

MEDIA RELEASE

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Hutt City Council's Kaanihi Butler-Hare named Emerging Leader of the Year

Hutt City Council's Kaanihi Butler-Hare has been named the recipient of the 2026 Sheffield Emerging Leader of the Year Award at the LGFA Taituarā Local Government Excellence Awards.

The Sheffield Emerging Leader of the Year Award recognises an up-and-coming leader with a proven track record of designing and delivering innovative and successful programmes, projects, processes or practices that have a clear impact on their community. As part of the award, the recipient will travel to the United States to attend the 2026 ICMA Conference in Long Beach, California.

Kaanihi, who is Temuaki Māori – Chief Māori Officer at Hutt City Council, was recognised for his leadership grounded in tikanga, community and te ao Māori, and for delivering transformational outcomes both within council and across the wider community.

The judges described Kaanihi as representing "the pinnacle of next-generation bicultural leadership".

“Moving between spaces with professionalism, humility, and compassion, his intrinsic application of Māori knowledge systems has delivered transformative, sector-leading successes that resonate deeply across his council, the community, and the wider region,” the judges said.

Among his achievements, Kaanihi played a key role in a COVID-19 response that achieved some of the highest vaccination rates in the country. He also initiated Hutt City Council’s first Māori strategy, revitalised relationships with mana whenua through Memoranda of Understanding, and established an iwi advisory group that brings together elected members, senior staff and iwi leaders.

The judges said Kaanihi's approach to leadership reflected a commitment to collective responsibility and intergenerational wellbeing.

“Grounded in the wisdom of kaumātua and kuia, Kaanihi views leadership not as a pursuit of personal recognition, but as a collective responsibility handed down through generations,” they said.



“In uplifting Te Tiriti o Waitangi to drive better outcomes for iwi, hapori Māori, and everyone in Te Awa Kairangi ki tai, he exemplifies the exact potential, vision, and heart required of the future leaders of our local government sector.”

The judges also awarded a Highly Commended recognition to Jessica Papple, Marketing Manager at Palmerston North City Council.

In just six years, Jessica has secured three promotions and now leads a team of 15. She was recognised for her contribution to economic development, including securing major conferences and millions of dollars for the local economy, alongside leading a refreshed city brand and an award-winning Summer Water Use campaign. The judges also highlighted her innovative use of AI workflows and her practical, values-led commitment to te ao Māori.

The judges said Jessica consistently demonstrated leadership beyond her formal responsibilities.

“Demonstrating dedication far beyond her core responsibilities, she has boosted both staff satisfaction and ratepayer value. She is a powerhouse professional with a bright, long-term career ahead in local government leadership.”

About the LGFA Taituarā Local Government Excellence Awards

The LGFA Taituarā Local Government Excellence Awards showcase and celebrate outstanding programmes, projects, partnerships and initiatives from across New Zealand’s local government sector. The awards recognise excellence, innovation and leadership that deliver positive outcomes for communities and create learnings that can be shared across the sector. The awards are hosted annually by Taituarā – Local Government Professionals Aotearoa.

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