

10.1 Simplifying Local Government - Participation in Head Start

Report Type Decision Report

SUMMARY

The Government's [Head Start Pathway](#) is intended for councils that are ready and willing to move quickly to establish one or more new unitary authorities. A proposal cannot be submitted by Whanganui alone. It must be submitted by at least two territorial authorities that together represent a majority of the directly affected councils or a majority of the population in the affected area.

Since May 2026, Whanganui District Council has participated in regional and neighbouring-council discussions, commissioned and considered technical analysis, engaged with iwi and Māori partners, and sought community feedback. That has included a [Livestreamed Community Feedback Panel](#), public korero sessions, survey feedback, a webinar and ongoing updates to community.

Council has also received updates publicly at its meetings of [16 June 2026](#) and [14 July 2026](#), as well as through confidential workshop briefings. Public reports have been released, and material considered in confidential workshops has been proactively released where appropriate.

That work has improved the evidence base but has not produced an agreed grouping, governance model or regional consensus for a Head Start proposal involving Whanganui.

In the Manawatū-Whanganui region, a draft Memorandum of Understanding and collective letter to the Minister has been developed. The MOU would establish a Regional Working Party, Chief Executive Steering Group, Technical Working Group and independent facilitator, supported by an eight-phase work programme. It expressly preserves each council's decision-making authority and does not commit any council to a structural option. At the time of writing, it has been supported by Rangitikei, Manawatu, Ruapehu and Tararua District Councils, with Palmerston North City and Horowhenua District Councils yet to reach a conclusion on whether to support this regional approach. Their meetings are set for Wednesday 5 August.

An early body of work was commissioned by the Horizons region to test what a single unitary model for the Horizons region would achieve. The Morrison Low regional study found that a single Horizons unitary authority could support integrated planning and simplify governance, but likely efficiency gains would be moderate rather than transformational. It also assessed the model as weak on local voice and high risk to deliver, particularly because of the size and diversity of the region and the absence of consensus. Other councils including [Rangitikei](#), Ruapehu, [Palmerston North City Council](#), and Horowhenua have engaged modelling for cross boundary or sub-regional options also completed by Morrison Low. These have all concluded with different options that align with each Councils or communities specific areas of interest.

Community feedback is also cautious. Of 350 survey respondents, 58% opposed council amalgamation. Across the survey and a public forum attended by more than 100 people, the strongest themes were maintaining local decision-making, protecting Whanganui's identity, keeping rates affordable, and maintaining quality infrastructure and services. This engagement was self-selected and should be treated as indicative rather than statistically representative, but the themes were consistent.

Officers have assessed the three available options and set out the advantages, disadvantages, risks

and implications of each. No single officer recommendation is made because the decision concerns the future form, function and representation of local democracy in Whanganui and is therefore a matter for elected members to determine.

Councils in Rangitikei, Ruapehu, Manawatu and Tararua have all resolved not to put in a Head Start proposal, but to sign a Memorandum of Understanding along with a letter to the Minister for Local Government outlining how they will work together on the future for local government in the region.

OFFICER RECOMMENDATION

That Council:

1. notes and continues to endorse the key themes from community feedback that any future reform should:
 - a. protect local voice and representation;
 - b. recognise Whanganui's identity, Te Awa Tupua and wider settlement responsibilities; and
 - c. demonstrate improved affordability, infrastructure and service delivery;
2. and adopts one of the following options:
 - a. Option 1 - submits a Head Start Proposal
 - i. notes that the decision is significant and that Part 6 of the Local Government Act 2002 has been applied as far as was practical;
 - ii. notes that this decision is inconsistent with its significance and engagement policy;
 - iii. approves the submission of an outline proposal for unitary amalgamation under the Government's Head Start Pathway by 9 August 2026, with council(s) X;
 - iv. authorises the Mayor and Chief Executive, on behalf of Whanganui District Council to:
 - i. finalise the outline proposal with participating council(s);
 - ii. make minor amendments that do not materially alter the proposed grouping, governance direction or intended outcomes; and
 - iii. sign and submit the proposal to the Minister of Local Government and Ministry for Cities, Environment, Regions and Transport, by 9 August 2026;
 - b. Option 2: Join a regional Memorandum of Understanding with other councils in the region
 - i. resolves not to submit an outline proposal for unitary amalgamation under Government's Head Start pathway by 9 August 2026;
 - ii. resolves to continue exploring and advocating for alternative local government reform models outside the Head Start pathway that seek to improve local government and retain local representation
 - iii. endorses Whanganui District Council entering into the regional Memorandum of Understanding, substantially in the form attached to this report, noting that it does not commit Council to any preferred structural option, future proposal, or reorganisation decision;
 - iv. authorises the Mayor and Chief Executive, on behalf of Whanganui District Council, to:
 - i. sign the regional Memorandum of Understanding;
 - ii. finalise and sign or endorse the joint regional letter to the Minister of Local Government; and
 - iii. communicate Council's willingness to take an active role in local government reform, independently or collaboratively.

- c. **Option 3: Await the Backstop process**
 - i. resolves not to submit an online proposal for unitary amalgamation under the Government's Head Start Pathway by 9 August 2026;
 - ii. resolves not to enter into the regional Memorandum of Understanding;
 - iii. directs the Chief Executive to cease proactive work on potential future local government structures until the Government confirms the design and next steps for the Backstop process, other than:
 - i. monitoring Government policy and proposals that could materially affect Whanganui District Council or its communities;
 - ii. meeting any statutory, Treaty settlement or existing relationship obligations; and
 - iii. providing Council with advice where an urgent response or decision is required;
 - iv. directs the Chief Executive to report back when the government confirms the Backstop process or when a reform proposal materially affecting Whanganui requires Council consideration.
3. **Authorises the Mayor and Chief Executive to:**
 - a. communicate Council's selected position to the Minister of Local Government, regional partners, and any affected councils; and
 - b. respond where Whanganui District Council is identified as a proposed participant in any Head Start or other reform proposal that Council has not endorsed.
4. **Notes that, under current Government policy, Whanganui will enter the compulsory Backstop policy process after the 2028 local elections unless an accepted Head Start proposal involving Whanganui progresses.**

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Simplifying Local Government

On 25 November 2025, the Government released its [Simplifying Local Government proposal](#). The original proposal included replacing elected regional councils with combined territories boards led by mayors and developing regional reorganisation plans.

Whanganui District Council submitted on the proposal on 19 February 2026. Its [submission](#) supported reform where it would improve outcomes, but emphasised subsidiarity, local democracy and local voice; opposed voting Crown representatives on regional governance bodies; raised concerns about resourcing and mayoral workload; and highlighted Whanganui's distinctive circumstances, including Te Awa Tupua.

The Head Start pathway

On 5 May 2026, the Government announced [Head Start](#) as a voluntary, streamlined pathway for councils ready to progress structural reform before the wider compulsory process. Outline proposals are due by 9 August 2026 and must establish a new unitary authority covering part or all of a region.

The Government will assess eligible proposals against five criteria:

- **Deliverability:** whether the new arrangements are realistic and can be implemented in a timely way.
- **Support for the new planning system:** whether the proposal supports spatial and natural environment planning and avoids or minimises disruption.
- **Simplification of local governance:** whether decision-making is consolidated and better aligned.

- **Economies of scale:** whether regional functions, infrastructure, assets and services can be delivered effectively and affordably.
- **Maintenance of local voice:** whether representation is fair and effective, local decision-making is retained where appropriate, and urban and rural interests are balanced.

Cabinet is expected to decide in September 2026 which outline proposals will move to detailed design. Detailed proposals would be developed through to March 2027, with final policy decisions and enabling legislation to follow in 2027 and early 2028.

Council's earlier decisions

At its meeting on [16 June 2026](#), Council resolved to participate in the Head Start process, expressly noting that participation did not commit Council to submitting a proposal. Council also requested advice on the minimum requirements for a credible submission and asked the Chief Executive to write to the Minister about the timeframe and resourcing pressures.

A [letter from Mayor Andrew Tripe to Hon Simon Watts](#) was sent on 29 June 2026. It confirmed Whanganui District Council's willingness to engage constructively in reform while raising the practical pressures created by the Head Start timetable.

The [14 July 2026](#) Council update brought together the Government's guidance, regional work, community feedback and engagement undertaken to that point. It also confirmed that Council would make its formal Head Start decision on 4 August 2026.

Further clarification from Government officials

A further Chief Executives' discussion with Government officials on 22 July 2026 clarified the practical choices available to councils. This advice reflects current policy and may change as Ministers make further decisions. The following points were noted:

- There is no confirmed second tranche of Head Start. Councils should not assume that work completed after 9 August will be considered through a later Head Start round.
- A letter of intent or memorandum of understanding that does not meet the published eligibility requirements should not be presented as a Head Start proposal.
- A collective regional or subregional letter is likely to be more useful than separate letters because it can distinguish councils actively developing options from councils that have not engaged with reform.
- Councils should continue work now so that evidence, narrowed options and preferred design features can inform officials' advice on the Backstop.
- A Head Start proposal may include a council that has not supported it. Officials would consider whether that council had been consulted and given a fair opportunity to state its position.
- The current Head Start policy does not provide a clear off-ramp once a proposal progresses. Transitional issues, including the treatment of councils left outside a subregional proposal, remain to be resolved.

Regional collaboration and analysis

Mayors and chief executives across the Manawatū-Whanganui (Horizons) region have worked together through the Mayoral Forum and related officer groups. Work has included:

- [Morrison Low analysis](#) of a single unitary authority across the current Horizons footprint.
- [Horizons analysis](#) of regional activities, costs and income streams.
- social, demographic and economic comparisons across Whanganui and neighboring districts;
- community engagement undertaken by individual councils;

- engagement with iwi and Māori partners; and
- discussion of possible regional and subregional groupings.

This work provides a useful common evidence base. It was not commissioned to advocate for a particular outcome and does not amount to an agreed regional proposal. It also does not preclude the future regional options should be discounted or supported.

A regional Memorandum of Understanding

A draft MOU to provide a proactive, disciplined framework for further work has been developed for consideration by the region. The intended parties are Horizons Regional Council and the Horowhenua, Manawatū, Palmerston North, Rangitikei, Ruapehu, Tararua and Whanganui councils. Each council must make its own decision on participation.

The key elements of the MOU are:

MOU element	Proposed approach
Purpose	Develop a shared evidence base, test regional, subregional and relevant cross-boundary options, and decide whether any credible pathway should progress.
Principles	Locally led, evidence-based, transparent, respectful of differences, practical and timely, with no predetermined outcome and early recognition of iwi, mana whenua and settlement responsibilities.
Governance	A Regional Working Party of each mayor and one additional council representative; an independent facilitator; a Chief Executive Steering Group; and a Technical Working Group.
Work programme	Eight phases covering mobilisation, evidence, option development and testing, engagement, further analysis, advice and individual council decisions on next steps.
Decision rights	The MOU is non-binding, preserves each council's statutory powers and does not commit any council to a structural option or future proposal.
Costs and term	Each council meets its internal costs. Shared external costs require separate written agreement. The proposed term runs to 30 June 2027 unless changed by agreement.

The MOU is also non-exclusive. Councils may continue exploring local, subregional or cross-boundary options. Ideally those options are identified through the shared programme so their implications can be assessed alongside regional options rather than in isolation.

Proposed collective letter

The draft collective letter would advise the Minister that the participating councils are not applying for Head Start but are taking a proactive and locally led approach to the wider reform challenge. It would attach the MOU, identify the work already completed, explain the regional work programme and seek ongoing engagement with Government officials. The current draft is framed as a letter from the region's mayors, while the MOU provides for mayor or chair and chief executive signatures. The recommendations give the Mayor and Chief Executive sufficient authority to execute the final agreed documents in the appropriate form.

Council positions

At the time of writing the following Councils had reached the following positions:

- Manawatū District Council met on 22 July. It decided to not participate in the Head Start pathway and to oppose compulsory local government amalgamation but to engage constructively on alternative reform approaches with a focus on localism. The Manawatū District Council [Minutes of 22 July 2026](#) are available on their website.
- Ruapehu District Council met on 29 July. It decided not to submit a Head Start Proposal, but instead to write to the Minister to express its willingness to continue to explore options for the district's future, including with those outside the regional grouping, and its ongoing commitment to engage with community, iwi partners and neighbouring councils. Ruapehu District Council also agreed to participate in the Regional Joint letter (Attachment 9). The Ruapehu District Council minutes 29 July are yet to be published, however their [29 July 2026 Council Agenda](#) and meeting recording are available on their website.
- Tararua District Council met on 10 June and agreed to investigate going west as its preferred option, while also challenging the reform timeframe. The minutes of the [10 June Extraordinary meeting](#) of the Tararua District Council are available on their website. They also met on 29 July. The Council decided not to submit a Head Start Proposal, but instead to write to the Minister to communicate the Council's willingness to actively engage in reform and its support for models that seek to improve local government and retain local representation. Tararua District Council also agreed to participate in the Draft Regional Memorandum of Understanding (Attachment 9). The Tararua District Council minutes of 29 July are yet to be published; however the [29 July Agenda](#) paper is available on their website.
- Rangitikei District Council met on 30 July. It decided not to submit an outline proposal under the Government's Head Start pathway, but instead to continue exploring local government reform models outside the Head Start pathway that seek to achieve the Government's objectives while retaining local representation, local decision-making and local accountability, including working collaboratively with other councils where appropriate. Rangitikei District Council also authorised the Mayor to communicate its position to the Minister of Local Government and to finalise and sign a joint letter and/or memorandum of understanding with other councils in the Manawatū-Whanganui Region. The Rangitikei District Council agenda is available on the [Rangitikei District Council website](#).
- The Palmerston North City Council [Council Agenda for 5 August 2026](#) sets out three options. The first is entering into a 'Front Foot' proposal. This includes a pre-drafted letter to the Minister of Local Government that notes a preference for working with Horowhenua District Council. It is noted as not a Head Start proposal but intends to work together proactively on solutions. The second option is a Head Start proposal with no council identified. The third option is the backstop option, which two options are identified, being agreeing to the regional MOU and letter or not undertaking any further work until required to.
- Horowhenua District Council are also meeting on 5 August 2025 and once their agenda is published will be available on their [website](#).

Community feedback

WDC's initial engagement focused on the principles that should guide Council, rather than asking the community to endorse a defined structural option. A total of 350 people completed the survey and more than 100 people participated in the [9 July 2026 Public Forum](#).

The main findings were:

- 58% of survey respondents opposed amalgamation;
- maintaining local decision-making and representation was the strongest recurring priority;

- protecting Whanganui's identity and community character mattered strongly;
- affordable rates and quality infrastructure and services were seen as essential tests of reform;
- some respondents saw potential benefits from shared services, scale and longer-term planning; and
- support for change was generally conditional on clear evidence of better outcomes and protection of local influence.

These findings were presented publicly at Council's meeting of [14 July 2026](#).

The engagement does not establish a statistically representative mandate for or against a particular model. It does, however, set clear expectations that Council should not support structural change without a credible case on local voice, service outcomes, affordability and identity.

OPTIONS AND ASSESSMENT

There are three options available to Council at this point in the Head Start pathway. Officers have provided analysis of each option, including the advantages, disadvantages, risks and likely implications. Officers have not made a single formal recommendation because the decision concerns the future form, function and representation of local democracy in Whanganui. However, the report identifies Option 2 as the strongest pathway on the information currently available, while leaving the final decision to elected members.

This is because the decision before Council goes beyond ordinary operational advice and directly concerns the future form, function and representation of local democracy for Whanganui. It is therefore appropriate that officers provide clear, balanced advice to support decision-making, while leaving the substantive choice to the elected Council.

Option 1: Develop and submit a Head Start proposal by 9 August	
Summary of Option	
Under this option, Whanganui District Council would seek to agree an eligible grouping with other territorial authorities and submit an outline proposal for a new unitary authority. This approach would be inconsistent with its significance and engagement policy and would be difficult to give full effect to decision making in accordance with Part 6 of the Local Government Act 2002.	
Advantages and Disadvantages	
Advantages	
• Maximises early local influence over structural design. • Provides a potential pathway to implementation by the 2028 local elections. • Responds to the Government's invitation for councils to lead reform where they are ready.	
Disadvantages	
• The decision would be inconsistent with the significance and engagement policy; • Whanganui District Council cannot submit a proposal alone. • No eligible, agreed grouping involving Whanganui has been confirmed. • There is no agreed structural model or governance design. • No financial case, service model or transition plan has been developed. • Regional analysis identifies significant risks to local voice and deliverability. • Community and partner engagement has not tested a defined proposal. • The current policy provides no clear off-ramp once a proposal progresses.	

- The 9 August deadline creates a high risk that any proposal would be insufficiently evidenced or lack durable support.
- Proceeding could expose Council to an uncertain and potentially difficult detailed-design process

Option 2: Join the Memorandum of Understanding and do not submit a Head Start proposal.

Summary of Option

Under this option, Whanganui District Council would not submit a Head Start proposal. It would enter the regional MOU, participate in the Regional Working Party and associated officer groups, and help implement the phased work programme. The region would advise the Minister collectively that it is not applying for Head Start but is organised and actively developing options that can inform the Backstop.

It is Officers' advice that this option provides a credible pathway forward that best aligns with the intent and previously signaled intent of Council.

Advantages and Disadvantages

Advantages

- Avoids committing Whanganui to a model that is not ready.
- Establishes formal governance through the MOU.
- Provides clear principles, staged decision points, cost controls and an end date.
- Supports proper engagement with iwi, hapu, mana whenua and communities.
- Allows regional, subregional and cross-boundary options to be tested.
- Creates a stronger platform to advocate for local voice, Whanganui's identity, settlement obligations and Te Awa Tupua, affordability and effective service delivery.

Disadvantages

- Does not exempt Whanganui District Council from the compulsory Backstop process.
- Does not guarantee a later route into Head Start.
- The Government is not required to adopt the region's preferred approach.
- Will require political and officer capacity.
- May require shared external advice and associated costs.
- Other councils may submit proposals affecting Whanganui or neighbouring communities without Whanganui District Council's endorsement.

Option 3: Do not submit a Head Start proposal and undertake no further work

Summary of Option

Under this option, Whanganui District Council would not submit a proposal and would pause local and regional structural work until the Government confirms the Backstop process and next steps. It is Officers' advice that this option provides a credible pathway forward that aligns with the intent and previously signaled intent of Council.

Advantages and Disadvantages

Advantages

- Minimises immediate cost and capacity demands.
- Allows Council to focus on existing priorities.
- Supports continued focus on the new planning system and delivery of core services.

Disadvantages

- Reduces Council's ability to influence the design of the Backstop process.
- Gives up the opportunity to help shape the regional position.
- Risks losing momentum from the work, relationships and public engagement completed to date.
- Is inconsistent with Council's stated intention to engage constructively in reform.
- Leaves Whanganui reacting to decisions made elsewhere.

Why the Memorandum of Understanding is advantageous

The question is not whether Whanganui District Council supports improvement to local government. Council has consistently supported evidence-based reform that improves outcomes. The immediate question is whether an agreed and credible unitary authority proposal is ready to be lodged under an accelerated process.

On the information currently available, it is not. The strongest course is to be clear that Whanganui District Council will not submit a Head Start proposal, while entering a formal regional collaboration process that is disciplined, time-bound and has no predetermined outcome. This is a positive regional position, not a defence of the status quo.

The MOU and joint letter provide a practical bridge into the next phase. They record the work completed, establish governance and a phased programme, make local and Treaty settlement interests explicit, and give Government visibility of the region's intended process. They also allow individual councils to test relevant local, subregional and cross-boundary pathways without fragmenting the shared evidence base. It is also a clear process that outlines that Councils will not wait for the governments backstop process, and are willing to work together regionally, noting that all Councils other than Palmerston North, Horowhenua and Whanganui are yet to endorse this approach.

ALIGNMENT WITH COUNCIL'S STRATEGIES AND POLICIES

Any decision of Council should ensure that the long term aspirations of Council, including its long term goals outlined in Rautaki mo Whanganui - the Strategy for Whanganui and other strategic documents can be achieved.

FINANCIAL AND RESOURCING IMPLICATIONS

Each option comes with differing financial and resourcing implications.

Option 1 - Undertaking a Head Start proposal would require a very short but rapid mobilisation of resources, likely with limited success. It would create the greatest immediate and unbudgeted resource demand because it would require an eligible proposal, governance and representation design, financial and service analysis, partner engagement, risk assessment and transition planning to be assembled at pace.

Option 2 - entering into a regional MOU option does not commit Council to implementing a new structure and has no immediate capital implications. Under the draft MOU, each council would meet its own internal costs. Shared external costs, including specialist advice, programme support or engagement material, could only be incurred where participating councils agree in writing, with the allocation basis settled before costs are committed.

Continued regional analysis, engagement and advocacy can initially be managed through existing work programmes and shared regional arrangements. If material additional external advice or dedicated programme resources are proposed, officers will return to Council with scope, timing and funding

implications before WDC commits expenditure.

Option 3 - waiting for the backstop would have the lowest immediate cost but the highest strategic risk of reduced influence.

LEGAL CONSIDERATIONS

Head Start and the Backstop are currently Government policy settings rather than an enacted reorganisation framework. Enabling legislation is expected in 2027 and early 2028. The MOU and joint letter would not amount to a formal Head Start proposal or create an entitlement to a later Head Start process.

The draft MOU records shared intentions and is not legally binding, except in relation to any shared costs separately agreed in writing. It does not limit Council's statutory responsibilities, decision-making powers or discretion, and WDC may withdraw by giving written notice.

The decision not to submit does not itself change Whanganui District Council's boundaries, governance, assets, liabilities or service delivery. Any future structural proposal will need to be assessed against the legislation in force at that time, including applicable decision-making, consultation and Treaty settlement requirements.

CLIMATE IMPLICATIONS

There are no obvious climate considerations at this point of decision making.

RISK AND OPPORTUNITIES ASSESSMENT

The following risks have been identified:

Risk	Potential consequence	Mitigation through Regional Futures
Government does not support the regional approach	Reduced ability to shape the Backstop or future boundaries.	Send a clear joint letter, maintain direct official engagement and provide evidence-based regional advice.
Another Head Start proposal affects Whanganui or neighbouring districts	Council may be named in or affected by a proposal it has not endorsed.	Monitor proposals, engage early with proposing councils and clearly record WDC's position for officials and Ministers.
No later Head Start opportunity	The region may complete good work but still proceed only through the compulsory Backstop.	Frame the programme honestly as Backstop preparation and seek regular engagement so the work informs policy design.
Regional work loses momentum or alignment	The region enters the Backstop without an agreed evidence base or set of principles.	Use the MOU governance, independent facilitation, phased work programme and council decision points.
Local voice or Treaty settlement arrangements are not adequately reflected	Loss of trust, weak governance design and potential legal or relationship risk.	Continue early, direct engagement with iwi, hapū, marae, Ngā Tāngata Tiaki o

Risk	Potential consequence	Mitigation through Regional Futures
		Whanganui and affected communities.
Capacity and cost pressures	Reform work competes with planning reform and core delivery.	Stage and share the work; require written agreement before shared external costs are incurred; return to Council before material new expenditure.

ASSESSMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Local government reform is a matter of high public interest. However, the recommended decision does not itself reorganise Council or alter services. It declines to lodge an accelerated proposal and retains further work and engagement before any future structural position is adopted.

Whanganui District Council has undertaken principle-level engagement through its survey, public forum, community kōrero and webinar, and has engaged with iwi and Māori partners. This is appropriate for the decision now before Council. Further engagement will be required before Council endorses any defined structural model.

In the event that Council adopted option 1 to enter into a Head Start proposal, it should be noted that this decision would be inconsistent with its Significance and Engagement Policy.

CONTRIBUTION TO DECISION MAKING BY MĀORI

Any future structure must recognise and provide for the distinctive statutory and relationship context in Whanganui. The Government's Head Start guidance states that Treaty settlement arrangements will continue and expects councils to engage relevant post-settlement governance entities on how those arrangements could transfer to new authorities with equivalent effect.

Officials have advised that settlement legislation does not necessarily prevent councils being reorganised differently, but the detailed design would need to provide equivalent effect to settlement obligations. Māori representation, transitional arrangements and the treatment of existing partnership mechanisms would also need to be worked through.

For Whanganui District Council, this requires careful consideration of Te Awa Tupua, Tupua te Kawa, relationships with Ngā Tāngata Tiaki o Whanganui, and direct relationships with iwi, hapū and marae. Engagement through Te Kōpuka and directly with partners is continuing. The Head Start timeframe has not allowed these matters to be worked through to the level that should underpin a formal structural proposal. The draft regional MOU improves the next phase by making these responsibilities an early and explicit part of option development and transition planning.

AFFECTED COMMUNITIES

ENGAGEMENT, CONSULTATION AND COMMUNICATION

Communication of Councils decision with partners and community will be undertaken following Councils decision.

NEXT STEPS

The next steps will depend on which option Council adopts.

If Council adopts Option 1 – Submit a Head Start proposal

- The Mayor and Chief Executive will finalise the attached outline proposal with the participating council(s) and obtain the necessary approvals and signatures.
- The proposal will be submitted to the Minister of Local Government by 9 August 2026.
- Officers will respond to any requests for clarification or further information arising from the Government's assessment.
- If the outline proposal is accepted, officers will develop a programme for preparing the detailed proposal, including further financial and service analysis, governance design, engagement with iwi and Māori partners, community consultation, transition planning and implementation costs.
- The detailed proposal and its implications will be reported to Council for approval before it is submitted or Council makes any further material commitment.
- If an eligible proposal cannot be finalised by 9 August, or the proposal is not accepted by the Government, Whanganui will enter the Backstop process under current Government policy.

If Council adopts Option 2 – Join the Memorandum of Understanding

- The Mayor and Chief Executive will sign the regional Memorandum of Understanding and finalise and sign or endorse the joint regional letter to the Minister of Local Government.
- The joint letter and Memorandum of Understanding will be provided to the Minister by 9 August 2026, confirming that the participating councils are not submitting a Head Start proposal but intend to take a proactive and locally led approach to reform.
- The participating councils will commence the first phase of the Regional Futures Programme, including confirming the work programme, shared evidence base, Government engagement arrangements, timetable and any proposed external resourcing.
- Engagement with iwi, hapū, mana whenua and communities will continue as regional, subregional and cross-boundary options are developed and tested.
- Officers will monitor any Head Start or other reform proposal that could include or materially affect Whanganui and ensure Council's position is clearly communicated.
- Council will receive further advice at key decision points, when a credible structural option is ready for consideration, or when the Government confirms the design of the Backstop process.

If Council adopts Option 3 – Await the Backstop process

- The Mayor and Chief Executive will advise the Minister of Local Government and regional partners of Council's decision not to submit a Head Start proposal or participate in the Memorandum of Understanding.
- WDC will not sign the regional Memorandum of Understanding or participate in the proposed regional governance and officer workstreams.
- Officers will cease proactive work on potential future local government structures and will not commit expenditure to further regional reform work.
- Officers will continue to monitor Government policy and any proposal that could materially affect Whanganui, meet existing statutory and Treaty settlement obligations, and respond where necessary to protect Council's and the community's interests.
- Council will receive a further report when the Government confirms the Backstop process or when a reform proposal materially affecting Whanganui requires a Council decision.

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References:

1. Morrison Low Unitary Council Analysis Report
2. Horizons Regional Council - Whanganui Functions Report
3. 20260716 - Draft Regional MOU and Letter
