8% *90*	8% *20*	7% *5*	8% *27*	5% *6*	10% *32*
Core services only, not frills	8% *88*	9% *23*	12% *9*	11% *35*	5% *6*	5%↓ *15*
Alternative boundaries/models	11% *124*	10% *26*	9% *7*	12% *39*	11% *12*	12% *40*
Keep regional functions	3% *37*	3% *8*	1% *1*	5%↑ *17*	4% *4*	2% *7*

Transparency and accountability

Respondents raised concerns about the need for transparency and accountability in the reform process, particularly with regard to contracts and outcomes. This was largely driven by frustration with perceptions of poor transparency in current local government settings, and was particularly strong among Dunedin City respondents.

Environmental priorities and iwi involvement

Respondents called for the prioritisation of environmental and iwi needs in any reform, alongside genuinely capturing the voice and desires of communities. This was particularly strong among Dunedin City respondents, who specifically called for treaty obligations to be upheld.

Need for consultation and/or Referendum

Some respondents felt that communities should have a direct say in reform through formal consultation or a public vote before any changes are made.

Core services only

There was a strong sense among some respondents that reform should concentrate on the basics – roads, water, waste, and infrastructure – through tight and focused spending, rather than expanding council functions.

Alternative boundaries and models

Some respondents referred to alternative structural arrangements, including boundaries that follow catchments rather than existing council lines, and other models that do not simply replicate current structures at a larger scale.

Retain regional functions

A smaller number of respondents emphasised the importance of retaining dedicated regional functions, particularly environmental oversight, within any reformed structure.

DEMOGRAPHICS

Age data was collected through an optional question, completed by 84% of respondents. The results show the survey skewed towards older residents — young people under 30 made up just 5% of submitters but 38% of the Otago population.

	TOTAL OTAGO	*OTAGO (Census 2023)*	Central Otago	Clutha	Dunedin	Q'town Lakes	Waitaki
0-14 years	0%	*16%*	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
15-29 years	5%	*22%*	3%	3%	6%	1%	8%
30-64 years	64%	*44%*	64%	63%	70%	61%	55%
65 years plus	32%	*18%*	33%	34%	24%	38%	38%

Ethnicity data was also collected through an optional question, with the same 84% completion rate. Pākehā / NZ Europeans were slightly over-represented, while residents who identify with minority ethnicities were generally under-represented. This was especially true for Asian ethnicities, who made up just 2% of submitters against 9% of the Otago population.

	TOTAL OTAGO	*OTAGO (Census 2023)*	Central Otago	Clutha	Dunedin	Q'town Lakes	Waitaki
European	89%	*85%*	92%	85%	91%	93%	79%
Māori	8%	*10%*	7%	10%	9%	3%	6%
Asian	2%	*9%*	1%	2%	2%	2%	4%
Pacific Peoples	2%	*3%*	1%	2%	2%	1%	7%
MELAA	1%	*2%*	1%	1%	1%	2%	2%
Other ethnicity	7%	*1%*	7%	10%	8%	3%	7%

DISTRICT APPENDICES

The following appendices provide additional district-level detail on responses to **Q2 How do you feel about how local government reform might affect you and your community?** The appendices set out the key themes and illustrative quotes for each district, complementing the regional comparison table in the main body of the report.

District-level data for Q3 and Q4 is contained in the main body of the report.

CENTRAL OTAGO DISTRICT

A total of 492 respondents from Central Otago provided a response to the question about how local government reform might affect them or their community. These responses were coded into themes and have been shown below.

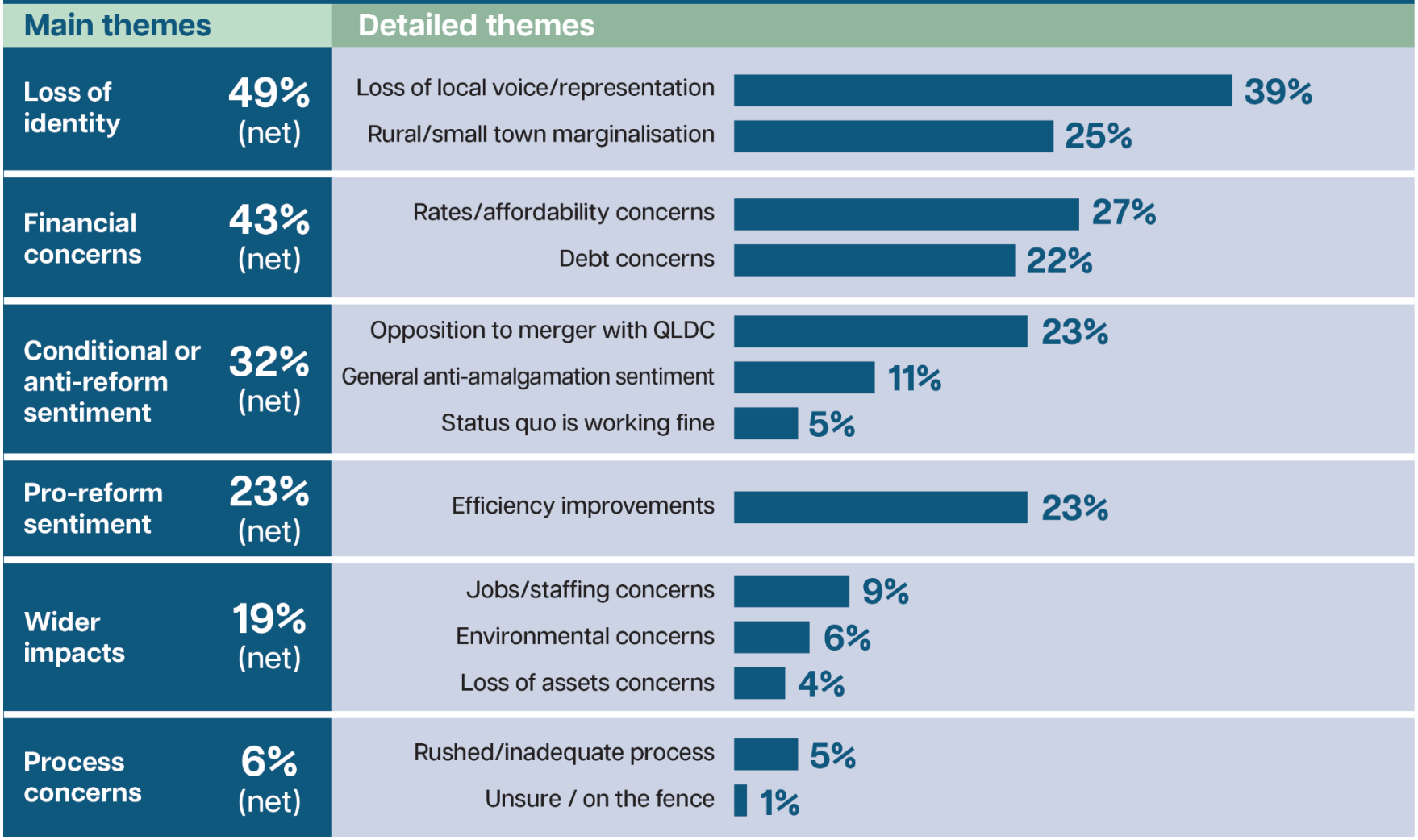
The primary concern among Central Otago respondents related to a **loss of identity**, either through local representation or the marginalisation of small and rural towns. Some expressed that under a larger entity, local decisions will be made by people distant from the community, local knowledge will be lost, and larger centres will overshadow Central Otago's specific needs.

Financial concerns were also mentioned, with concerns around rate increases, affordability, and the challenge of absorbing debt from neighbouring councils. While these comments were framed around QLDC, DCC was also mentioned by some. CODC's comparatively strong financial position is seen as something to protect. The concern is not only about current rates but about future liability.

Building on the above point were the concerns around **amalgamation with QLDC** specifically, largely driven by concerns about debt, infrastructure failures (particularly wastewater), and poor governance. Some expanded this concern to the wider amalgamation environment, reinforcing the loss of local identity, reduced representation, and scepticism about proposed efficiencies that do not eventuate.

Despite the above concerns, some respondents also held a positive view and spoke of **potential efficiency gains** that could be made through amalgamation. Respondents mentioned benefits such as reduced duplication, shared expertise, and better coordination. It should be noted that these comments were often conditional on the ability to keep a local voice within decisions.

Central Otago



Note: 'net' results ensure that each respondent is only counted once. Some may have provided more than one response within a theme.

CLUTHA DISTRICT

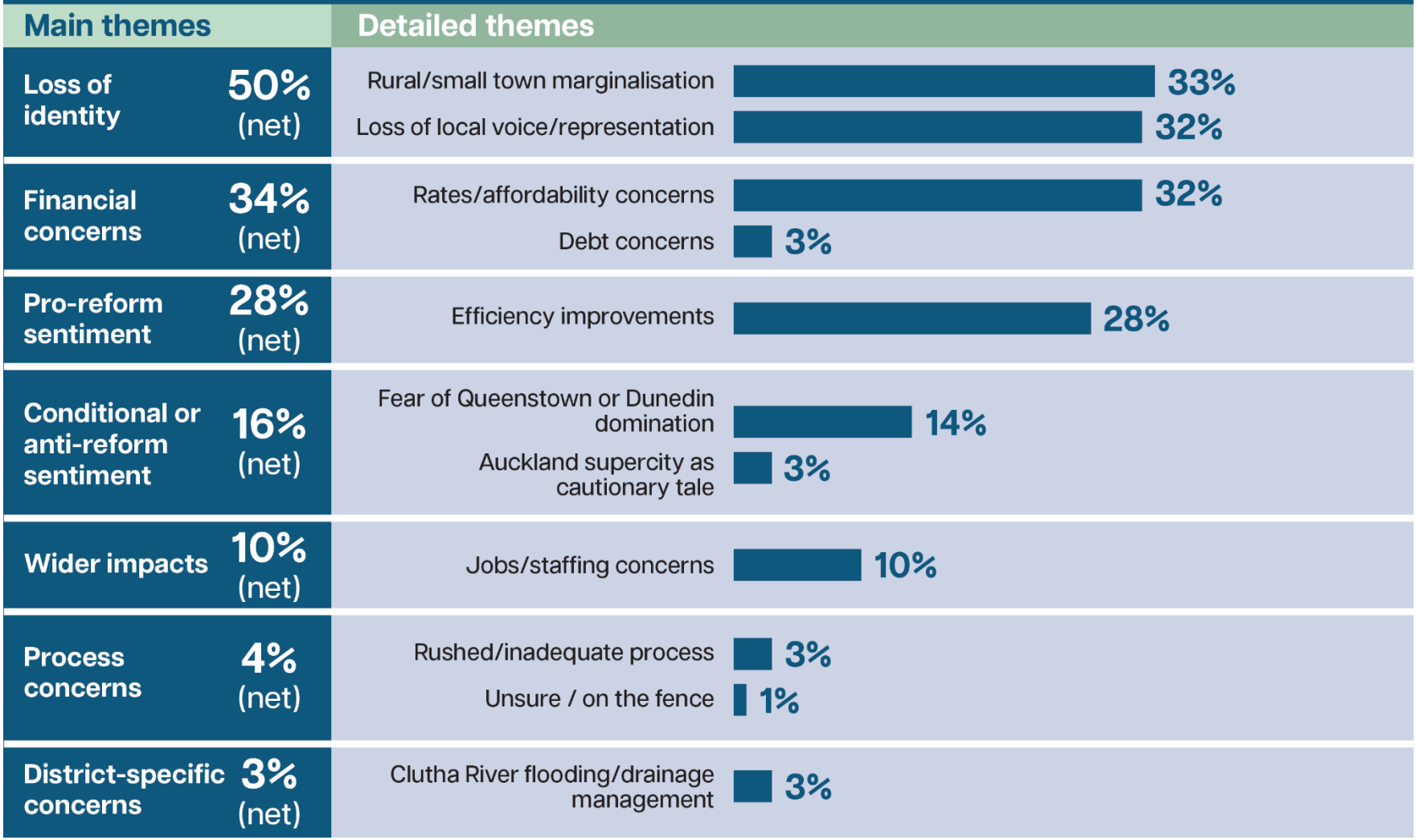
A total of 146 respondents from Clutha provided a response to the question about how local government reform might affect them or their community. These responses were coded into themes and have been shown below.

A significant theme among these respondents was the **loss of identity**, with a net 50% of respondents mentioning this element. There was particular concern about the impact on small and rural communities, with mentions of Lawrence, Tapanui, Kaitangata, Clinton, and Milton noted by respondents. Some respondents reflected on the previous amalgamations and noted that the local knowledge and rural understanding were lost through this process; there are concerns that this would be further diluted should a wider amalgamation occur.

Another notable mention within the responses from Clutha residents was **financial concerns**. Respondents noted current rate levels, and there is an apprehension that reform will add costs rather than reduce them. Affordability was particularly noted as relevant for some of the very small rural towns where increasing rates were a threat to property ownership and small-town viability.

Smaller mentions were also made of concerns of domination of other councils, job losses, and a rushed process. However, 28% of Clutha respondents appeared **supportive of the reform** process, with respondents citing that the current Clutha District Council staff numbers have increased considerably over time. As with other districts, the positive views of reform are conditional on how the reform is implemented and the retention of a local connection.

Clutha



Note: 'net' results ensure that each respondent is only counted once. Some may have provided more than one response within a theme.

DUNEDIN CITY

A total of 610 respondents from Dunedin City provided a response to the question about how local government reform might affect them or their community. These responses were coded into themes and have been shown below.

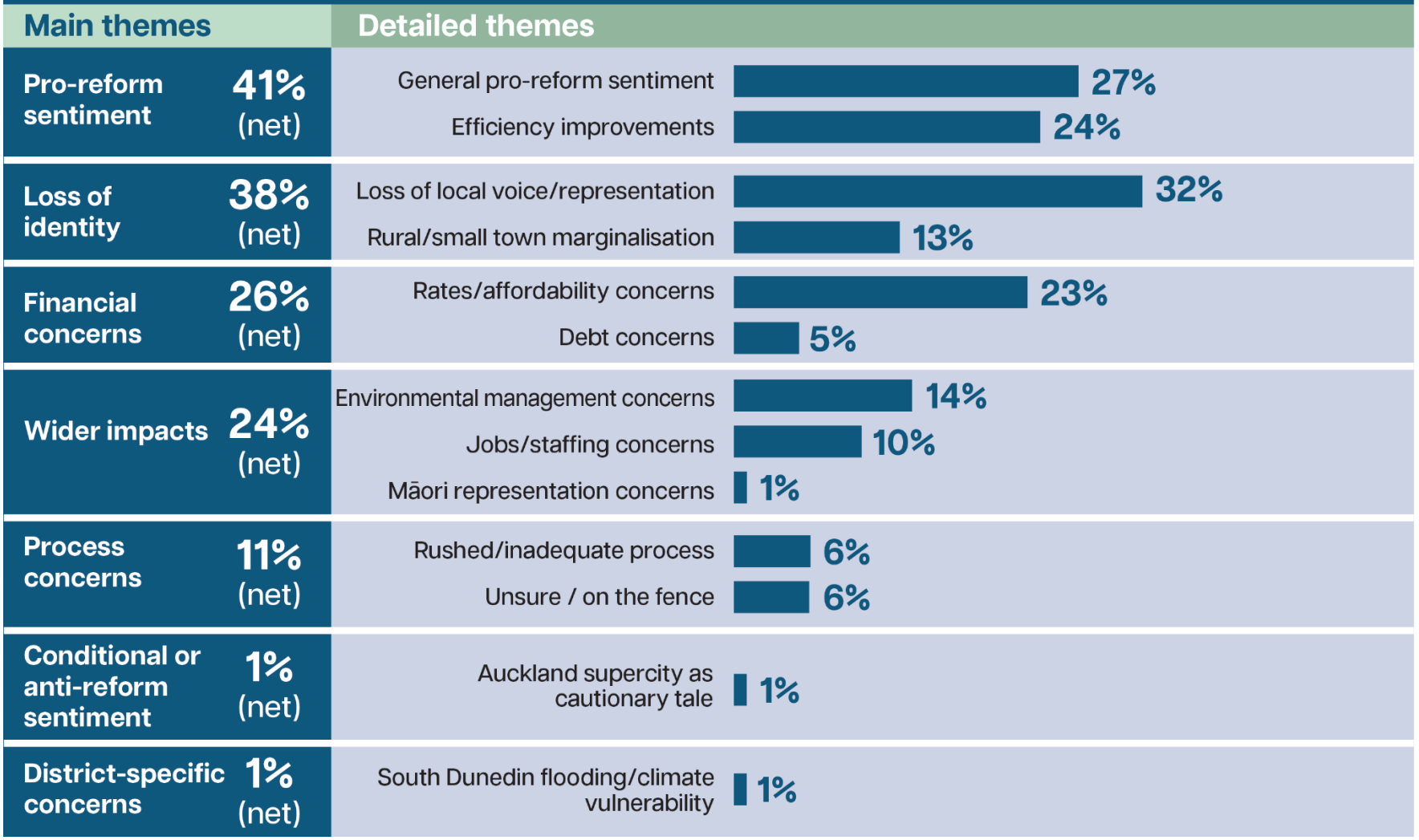
Pro-reform sentiment was a strong theme for Dunedin, with a net 41% of respondents making a comment aligned with this theme. These views were driven by concerns that the current DCC and ORC structure is too large, wasteful, and out of touch.

However, there was also concern among Dunedin respondents that there would be a **loss of identity,** local voice and representation, particularly for smaller communities. Respondents raised concerns about the special character of the city, and worried that the needs of its residents may be forgotten within a larger regional entities.

Financial concerns were also apparent, especially relating to rate rises. Some suggested that reform would fail to reduce rates or would actively increase them as the Dunedin area absorbs other councils' infrastructure backlogs, particularly from Waitaki and Queenstown Lakes.

Dunedin respondents also noted **wider concerns** about the potential loss of environmental protection, job losses, and poorer representation of Māori. This element is specifically linked to the removal of environmental oversight through abolishing ORC. While some see a merged council as an opportunity for better catchment-scale management, more see it as a threat to specialised environmental functions.

Dunedin



Note: 'net' results ensure that each respondent is only counted once. Some may have provided more than one response within a theme.

QUEENSTOWN LAKES DISTRICT

A total of 177 respondents from Queenstown Lakes provided a response to the question about how local government reform might affect them or their community. These responses were coded into themes and have been shown below.

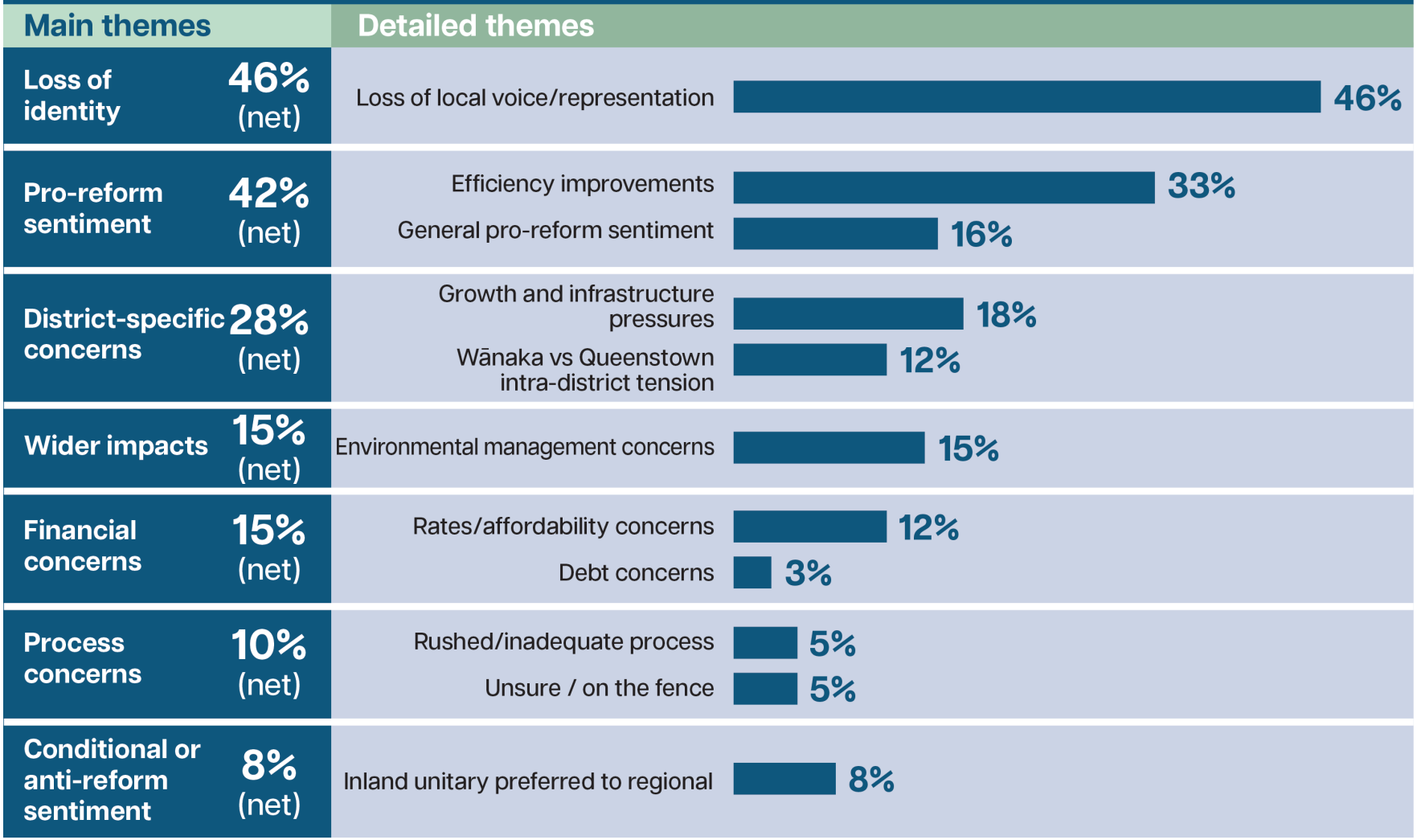
One of the strongest themes from Queenstown Lakes respondents was around the **loss of identity** and local voice within a larger entity. This concern was framed as particularly important given the speed and scale of growth the district is currently facing. Specifically, respondents noted that long-term decisions about land, housing, and local infrastructure will require input from the communities that are most closely affected.

Another significant theme was **pro-reform sentiment**. In part, this openness was driven by a feeling that reform would bring efficiency to the local government sector. However, others were motivated to support reform due to holding poor views of the current local council.

Queenstown Lakes respondents were also more likely than other districts to raise **district-specific issues**. Key among these were the unique pressures that the district faces through population and tourism growth. Respondents want to see these specific pressures reflected and considered in the reform, not simply 'averaged out' among the larger rural areas within the region.

Respondents also raised concerns about the representation and delivery of the needs of specific communities within the district. Wanaka and Upper Clutha respondents report already feeling marginalised within the QLDC structure, and reform is seen as likely to augment this issue further.

Queenstown Lakes



Note: ‘net’ results ensure that each respondent is only counted once. Some may have provided more than one response within a theme.

WAITAKI DISTRICT

A total of 337 respondents from Waitaki provided a response to the question about how local government reform might affect them or their community. These responses were coded into groups after the data collection period and have been shown below.

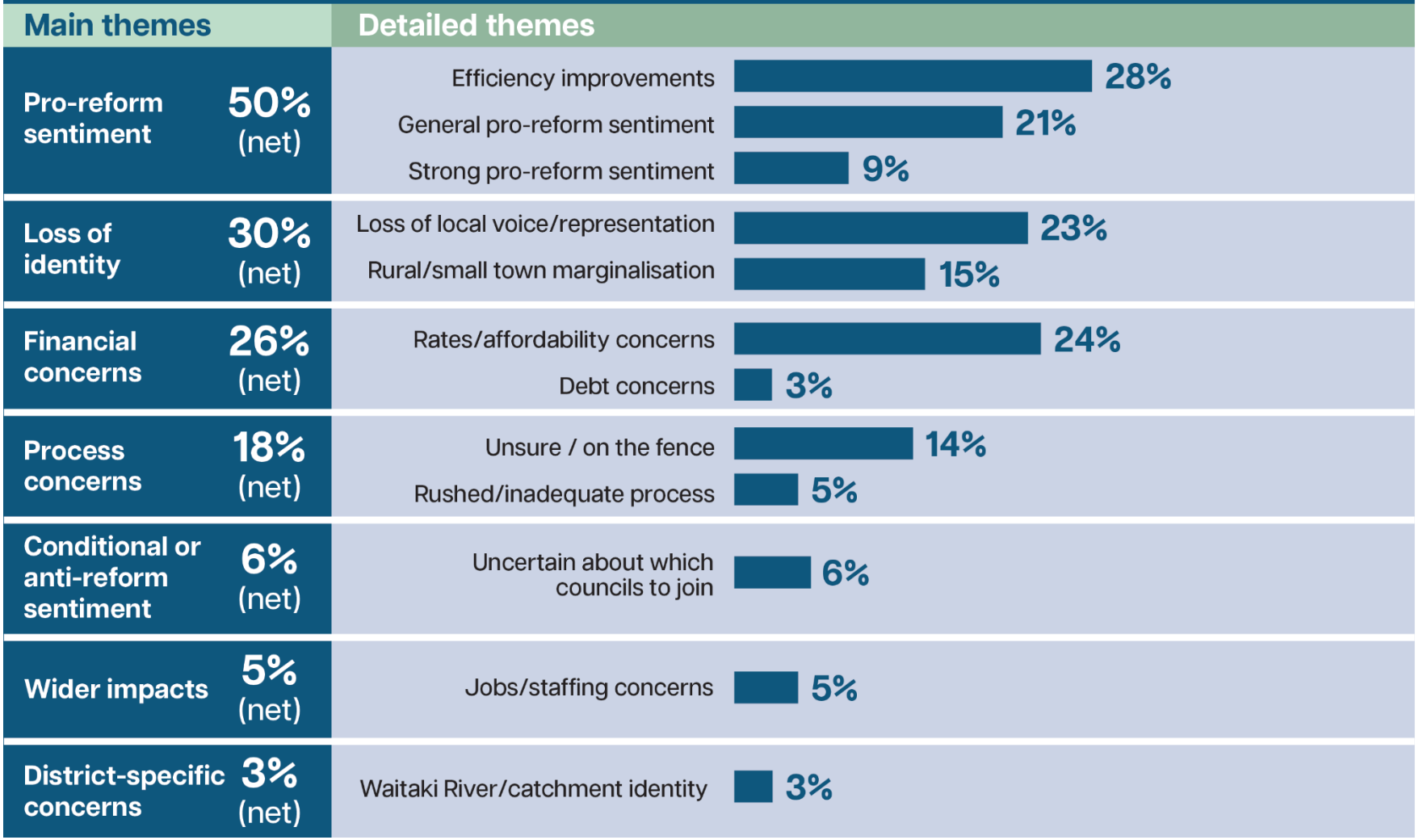
Waitaki respondents appeared to be the most **pro-reform**, with a net 50% viewing reform in a positive light. This thinking was underpinned by a desire for greater efficiency and low levels of confidence in the current council.

However, despite the desire for a change, several comments noted concerns about a **loss of identity**, particularly for some of the very small communities which already struggle to gain traction in the current environment, e.g., Waihemo, Palmerston, Kakanui, or Otematata.

Another significant concern for these respondents was the **financial concerns** that could arise through reform. Current rates increases were frequently noted, with deep concerns that further rate increases through reform would make this untenable for people in the district, with specific mentions of the effects for those on fixed incomes.

Several respondents noted that they were unsure of what reform would bring and felt the process was rushed. A comment that was unique to Waitaki was **uncertainty about which councils to join**, i.e., Otago, South Canterbury or Dunedin. Strong views existed in favour of different options, with some seeing stronger links with Dunedin (particularly those with close geographical proximity), others seeing Timaru, Mackenzie, or Waimate as culturally and geographically more compatible.

Waitaki



Note: 'net' results ensure that each respondent is only counted once. Some may have provided more than one response within a theme.