

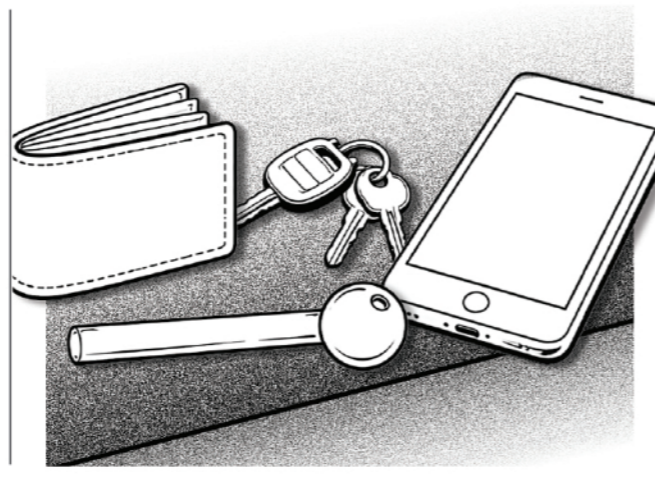
TE UPOKO O TE IKA

The Post Weekend

Your Weekend magazine
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In 2019 the New Zealand Festival of the Arts included MAM, from Irish choreographer Michael Keegan-Dolan. This year, some arts lovers say there has not been enough international content.

The problem with the capital's arts festival

Call for rethink of city's premier event, with critics saying it has lost its buzz

ARTS
Sarah Catherall

The Aotearoa Festival of the Arts is under attack, with Wellington mayor Andrew Little and councillor Nicola Young questioning why the biennial event this year had a smaller programme, lacking the buzz of previous years.

Little attended a few festival events between February 24 and March 15 that he enjoyed, but said that for Wellington to retain its status as the cultural capital of New Zealand, it needed an iconic arts festival.

"When I go back to the arts festivals from the late 80s and 90s, everyone knew the festival was on and you saw it around town. There were big events – and anchor events that drew people in. I didn't see any of that sort of stuff [this year]. I'm keen to talk to the organisers about what their reflections are, what we can do better, what more might need to happen."

Arts charity Tawhiri gets \$1.45 million in ratepayer funding each year (via WellingtonNZ) to run the festival, which Young said was the council's biggest spend on arts and culture in the city. That makes up about 40% of the festival's overall income, although the festival board did not disclose its budget.

Ratepayers deserved to know that money was being well spent, Young said, but there were gripes that this year's programme was a disappointment, lacking the international content, free events, visibility and hype of previous festivals. She canvassed patrons and has heard concerns.



Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds were part of this year's festival and exclusive to Wellington. BRUCE MACKAY/THE POST

"The overall feeling is that the festival has lost its way. It's been like a tyre slowly losing air. It used to be an international festival and the city really burst into life."

Young was a supporter of the Tawhiri Warehouse (owned by the council and leased by the festival board), but said the location of many of the events there was disappointing because it took the buzz away from the central city. In 2020, waka came into the harbour, luring 35,000 people to

watch the festival opening, and in years before that, the Spiegel tent was a focal point in Frank Kitts Park.

Little met with the Tawhiri board this week and said he would be working on ways to get the festival more support, noting the board did not ask for more money.

Tawhiri board chairperson Sarah Kemp said that, like other arts organisations, the festival was navigating challenging times and audiences were also changing.

Discussions with funders were a "constructive and ongoing conversation".

Festival chief executive Angela Green pointed to funding pressures and a lack of corporate and public money for the reduced international content and beacon events. Audience satisfaction surveys showed 95% of ticket buyers were happy with the programme and 97% would attend again.

Local government funding makes up 40% of the budget, but that had stayed the same for 12 years – declining in real terms thanks to inflation. But it cost about three times as much to put on a show as a few years ago, Green said.

"We would have loved to have had a big flashy outdoor spectacle event like we've been able to do in the past, or a big ticket event like we did in the last festival such as Light Cycles.

"The reason is that we didn't do that is not to do with ambition or desire, but simply to do with resources and access to additional funding and sponsorship."

She also argued local artists were front and centre in the festival programme, but the co-directors also try to bring in international works which wouldn't normally come to Wellington.

This year the international star Khalid Abdalla, of *The Crown*, brought his gripping solo show, *Nowhere*, and Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds was part of the festival and exclusive to Wellington, thanks to a long relationship with the promoter, she says.

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Wellington's next chapter starts now

Capital Crossroads is a four-part series examining the pressures facing Wellington – and what it will take for the capital to thrive again. **Deborah Morris** reports.



The Wellington space station from design firm Warren and Mahoney, who reimagined what Wellington might look like in the future and asked their graduates to write a postcard from the future and then AI generated the images.

We all know what's going on with Wellington.

The complaints are heard regularly and loudly. What we hear is our rates are too high (both residential and commercial), our infrastructure is a mess, our businesses are closing.

And yet here we still live.

International urban planning expert Alain Bertaud's most often repeated message was that cities were about what people want.

He used the reopened library as an example. "The core of a city is not the number of jobs. It's amenities, like the museum, the library, cafes."

There are different ways of measuring if a city is liveable. Studies by groups like the World Economic Forum use measures like affordability, others measure access to needed services, and some quality of life.

But on the whole the factors are stability, infrastructure, healthcare, education and culture and environment.

The Wellington City Council's residents monitoring survey shows most of us think Wellington is still a good place to live.

But should we be satisfied with that? Shouldn't we dream more?

The Global Cities Index lists Wellington ranked 78th in the world overall, highest in governance and environment and weakest in economy. Auckland came in at 85.

Last year Australasian architecture firm Warren and Mahoney's Wellington office got their graduates to write a love letter to the city and dream big about what we could have. Their ideas, brought to life by AI-generated images were amazing – a spaceport at the airport, salt water baths on the waterfront not far from a film museum.

on the cards.

As of February 2026, the Greater Wellington Regional Council and several local mayors have formed a regional joint working group to investigate "Regional Reorganisation Plans". This was sparked by central government reforms aimed at simplifying local governance.

There are benefits to amalgamating. More coordination and better strategic planning being the most obvious.

It comes ahead of plans by the Government to get rid of regional councils.

Kapiti is not in favour while Upper Hutt has taken a cautious approach.

Porirua's mayor Anita Baker is a supporter but she is equally blunt.

"If Wellington fails, we all fail."

There is already so much interconnection with residents of the outlying cities working in town but playing sport in Porirua, shopping in Lower Hutt.

She says it makes economic sense to have one strong voice for government funding rather than everyone competing against each other.

It would also cut out several layers of the councils that we are paying for. That's money that could be spent somewhere else.

"We already get together for things like emergency management. Why shouldn't we do that for everything?" she asks.

A referendum would need to be held in the next local body elections.

But to be clear, amalgamation won't mean your rates go down or change how you get to work. It just means a more coordinated approach to the region.

First Retail's Chris Wilkinson doesn't think there is anything inherently wrong with Wellington but says the city has forgotten how to champion itself.

"I think people haven't felt proud of Wellington for a while."

Wilkinson said Wellington was no different from any city the world over, they all have problems that need addressing.

"The city has a strong creative sector and that needs to be brought to the fore again."

Areas like Te Aro and Courtenay Place needed some work.

"There is a lot in the suburbs. It's the city that could do with some love."

Precincts are also a good idea. Little areas that cater to a particular type of business that cluster together.

Wilkinson said the places re-opening like the Civic Square and the library brought new life to those areas and Courtenay Place would benefit from the Reading complex being revitalised.

Meanwhile, Vision for Wellington's findings also showed we wanted safety, affordability and public transport. Top priorities were maintaining and renewing core infrastructure at 93%, safety in the city on 88% and affordability with 86%. That was followed by stronger leadership on 83%.

Some of it was basics – working lights, maintained parks, eliminate graffiti – while some would need work – free weekend parking, empty spaces used as pop-ups like temporary art galleries.

The ideas that have been around for a while have included huge proposals like a second Mt Victoria tunnel or the Golden Mile project. We have lots and lots of ideas. What we don't have is progress.

What will make the difference?

Amalgamation of the councils – a supercity made up Wellington, Porirua, Lower Hutt and Upper Hutt and the regional council is

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