

Head Start webinar questions and answers

16 July 2026

The discussion consistently returned to several key issues:

- local voice and representation was the dominant concern
- evidence before decisions – the panel emphasised that financial modelling and governance detail are needed before considering any structural change
- the community supports efficiency but not if it comes at the expense of local services or representation
- infrastructure funding and rates affordability were recurring concerns for people.
- the council emphasised a commitment to transparency, including making modelling and responses to questions publicly available where possible.

Question 1

Which neighbouring councils is Whanganui District Council talking with and are any likely merger options beginning to take shape?

Answered by: Mayor Andrew

Response

- Whanganui has been talking with neighbouring councils but has not settled on any preferred option.
- Stratford and South Taranaki are exploring their own pathway.
- Ruapehu and Rangitīkei are considered the most natural neighbouring partners and discussions are underway.
- Ruapehu has several possible directions it could explore, including north towards Waikato/Taupō or south.
- Palmerston North and neighbouring councils are largely looking south.
- Geography, catchments (particularly the Whanganui River) and future planning arrangements are important considerations.
- The council wants more evidence, modelling and community feedback before considering any preferred arrangement.

Question 2

When will modelling of different governance options begin and will the results be publicly available?

Answered by: Doug Tate

Response

- Yes. The council intends to be transparent and make modelling available.
- Some regional modelling already exists (including the Morrison Low work commissioned through the Mayoral Forum).
- Existing modelling is only a starting point and doesn't answer every question.

- Detailed modelling won't occur until there is greater certainty around which options are worth investigating because comprehensive modelling is expensive.

Question 3

If New Zealand is already one of the most centralised OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) countries, why is reducing layers of local government necessary?

Answered by: MP Carl Bates

Response

- Central government and local government are separate issues.
- The concern is duplication between regional councils and territorial authorities.
- Unitary authorities already operate successfully in several parts of New Zealand.
- He used building consenting as an example where applicants can face duplicate processes through district and regional councils.
- Removing duplication could improve efficiency without necessarily centralising decision-making in Wellington.

Question 4

Would community facilities such as libraries, swimming pools and parks be affected?

Answered by: Councillor Julie Herewini

Response

- These services should continue to be delivered locally.
- Administrative efficiencies may be possible behind the scenes.
- Larger organisations could share resources (such as library collections or purchasing) while maintaining local services.
- Any efficiencies should reduce costs without reducing local access.

Question 5

Which council services should always remain local?

Answered by: Councillors Philippa Baker-Hogan and Glenda Brown

Response

The two councillors emphasised:

- libraries
 - museums
 - parks
 - swimming pools

- local roads and footpaths
- community facilities
- local events and community development.

They stressed:

- decisions should continue to be made by people who understand local communities
- administrative functions could potentially be shared, but front-line services should remain locally delivered
- maintaining local representation was considered essential.

Overall, for questions 4 and 5: Councillors Julie Herewini, Philippa Baker-Hogan and Glenda Brown agreed that community facilities and everyday services – such as libraries, museums, parks and swimming pools – should continue to be delivered locally, regardless of future governance arrangements. They noted that some efficiencies may be achieved by sharing administrative functions or purchasing across a larger organisation but emphasised that services should still be delivered by people who understand local needs. The panel consistently highlighted local representation and local service delivery as key considerations in any future governance model.

Question 6

Is central government funding councils to undertake this work?

Answered by: Doug Tate

Response

- No funding has been announced.
- Current guidance indicates councils are expected to meet these costs themselves.
- Whanganui has deliberately kept spending on the work to a minimum so far.

Question 7

If procurement becomes regional, how do smaller communities avoid being overlooked?

Answered by: Doug Tate

Response

- Larger procurement can produce efficiencies.
- Auckland Council has moved away from some very large contracts after finding smaller local contracts often delivered better value.
- Future procurement should balance economies of scale with local knowledge and community needs.
- Communities should continue to influence how services are procured.

Question 8

How can councils manage increasing responsibilities with less revenue under rates capping?

Answered by: MP Carl Bates and Mayor Andrew

Carl Bates

- Rates have been increasing at an unsustainable level.
- Rates capping would force councils to prioritise spending.
- Councils should focus on core services.
- Simplifying local government and removing duplication should reduce costs.

Mayor Andrew

- Affordability is important.
- Rates capping must be considered alongside wider reforms (water, RMA, planning, etc.).
- A rigid cap could create unintended consequences because infrastructure costs continue rising.
- Deferred maintenance and increased debt are risks if funding becomes too constrained.
- Any rates cap needs flexibility and broader funding reform.

Question 9

Could Whanganui ratepayers subsidise neighbouring councils with poorer infrastructure?

Answered by: Doug Tate and Mayor Andrew

Doug Tate

- Current Local Water Done Well arrangements keep costs ring-fenced.
- Similar mechanisms could exist under future structures.
- These issues would need to be negotiated during any amalgamation.

Mayor Andrew

- This is a genuine concern.
- Whanganui has generally maintained its infrastructure well.
- Before any merger, the council would need detailed information on neighbouring councils' assets and liabilities.
- Ring-fencing could potentially protect communities from subsidising others.

Question 10

Could AI be used instead of expensive consultants for modelling?

Answered by: Doug Tate

Response

- Council is already using AI tools such as Microsoft Copilot.

- AI can improve efficiency.
- However, modelling still requires significant human analysis of financial data and council accounts.
- AI can support the work but cannot currently replace detailed expert modelling.

Question 11

Instead of merging councils, why not have central government perform council functions?

Answered by: Mayor Andrew

Response

- Local government exists because communities need local representation.
- Decisions made solely from Wellington would not reflect local needs.
- Councillors regularly engage directly with communities across Whanganui.
- He argued local government should have an even stronger role in representing communities, not a reduced one.

Question 12

Government reforms haven't been enacted yet. If they aren't law, how can councils be expected to respond?

Response

The government has announced its intention to reform local government and has invited councils to participate in the voluntary Head Start process by submitting high-level proposals. While aspects of the wider reform programme are still being developed, councils have been asked to consider whether they wish to participate in this early pathway.

Whanganui District Council has made it clear that it won't rush into submitting a proposal before it has sufficient information. The council's current focus is on understanding the government's direction, gathering community feedback, considering the interaction with other reforms (such as Local Water Done Well, resource management reform and rates capping), and ensuring that any future decisions are evidence-based.

If the legislative framework changes as reforms progress, the council will continue to assess that information before making any decisions about future governance arrangements.