

Calls for ‘department for local government’ to oversee councils



Peter Boshier, who was Chief Ombudsman from 2015 to March this year, appeared before the governance select committee on Tuesday. ROBERT KITCHIN / THE POST

Former Chief Ombudsman Peter Boshier is calling for the creation of a new “department for local government” to manage the relationship between councils and central government, saying it is complicated, difficult and not working.

Boshier, who appeared before the governance select committee on Tuesday, said the oversight now was not “up to it”. Councils were supposed to be a bastion of democracy, but “they’re not achieving this at the moment”.

“I had situations as Chief Ombudsman where the mayor and the chief executive did not communicate,” said Boshier, who held the role from 2015 to March this year.

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The Department of Internal Affairs leads the government’s relationship with local government. Boshier said this was an uncomfortable fit.

“I believe there should be a brand new department created called the department for local government. It should have a minister, and it should be answerable to the minister.

“Local Government New Zealand and the Local Government Commission are handy, but they are not up to the task.”

Boshier wanted those elected to local body roles to undergo mandatory training and induction on what government means and local government.

The new body should have a complaint resolution function with mediation and, if necessary, arbitration functions to settle disputes.

“The fourth thing is where Code of Conduct breaches occur, there should be ability of this department, I’m suggesting, to rule on Code of Conduct breaches and where necessary, suspend the offender.

“I’m saying all of this because it’s really a topical at the moment.”

Boshier said it could be difficult to take action when a council became dysfunctional.

“There are some steps available to central government such as the appointment of an observer or the replacement of a council with commissioners ... but that tends to be used as a last resort and only after ministerial intervention.”

The agency he suggested would be set up like the Public Service Commission, “with the ability to provide early, proactive support for local government and effective advice to ministers when issues arise”.

Local Government Minister Simon Watts would not comment on the proposal, but Labour local Government spokesperson Tangi Utikere said he had “some concerns around the role within which government would play overseeing this”.

“There absolutely needs to be a connection between central government and local government, but the other side of that is ensuring that local democracy and decision making is still protected.”

Wellington mayor Tory Whanau said she supported the idea.

Local Government New Zealand president Sam Broughton was not available for comment.

Earlier this month, Local Government New Zealand passed a remit from Tauranga City Council to review local government’s governance arrangements.