

7.3 Local Government Reform: Headstart Pathway Update for Whanganui District

Report Type Decision Report

SUMMARY

The purpose of this report is to present an overview of the programme approach that Council is taking in response to the Head Start announcement from central Government, relating to the Simplifying Local Government reform.

Secondly, to seek feedback and formal endorsement that Council intends to participate in the Headstart Pathway, noting the governments requirement to finalise a proposal by 9 August 2026.

OFFICER RECOMMENDATION

That Council:

- a. **Receives the report** Local Government Reform: Headstart Pathway Update for Whanganui District.
- b. Formally **agrees** to participate in the Headstart Pathway programme, noting that any proposal will be presented for approval to this before its submission.
- c. **Notes** that agreeing to participate in the Headstart Pathway programme, does not commit Council to submitting a proposal.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Reform Context

In November 2025, the government consulted on a draft proposal that would replace regional councillors with a group made up of a region's Mayors to simplify local government, this is referred to as the Simplifying Local Government [proposal](#).

Through the subsequent submission process government have noted that councils told them that they wanted greater flexibility, including the ability to shape future governance arrangements themselves, and where they are ready, to move more quickly.

On [5 May 2026](#) the Ministers for Local Government and RMA Reform jointly announced a short window to put forward unitary local government amalgamation proposals under what has been called the 'Head Start Pathway.' The Head Start pathway is a direct response to the submission feedback. More detail can be found in the associated [Cabinet paper](#).

[Head Start](#) pathway is a voluntary, streamlined option for councils that want to lead the transition early. It is intended to enable locally led solutions, so councils can set their own direction and pace rather than waiting for the wider reform settings to apply.

Essentially councils which submit proposals before 9 August 2026 have a fast-track process to establishing new governance arrangements to be implemented for the 2028 elections.

To be eligible proposals must include two or more territorial and/or unitary authorities (including cross-boundary groupings) if they represent a majority of either the:

- directly affected territorial authorities, or

- population across directly affected areas.

Proposals cannot be submitted by minority groupings, individual territorial authorities or unitary authorities, regional councils, individuals or other organisations.

The announcement also confirmed the dissolution of regional councils at the 2028 local government elections.

Guidance on what is required as a part of an outline proposal submitted under the 'Head Start Pathway' is limited. The [Headstart Pathway DIA Policy Document](#) sets out the following criteria that proposals will be assessed against:

- **Deliverability:** Proposals are realistic and demonstrate how new arrangements can be implemented in a timely manner.
- **Supports the new planning system:** Shows clear support for implementing the new planning system – including progress on spatial and natural environment plan development – and avoids or minimises disruption to that work.
- **Simplifies local governance:** Proposes more efficient regional governance arrangements, consolidating decision-making and improving alignment between a region's councils.
- **Economies of scale:** Supports regional strategic planning and effective delivery of key regional functions (such as transport and catchment management), and demonstrates responsible and affordable asset management, infrastructure investment, and service delivery.
- **Maintains local voice:** Demonstrates fair and effective representation for communities of interest and how decisions will be made at the local level, balancing urban and rural interests.

Those councils that do not opt in via the Head Start pathway will not face mandatory change until after the end of the 2028 local elections – this is referred to as the **Back Stop** approach.

The government has been clear that regional governance needs to be simpler and more effective over time. We are being asked to focus on creating unitary authorities – this means combining regional and city or district council functions into one organisation.

In parallel with this reform there is the development and delivery of the new planning system.

To date Council have informally noted their intent to participate in the Headstart Pathway programme, and in good faith Officers have progressed work. Officers now seek formal endorsement of the Councils intent to participate in the programme.

Our Whanganui approach

Our community will be at the heart of this work. What this means is that we will talk about identity, relationships, representation, service delivery and how we protect and advance the wellbeing of Whanganui for today and the future. These discussions will be anchored in a Te Awa Tupua way of working and the relational approach and responsibilities that come with that.

More specifically the things that we will consider are:

- Regional relationships
 - Alignment with neighbouring councils and organisations
 - Working on avoiding duplication or fragmentation
- Rural and provincial context
 - We cover a large geographical area now with spread-out communities
 - Local identity and representation are important
 - Accessibility to services across the district/region

- Community voice
 - Meeting our communities' expectations of being involved early and in meaningful ways
 - Striking the balance between efficiency and local connections.

This approach has been heavily embedded early in a relational approach, which will include engagement across iwi, hapu, PSGE's and Marae through Te Kopuka as vehicle to collaborate. Officers note that this approach through Te Kopuka does not take away from the need to engage directly with iwi and settlement partners.

Programme view

Early work has broken the programme into four key phases as noted below, with timeframes associated with each phase:

Phase one: Establishment and planning (May to June) project establishment, including confirming project governance, setting up the workspace, agreeing communications protocols, identifying facilitators, and pulling together the baseline data, budget considerations, and political advice.

Phase Two: Options development (late May – mid July) is where guiding principles will be defined, identify communities of interest, and develop and assess options (that will be tested against the government's criteria).

Phase Three: Assessment and Engagement (June – early July) with community, sector, and iwi engagement used to test and refine options, understand implications, and build an informed preferred direction.

Phase Four: Political consideration and proposal (late June – early August) briefing elected members, drafting and confirming proposal, and submitting the proposal.

Community and stakeholder engagement strategy

Community and stakeholder engagement has started. Key activities to date include:

- Initial conversations with Gerrad Albert, Principal Advisor, Ngā Tāngata Tiaki o Whanganui, regarding Hapu/Iwi involvement.
- Community panel discussion held on 9 June 2026, providing an early opportunity to introduce the Head Start process, gather initial community views, and identify key questions and concerns.
- Community survey was launched on 8 June to gather the communities understanding of the Head Start Pathway and identify what the values and principles the community find important.
- Social media content is underway to increase awareness of the Head Start programme, survey, and engagement opportunities.

The engagement strategy is built around the four phases of the programme, and is as follows:

1. Establishment and Planning

Aim: Build awareness, trust, and a shared understanding of the process.

Early engagement (panel discussion, iwi/hapu discussions) is used to:

- Introduce the Head Start Pathway
- Identify the values and priorities of the community to incorporate into options development
- Identify concerns of the public and address questions.

Outcome: A clear engagement approach, early insights, and a foundation for meaningful participation.

2. Options Development

Aim: Work with communities, stakeholders, and experts to develop and test options.

Engagement is targeted and interactive, including:

- Facilitated workshops
- Stakeholder and sector sessions
- Regional partner discussions.

Activities focus on testing:

- Key principles (efficiency, representation, identity)
- Practical implications (services, costs, capability).

Outcome: A refined longlist of options, with a clear understanding of trade-offs, risks, and opportunities.

3. Assessment and Engagement

Aim: Broaden participation and validate options with the community.

This is the main community engagement phase and will include:

- Roadshows and drop-in sessions (including rural communities)
- Online engagement (surveys and interactive tools)
- Hui with iwi/hapū
- Targeted stakeholder meetings.

Engagement is used to:

- Test how options affect services, costs, and representation
- Understand community preferences and concerns
- Refine options toward a preferred direction.

Outcome: Documented community and stakeholder feedback, with options refined based on real-world impacts and community priorities.

4. Proposal Drafting and Political Consideration

Aim: Confirm a preferred option and prepare a robust, evidence-based submission.

Engagement shifts to validation and alignment, including:

- Elected member workshops and briefings
- Regional leadership discussions
- Stakeholder and Ministerial engagement.

The focus is on:

- Ensuring alignment
- Testing deliverability
- Confirming the proposal reflects engagement findings.

Outcome: A preferred option supported by a clear evidence base, with engagement directly informing the final proposal.

Note: Hapu/Iwi will be engaged throughout the whole process.

OPTIONS AND ASSESSMENT

Two possible options for Council to consider include:

Option A - Formally approve participating in the Headstart programme.

Officers recommend Council proceed with Option A

That the Council **Approves participating in the Head Start Pathway programme, noting that this does not commit Council to submitting a final proposal and that any proposal would return to Council for approval before submission**

Summary of Option

This option confirms that Whanganui will stay at the table in the Government's voluntary Head Start process so it can help shape any future reorganisation options rather than having options shaped for it later through the backstop process.

It allows further work on options, evidence, engagement and partner discussions to continue within the short Government timeframe, while keeping Council's decision-making and legal obligations intact.

It also aligns with the report's proposed community-centred approach, including early engagement with iwi, hapū, marae, Post Settlement Governance Entity's, neighbouring councils and the wider community before any final proposal is considered.

Advantages and Disadvantages
Advantages

- Keeps Whanganui actively involved in shaping options, criteria and conversations with neighbouring councils, rather than waiting for a later Government-led Back Stop process.
- Provides time-limited but real opportunity to test whether any reorganisation option could better support regional planning, infrastructure delivery, transport, catchment management and other functions the Government has identified as needing stronger alignment.
- Allows Council to gather evidence, engage with community and iwi/Māori early, and compare realistic options before deciding whether to submit a proposal.
- May reduce uncertainty for the district by signalling that Whanganui is open to locally led solutions rather than defaulting to a structure imposed later.
- Is consistent with the approach other councils are taking to explore regional reform options, including public feedback processes underway in neighbouring districts.

Disadvantages

- The timeframe is extremely compressed, which creates pressure on staff, elected members, iwi partners and the community to consider complex structural change in a short period.
- Work on Head Start has already required reprioritisation of internal resources and may continue to delay other major programmes, including Long Term Plan preparation.
- There is currently limited Government guidance and no confirmed transition funding, so Council may incur further costs without certainty that a proposal will proceed or be accepted.
- Participation may create concern in the community that Council has already decided on amalgamation, even though this option is only about remaining in the process and keeping choices open.
- Any eventual reorganisation option could raise significant issues around local voice, rural representation, community identity and service accessibility if not carefully designed.

Option B - Do not participate in the Head Start Programme.

That the Council **does not approve participation in the Head Start Pathway programme at this time and instead waits for the later backstop process or other Government direction**

Summary of Option

This option would mean Whanganui chooses not to join the voluntary Head Start process now.

Council would avoid committing further effort to preparing an outline proposal within the current Government deadline and could instead focus on its existing work programme while monitoring what emerges nationally and regionally.

This may better reflect concerns about the speed and uncertainty of reform, but it would also leave future structural change more likely to occur through the later compulsory backstop process rather than through a proposal influenced by Whanganui and its partners.

Advantages and Disadvantages

Advantages

- Avoids the immediate resourcing pressure and cost of participating in a fast-moving process with limited guidance and no confirmed Government funding support.
- Reduces the risk that Council is perceived as moving too quickly on a matter of major significance before the community has had adequate time to consider the implications.
- Allows Council to focus on core business, including Long Term Plan preparation and delivery of other major programmes already affected by reform work.
- Creates more time to observe how other councils respond, including whether neighbouring councils develop viable options or whether Government refines the reform settings.

Disadvantages

- Council may lose the opportunity to help shape a locally led option and instead face change later through a compulsory backstop process with less influence over the outcome.
- Stepping back now may weaken Whanganui's position in regional discussions if neighbouring councils continue exploring options and relationships without it.
- It may increase uncertainty for the district by leaving future governance arrangements unresolved for longer.
- There is no guarantee that waiting will produce a better process, better funding support, or a better outcome for local representation and service delivery.
- If Government proceeds with reform regardless, Council may still need to engage later but from a more reactive position and with reduced ability to influence the shape of change

ALIGNMENT WITH COUNCIL'S STRATEGIES AND POLICIES

Council does not hold a specific Strategic or Policy position on this matter. The recommended option does seek to best ensure the interests of Whanganui are considered in this process for the long term.

FINANCIAL AND RESOURCING IMPLICATIONS

To date, existing resourcing has been reprioritised to address the reform programme announced by Government, notably redirecting the time of the Long Term Plan team. This re-prioritisation will and is already seeing delays to the Long Term Plan 2027-2037 programme. Not addressing this reform however also exposes Councils to risks and uncertainty in the development of its Long Term Plan.

To date no major costs have been incurred, however any further stages of this work are likely to incur significant costs to ratepayers. To date, Government have not signalled any intention to support transition of or support to Councils for this work. In the event that Council does submit a Headstart proposal and this is accepted by Government, while there will be further work to complete, the cost of this work will come at a cost to Council to further design and implement. There will not be long term resource to rededicate to this programme of work long term.

LEGAL CONSIDERATIONS

It is important to note that while the Government has announced the HeadStart initiative, at this stage it remains however a policy proposal and has not been enacted through legislation.

Advice provided by Local Government New Zealand (LGNZ) is clear that despite the constrained timelines, Council must continue to meet its legislative responsibilities and duties, including those of the its Significance and Engagement Policy.

CLIMATE IMPLICATIONS

There are no obvious climate considerations in this immediate decision.

RISK AND OPPORTUNITIES ASSESSMENT

There are a number of risks for Council associated with this wider programme. These are being actively managed through a risk register by the internal project control team, being led by the Executive Leadership Team member Sarah O'Hagan, and the Project Sponsor being the Chief Executive.

A summary of the key risks and the controls as part of the wider programme will be workshopped with Council in the near future.

ASSESSMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

The recommended decision is considered not significant under the Council's Significance and Engagement Policy. While the matter of Headway and the wider Simplification of Local Government is significant, potentially presenting Council and the District with the most significant change to Local Government since the amalgamation of Local Government in 1989, the decision at this point is not significant.

Noting the earlier legal advice from LGNZ, in the event that Council intends to submit a Headstart proposal to government, Council will need to give careful consideration to how it can best meet its legal obligations and the Significance and Engagement Policy within the timeframes set by Central Government.

CONTRIBUTION TO DECISION MAKING BY MĀORI

There will be specific opportunity for the Maori voice of the District to be given consideration of and the opportunity for further contribution to decision making to be provided in any final decision to proceed with a Headstart Pathway proposal.

AFFECTED COMMUNITIES

The entire district is potentially affected by this decision. This reflects the considered and wide reaching approach that Council is proposing to take on this matter in relation to engagement. Affected communities will be provided the further opportunity to engage before any proposal is submitted to Government.

ENGAGEMENT, CONSULTATION AND COMMUNICATION

Considerable engagement is planned as part of this work as outlined earlier in this report.

NEXT STEPS

Officers will continue to support the Elected Council in this policy announcement and working alongside community to determine the approach that best reflects the values and things that matter most to Whanganui in any local government reform programme. In the event that Council chose not to proceed further, Officers will also work with community to further communicate that decision.

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