



Our reference
F19/13/03-D21/26182

30 July 2026

Notice of Meeting

Notice is hereby given that, in accordance with Standing Order 8.5, an Extraordinary Meeting of Council has been called for **10.00am** on **Tuesday, 4 August 2026**, to confirm the Head Start Proposal. This meeting will be held in the **Council Chambers, Stratford District Council, 63 Miranda Street, Stratford.**

The timetable is as follows:

10.00am	Extraordinary Meeting of Council To confirm the Head Start Pathway Proposal
11.00am	Workshop - Long Term Plan – Vision and Community Outcomes Workshop Update - Long Term Plan – Early Conversations - Sportsgrounds Project – Update - Centennial Restrooms – Update - Playgrounds

Yours faithfully

Sven Hanne
Chief Executive

2026 - Agenda - Extraordinary - August (Approval of the Head Start Pathway Proposal)



04 August 2026 10:00 AM

Agenda Topic	Page
Notice of Meeting	1
Agenda	3
1. Welcome	4
1.1 Opening Karakia	4
1.2 Health and Safety Message	5
2. Apologies	
3. Declarations of Members Interest	
4. Decision Report – Approval of the Head Start Pathway Proposal	6
5. Closing Karakia	67

AGENDA

Extraordinary



F25/96/005 – D26/28080

Date: Tuesday 4 August 2026

Venue: Council Chambers, 63 Miranda Street, Stratford

1. Welcome

- 1.1 **Opening Karakia**
D21/40748 Page 4
- 1.2 **Health and Safety Message**
D21/26210 Page 5

2. Apologies

3. Declarations of members interest

Elected members to declare any real or perceived conflicts of interest relating to items on this agenda.

4. Decision Report -Approval of the Head Start Pathway Proposal

D26/27030 Page 6

Recommendations

- 1. THAT the report be received.
- 2. THAT Council approves in principle, the draft Head Start Pathway Outline Proposal attached to this report.
- 3. THAT Council notes South Taranaki District Council's decision on this matter, (to be) made on 3 August 2026.
- 4. THAT Council authorises the Chief Executive to work with the Chief Executive of South Taranaki District Council to finalise the draft and submit it by 9 August 2026 to the Ministry of Cities, Environment, Regions and Transport for assessment and approval by Cabinet.
- 5. THAT Council authorises the Mayor to approve the final proposal on behalf of Stratford District Council, before it is submitted.

Recommended Reason

On 21 July 2026, Council resolved that its preferred option for a Head Start proposal was to form a two-unitary council and amalgamate with the South Taranaki District Council to form a unitary council for central and south Taranaki.

/
Moved/Seconded

5. Closing Karakia

D21/40748 Page 67



Our reference
F19/13/03-D21/40748

Karakia

Kia uruuru mai
Ā hauora
Ā haukaha
Ā haumāia
Ki runga, Ki raro
Ki roto, Ki waho
Rire rire hau Paimārire

I draw in (to my being)
The reviving essence
The strengthening essence
The essence of courage
Above, Below
Within, Around
Let there be peace.



Our reference
F19/13/03-D22/17082

Health and Safety Message

In the event of an emergency, unless guided to an alternative route by staff, please exit through the main entrance. Once outside the building please move towards the War Memorial Centre congregating on the lawn area outside the front of the council building.

If there is an earthquake, please drop, cover and hold where possible. Remain indoors until the shaking stops and you are sure it is safe to exit or remain where you are until further instruction is given.

DECISION REPORT



F25/96/004- D26/28080

To: Council
From: Chief Executive
Date: 4 August 2026
Subject: Approval of the Head Start Pathway Proposal

Recommendations

1. THAT the report be received.
2. THAT Council approves in principle, the draft Head Start Pathway Outline Proposal attached to this report.
3. THAT Council notes South Taranaki District Council's decision on this matter, (to be) made on 3 August 2026.
4. THAT Council authorises the Chief Executive to work with the Chief Executive of South Taranaki District Council to finalise the draft and submit it by 9 August 2026 to the Ministry of Cities, Environment, Regions and Transport for assessment and approval by Cabinet.
5. THAT Council authorises the Mayor to approve the final proposal on behalf of Stratford District Council, before it is submitted.

Recommended Reason

On 21 July 2026, Council resolved that its preferred option for a Head Start proposal was to form a two-unitary council and amalgamate with the South Taranaki District Council to form a unitary council for central and south Taranaki.

/
Moved/Seconded

1. Purpose of Report

- 1.1 This report asks the Council to approve in principle the draft outline proposal (attached as Appendix 1) and to authorise the Chief Executive and the Mayor respectively (as per recommendations 3 and 4 above) to complete and approve the final document so that it can be submitted to the Government by the 9 August 2026 deadline.

2. Executive Summary

- 2.1 The Government announced its Simplifying Local Government Proposal in November 2025 and after receiving feedback from councils on this proposal, developed the Head Start pathway which was released in early May. This pathway enables councils to accelerate local government reform, providing a three-month window (ending 9 August 2026) to submit proposals to simplify and strengthen local governance arrangements in their regions. Councils are encouraged to develop locally led reorganisation proposals to improve efficiency, accountability and service delivery. The Government has signalled that where councils do not put forward credible proposals within the timeframe, it will proceed with Government determined reforms through the Backstop Process.
- 2.2 On 26 May 2026, the Council agreed to participate in the Government's Head Start pathway and on 21 July, after getting feedback from the community, the Council resolved that their preferred option for a Head Start proposal was a two-unitary council and amalgamate with the South Taranaki District Council to form a unitary council for central and south Taranaki.

- 2.3 New Plymouth District Council are developing, what they have called, a 'Pathfinder Proposal' for submission to central government by 9 August 2026 which will identify multiple draft options for Local Government reform in Taranaki. A final proposal will be developed for their consideration in March 2027 for either a Detailed Proposal (based on the Head Start timeframes) or the Backstop pathway.
- 2.4 Council officers across Taranaki have continued to work collaboratively to share information, look for alignment and consider how regional council functions could be delivered in the future. South Taranaki and Stratford District Councils also jointly engaged Morrison Low Advisory to undertake research, analyse the options and once a preferred option was confirmed, draft an outline proposal for the Councils' consideration.
- 2.5 This report asks the Council to approve in principle the draft outline proposal (attached as Appendix 1) so that it can be finalised and submitted to the Government by the 9 August 2026 deadline.

3. Local Government Act 2002 - Section 10

Under section 10 of the Local Government Act 2002, the Council's purpose is to "enable democratic local decision making by and on behalf of communities; as well as promoting the social, economic, environmental, and cultural well-being of communities now and into the future"			
Does the recommended option meet the purpose of the Local Government 4 well-beings? And which:		<i>This report impacts the overarching governance structure for Stratford and Taranaki, therefore directly impacts the delivery against the 4 wellbeings across the district</i>	
Social	Economic	Environmental	Cultural
X	X	X	

This decision supports the purpose of local government by enabling democratic local decision-making on how local governance in the Stratford district should be structured in response to central government's Head Start pathway and likely mandated reform in the future.

Approving the draft proposal for the Head Start pathway contributes to all four well-beings by establishing a proposal through which future local government arrangements can be tested against community outcomes, local decision-making, service efficiency and effectiveness, economies of scale and protection of the environment.

4. Background

- 4.1 The Government's Head Start pathway enables regions to develop and submit their own reform proposals ahead of any compulsory backstop process to follow the 2028 local elections. Head Start proposals must be submitted by groups of two or more territorial local authorities, not individual councils acting alone. It should be noted that regional councils are not able to submit proposals under the Head Start pathway.
- 4.2 If a council does not participate in the Government's voluntary Head Start pathway, it will instead be subject to a mandatory Backstop process. Under this process, central government will mandate the reorganisation of councils following the 2028 local elections, with decisions on the structure and governance of future local government arrangements to be determined by Government. This may include standardised approaches to restructuring, such as the formation of larger unitary authorities and the introduction of transitional governance arrangements (for example, boards of mayors or other interim bodies). The Backstop process is intended to apply to all councils that do not progress through Head Start or whose proposals are not accepted.

- 4.3 The Head Start pathway includes key milestones with an outline proposal to be submitted by 9 August 2026 and if that proposal is accepted, a detailed design phase to be completed by March 2027.
- 4.4 A Head Start proposal is intended to be 'light touch', high level and strategic with no strict content requirements and no thresholds for meeting each of the five criteria the proposals will be assessed against. The five criteria are:
- **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 local communities of interest and how decisions will be made at the local level, balancing urban and rural interests.
- 4.5 Outline proposals should provide for the amalgamation of at least two territorial authorities or unitary authorities into a new unitary authority. While the most straight forward approach may be for all territorial authorities in a region to combine to form a single unitary authority, the government will also consider proposals for sub-regional unitary authorities and cross-boundary proposals, providing they clearly meet the criteria and do not lead to fragmentation of service delivery for key regional functions.
- 4.6 If a sub-regional unitary authority is being proposed, the proposal needs to outline how that proposal benefits the region as a whole and what the impact is on councils not included in the proposal.
- 4.7 In all discussions held between Councillors and officers across the region, there has been a clear desire to work together, recognising that there are local government functions that are either legally required to be delivered regionally or would be best delivered regionally, for example regional spatial planning, river catchment management and civil defence.
- 4.8 The outline proposal is a high level proposal and if approved, details around the structure of local governance (eg representation, boundaries etc) and service delivery, particularly of any regionally delivered functions, will need to be worked through as part of the detailed design phase.
- 4.9 The next phase of work will provide further information, modelling and engagement to test whether the proposed two-unitary council model is viable and in the best interests of the Stratford District and the wider region. If that work identifies that the model is not viable, creates unacceptable risks or costs, or that another option would better meet the assessment criteria and community interests, the Councils could reconsider their position, change course or stop progressing the proposal before final decisions are made.

5. Consultative Process

5.1 Public Consultation - Section 82

The parties most directly affected by this decision, are the communities within the Taranaki region.

If the outline proposal is accepted by Cabinet, there will be further opportunities to consult the community during the detailed design phase before final decisions are made in May 2027.

5.2 Māori Consultation - Section 81

Te Rūnanga o Ngāti Ruanui provided feedback on the options and indicated strong support for Stratford and South Taranaki District Councils amalgamating into one unitary authority.

If a Head Start proposal is submitted and approved by the government, Councils will be expected to engage with all iwi within their rohe to demonstrate how existing Treaty settlement arrangements could be transferred to new unitary authorities. The Government will also work with post-settlement governance entities directly on proposed arrangements.

The decision to submit a Head Start proposal does not result in any immediate changes to Council's relationships with iwi, hapū, or post-settlement governance entities. However, if a proposal is approved, it will have implications for representation, decision-making, and how councils engage with Māori and iwi input will be an important aspect of the next phase of detailed structural design.

6. Risk Analysis

- 6.1 The principal risks relate to public concern about loss of local voice or 'amalgamation by stealth', uncertainty in the national reform direction and pressure on staff and financial resources. These risks can be managed through transparent communications, clear governance, staged decision points and continued council oversight if the Head Start proposal is submitted and accepted by Cabinet.
- 6.2 There is a risk that if all the territorial authorities in Taranaki do not agree on a proposal for the Head Start pathway, this may be viewed by central government as a lack of regional coordination and would likely weaken the credibility of any proposal put forward. Central government has signalled a preference for regionally aligned approaches for the Head Start pathway, meaning a unified proposal is more likely to be considered favourably.
- 6.3 There is also a risk that the Head Start and Backstop pathways could be derailed by a change in Government at the national elections in November 2026. This could result in either or both the Head Start and Backstop processes halting or changing. There is also a possibility that amalgamation of councils into much larger entities is mandated in the future.

7. Sustainability Consideration

There are no direct environmental sustainability considerations inherent in the decision sought.

8. Decision Making Process - Section 79

8.1 Direction

	Explain
Is there a strong link to Council's strategic direction, Long Term Plan/District Plan?	There is no direct link but a future organisation would likely utilise Council's strategic documents for direction to start with while it establishes its own direction and priorities over time.
What relationship does it have to the communities current and future needs for infrastructure, regulatory functions, or local public services?	A future entity would meet these needs as well as any additional responsibilities assigned through future legislation, such as the transfer of regional council functions.

The decision to confirm a preferred option for a Head Start pathway proposal is not, in itself, inconsistent with any current Council policy, plan, or strategy. However, any proposed structural changes resulting from the Council's preferred option being proposed and accepted may result in significant departures from the existing governance structure, plans and policies.

8.2 Data

The rushed nature of these reforms and resulting lack of detailed analysis has been well covered in the lead-up to this report. The safeguard to address this is the ability to alter or abandon a proposal during the second stage, should it become clear that there are financial or operational obstacles impacting its viability or if further community and iwi engagement impacts elected members' view on the adopted direction.

8.3 Significance

	Yes/No	Explain
Is the proposal significant according to the Significance and Engagement Policy in the Long Term Plan?		
Is it:		
• considered a strategic asset; or	YES	It affects all of council's strategic assets
• above the financial thresholds in the Significance and Engagement Policy; or	YES	
• impacting on a CCO stakeholding; or	YES	Council's CCO would be impacted by the outcome of the reforms
• a change in level of service; or	Maybe	It is likely that there would be standardisation of LoS across a future authority
• creating a high level of controversy; or	YES	This is already happening
• possible that it could have a high impact on the community?	YES	

In terms of the Council's Significance and Engagement Policy, is this proposal of high, medium, or low significance?		
High	Medium	Low
X		

8.4 Options

- 8.4.1 Since the Council agreed to participate in the Head Start pathway in late May, a community survey was undertaken and 633 responses were received. The survey asked respondents whether they would prefer one council or two councils covering the region – 83.3% were in favour of having two councils – one covering North Taranaki and one covering Stratford and South Taranaki combined. Only 16.7% of respondents preferred one council for the whole region.
- 8.4.2 Another question in the survey asked respondents what their biggest concerns were arising from a change in Council structures. The biggest concerns were a loss of local voice and representation (e.g. decision-making may become less responsive to local issues and priorities) and one size fits all policies that don't suit different communities (e.g. city vs rural).
- 8.4.3 The greatest opportunities respondents saw with a change in council structure were shared services opportunities, less duplication and simplification of local governance arrangements (one or two councils instead of four).
- 8.4.4 In regard to a question on what matters most about how council services are delivered, respondents said that fair representation for different communities of interest, keeping a strong local voice and affordability and cost efficiencies were the most important.
- 8.4.5 At the public hearing on Tuesday 14 July, four of the six speakers, including one who represented mana whenua and a broad cross-section of the community, supported a single-council model. One speaker advocated for a single unitary authority with Stratford as its head office, while another did not express a preferred option but encouraged the exploration of all available options.

- 8.4.6 South Taranaki and Stratford District Councils jointly engaged Morrison Low Advisory to undertake research, analyse the options and provide an assessment of those for the Councils to consider. This was done to ensure a degree of independence in the analysis and advice the Council received. Once both Councils agreed on their preferred option Morrison Low have drafted the outline proposal (attached as Appendix 1) for Councils' approval in principle so that can be finalised and submitted by the 9 August deadline.
- 8.4.7 This draft proposal was developed based on the community feedback, discussions and Councillor input at two workshops with the Council, a combined meeting of Stratford and South Taranaki councillors and a meeting of the Mayors, Chair and councillors of all four councils in Taranaki which all explored, at a high level, how future governance arrangements would be best delivered for the people of Taranaki. Once the decision was made on a preferred option, these discussions specifically considered how the draft proposal met all the criteria and what should be included in the proposal.

Assessment of options

Option One: Approve the draft Head Start Outline Proposal in principle.

This option enables the outline Head Start proposal to be finalised and submitted, providing South Taranaki District Council also approves the draft proposal.

This option meets the requirement of two or more territorial authorities being needed to submit a proposal. Given the current stance of New Plymouth District Council this proposal will be submitted without the support of New Plymouth District Council, therefore there is a risk that Cabinet will not approve it to proceed to the next stage.

Option Two: Do not approve the Head Start Outline Proposal.

This option is not the preferred option as this would result in no proposal being submitted by the deadline and would likely put the Council into the government's Backstop process with the potential for transitional governance arrangements, such as a board of mayors or other interim body to take effect from the 2028 local elections. It would also result in a missed opportunity for the Council to influence regional governance arrangements and represent the district's interests within any future local government reform programme.

8.5 Financial

The financial implications of drafting and submitting a proposal through the Head Start pathway relate to coordination, analysis, specialist advice, governance support, and engagement activity. Costs associated with preparing the proposal to this point include engaging a consultant to assist with this work and provide independent advice to the Council. The costs associated with this work are unbudgeted. The staff resources used in preparing the proposal are absorbed within existing budgets, however it should be noted that prioritising this work may result in some other Council priorities not being achieved within the 2026/27 financial year.

8.6 Prioritisation & Trade-off

It should be noted that prioritising this work may result in some other Council priorities not being achieved within the 2026/27 financial year.

If the proposal is approved, the government has indicated that any support required to develop detailed reorganisation plans will be determined with the councils and agreed by Cabinet. This does not necessarily indicate any financial support will be provided by the government and costs associated with the detailed design phase are not budgeted and will fall within the current financial year given the deadline for detailed design is March 2027.

8.7 Legal Issues

There is no current legislative requirement for the Council to proceed down the Head Start pathway. The current decision is being made in the context of the Government's Simplifying Local Government reform programme and the Head Start pathway announced on 5 May 2026.

8.8 Policy Issues - Section 80

The decision to submit a proposal for a Head Start pathway is not, in itself, inconsistent with any current Council policy, plan, or strategy. However, any proposed structural changes resulting from the Council's preferred option being proposed and accepted may result in significant departures from the existing governance structure, plans and policies.

Attachments:

Appendix 1 Head Start Simplifying Local Government Outline Proposal – DRAFT – Stratford District Council South Taranaki District Council

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'S Hanne', is shown within a rectangular box.

Sven Hanne
Chief Executive

Date: 30 July 2026



Head Start Simplifying Local Government Outline Proposal - DRAFT

Stratford District Council

South Taranaki District Council



AUGUST 2026



Letter from Mayors

DRAFT



Contents

1. Executive summary	3
2. Proposal eligibility and overview	6
3. Our case for change	12
4. Assessment criteria	15
5. Treaty obligations and the views of mana whenua	26
6. Requests of Central Government	28
7. Transitioning outline into detailed design	29
Appendix 1 Stratford District Council Community Survey Responses	
Appendix 2 South Taranaki District Council Community Survey Responses	
Appendix 3 Iwi letters of support	
Appendix 4 Local Government Reform – Timeline of changes	

DRAFT



1. Executive summary

Stratford District Council (SDC) and South Taranaki District Council (STDC) jointly propose establishing one Stratford and South Taranaki unitary council. This is a locally led proposal to create a simpler, more accountable and practical form of local government for the two districts. Community testing indicates strong preference in favour of this model.

This proposal assumes New Plymouth district forms a separate unitary authority or some such other structure. The two new local government authorities for Taranaki will be supported by shared regional governance over some specific region-wide functions.

This proposal recognises that Taranaki is connected, but its communities are not all the same. It does not force all Taranaki communities into a single governance model. Instead, it provides a practical two-unitary pathway that reduces the number of councils, strengthens local accountability and preserves regional coherence through a focused joint committee that provides shared regional governance.

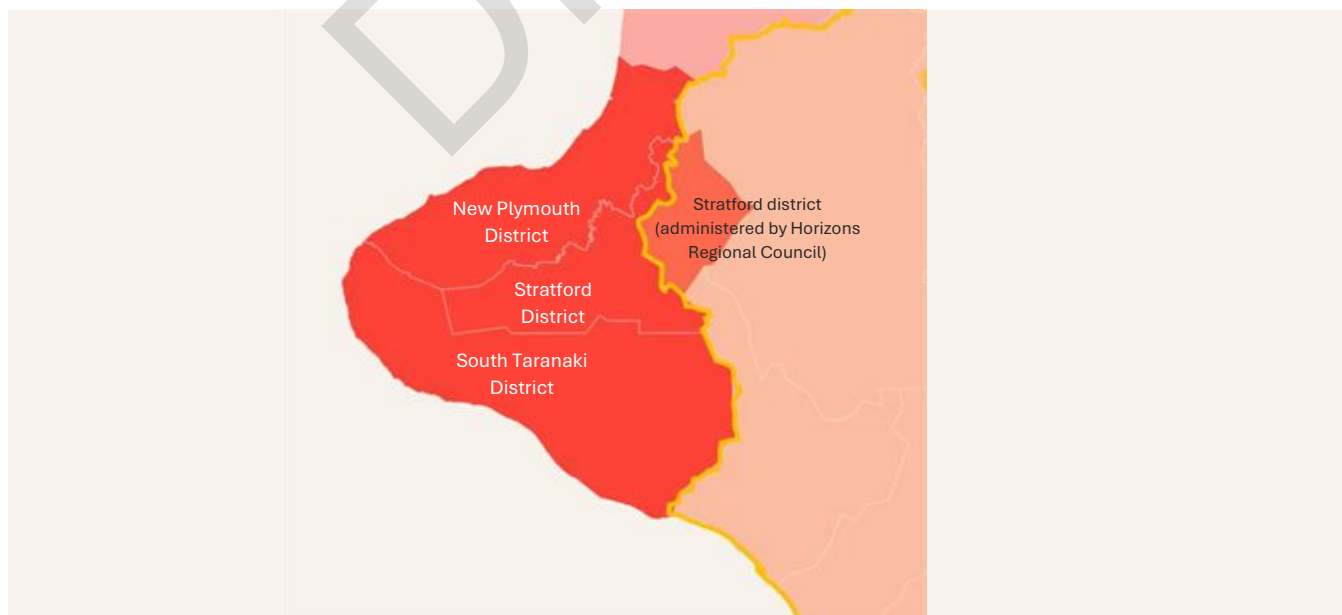
A Stratford & South Taranaki Unitary Council has overwhelming public support

The proposal reflects a clear principle – unitary by default, regional by exception. Decisions that may affect Stratford and South Taranaki communities should sit with one accountable institution. Wider regional arrangements should be retained only where natural systems, statutory requirements or cross-boundary coordination make that necessary.

This proposal has been developed through the Government's Head Start pathway, providing an opportunity for Stratford and South Taranaki to share their own future local government arrangements and design a model that reflects their communities, priorities and aspirations.

The Stratford and South Taranaki unitary council boundaries will comprise all of the area currently covered by Stratford District Council and South Taranaki District Council, including the area of Stratford district currently administered by Horizons Council.

Existing Taranaki region boundaries





Stratford and South Taranaki are the right fit

Community and iwi support the proposed changes. There is overwhelming public support. In Stratford District Council, 83% of over 600 respondents supported this model, and in South Taranaki District Council, support came from 94% of almost 1400 respondents (refer to Appendices 1 and 2). Ngāti Ruanui and Ngā Rauru support the two-unitary-authority model for Taranaki, and informally, a third iwi supports the proposed model.

Matching the scale and form of local governance to the communities they represent

The proposal is about simplification and accountability. Existing collaboration between Stratford District Council and South Taranaki District Council has value, but it does not remove separate mandates, separate budgets, separate planning cycles, or separate accountabilities. A Stratford and South Taranaki unitary council will move these matters from coordination between institutions to decision making within one accountable institution.

Taranaki is connected, but Taranaki communities are different. Taranaki’s communities are connected through common economic, environmental and infrastructure systems. However, communities of interest and characteristics of the districts are most similar in Stratford and South Taranaki. The proposed structure is a deliberate choice to match the scale and form of governance to the communities and systems that operate across Stratford and South Taranaki.

Local governance and service delivery will be the default, and regional only by exception. Shared regional governance over the small number of regional systems and functions that need to remain whole is delivered through formal collaboration with New Plymouth. In all other respects Stratford and South Taranaki make integrated decisions for the communities, infrastructure and services that are best managed at that scale.

Overall, this proposal benefits Taranaki as a whole by reducing the number of councils, clarifying local accountability for Stratford and South Taranaki, and preserving integrated regional management where it is essential. It avoids forcing all Taranaki communities into a single governance model, while ensuring catchments, regional planning, transport planning, emergency management, and strategic assets are not fragmented.

Assessment criteria

This proposal meets the Government’s five assessment criteria and presents a practical, locally led pathway to establish one Stratford and South Taranaki unitary council.

Criteria	Met	Key Points
1. Supports the new planning system	✓	• Shared regional governance over spatial and environment planning and catchment management, while a Stratford and South Taranaki unitary council influences local environmental priorities and delivery issues. • Need to coordinate regional and district planning functions across four councils is reduced. • Regional interfaces for councils within the Taranaki district, and between Taranaki councils and the neighbouring regions, are provided through the shared regional governance.



Criteria	Met	Key Points
2. Simplifies local governance	✓	- Current collaboration is turned into formal accountability when territorial and relevant regional responsibilities for Stratford and South Taranaki are brought together into one unitary council. - Duplicated governance, policy, engagement, reporting, and administration are reduced. - Decision making becomes easier to understand for communities as, for most matters, Stratford and South Taranaki residents, iwi, businesses, and partners will have one clearer point of accountability.
3. Economies of scale	✓	- Economies of scope are achieved by bringing territorial and regional functions together. - Practical benefits of scale are created by forming a larger organisation than either Stratford District Council or South Taranaki District Council alone. - Resilience is built by bringing the two district councils together allowing stronger capacity to absorb workforce, systems, and delivery pressures and building a strong balance sheet.
4. Maintains local voice	✓	- Local voice is a core design condition for a Stratford and South Taranaki unitary council. - Shared governance is paired with a deliberate representation and engagement model to provide practical local influence for towns, rural communities, coastal communities, iwi, Māori, and other communities of interest.
5. Deliverability	✓	- Day one readiness is the central test to ensure the new authority will maintain uninterrupted delivery of core services and statutory functions from day one. - Existing collaboration between Stratford District Council and South Taranaki District Council provides a strong base to establish the new authority. - A dedicated transition body established immediately after Government approval will have clear authority and escalation points, milestones, programme support, and direct involvement from all stakeholders. - Transition will be staged to manage the Head Start timeframes through early establishment decisions, a dedicated transition body, and a tightly managed establishment programme.

Requests of Central Government

The participating councils are seeking central government support to enable a staged, practical transition to a Stratford and South Taranaki unitary council, while maintaining service continuity and community confidence.

The support required will include bespoke legislation and transfer powers, transitional governance arrangements, electoral and representation provisions, timing relief for Long-term Plans, Annual Plans, representation review requirements, or rate capping if needed, support for rates and debt transition where required, and implementation support for day one readiness.

Transitioning outline into detailed design

A transition governance arrangement will be established immediately following Government approval to provide clear leadership, oversee detailed design, manage risks, and maintain momentum through to implementation.



2. Proposal eligibility and overview

Eligibility

This proposal meets the Head Start eligibility requirements as a joint subregional proposal.

Requirement	Meets	Rationale
Joint proposal	✓	Submitted jointly by Stratford District Council and South Taranaki District Council.
Majority support	✓	Two councils submitting represents 100% of the directly affected territorial authorities in the proposed area. This satisfies the Head Start majority test.
Creation of a unitary authority	✓	Establishes a Stratford and South Taranaki unitary authority combining territorial authority functions with relevant regional council functions.
Fewer local authorities overall	✓	Replaces two territorial authorities with one unitary authority and transfers relevant regional functions to that authority. The remaining functions would be delivered across a wider region or interregional grouping through joint arrangements.
Region is geographically large and has complex issues	✓	A subregional unitary authority will better serve the Taranaki region given it is geographically large, it is complex due to catchments crossing district and regional boundaries, and it has distinct communities of interest that differ between the combined Stratford and South Taranaki districts and New Plymouth district.
Clear accountability and effective delivery of territorial and regional functions	✓	Accountability for services is clearly defined. The Stratford and South Taranaki unitary authority, and the New Plymouth unitary authority (or other arrangement), will each be accountable for territorial functions and locally focused regional functions within their districts. Shared regional governance provides regional accountability for specified region-wide functions including catchment management. This approach provides clear lines of responsibility while maintaining a coordinated regional approach.

One Stratford and South Taranaki unitary council for all local matters

Stratford District Council (SDC) and South Taranaki District Council (STDC) propose the formation of one unitary council to bring together these two districts. The Stratford and South Taranaki unitary council will deliver both territorial and relevant regional functions across the combined area of both districts.

This proposal is designed to work alongside a separate New Plymouth unitary authority or some such other structure. Regional functions can no longer be delivered in their current form after 2028 so the form of New Plymouth District Council will need to change in any case.

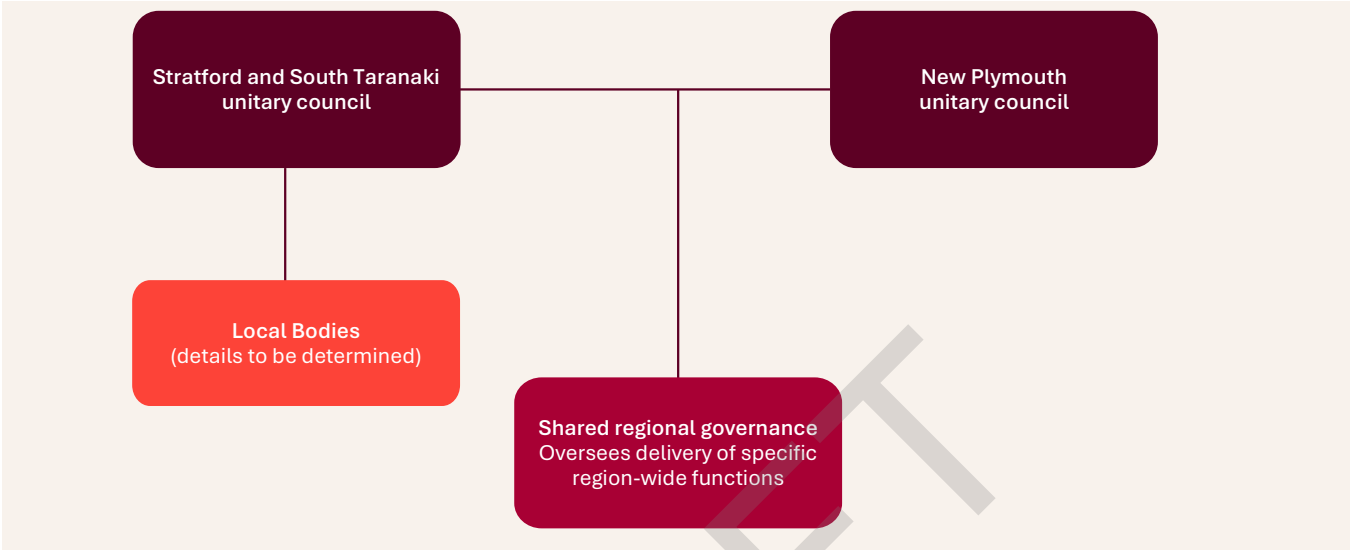
The two new authorities will be supported by a shared regional governance to provide some specific region-wide functions.

Given the exact form of the New Plymouth governing body is not known at this stage, the detail of this proposal focuses on the formation of the Stratford and South Taranaki unitary council.



The proposed structure of the two unitary authorities and the shared regional governance is shown below:

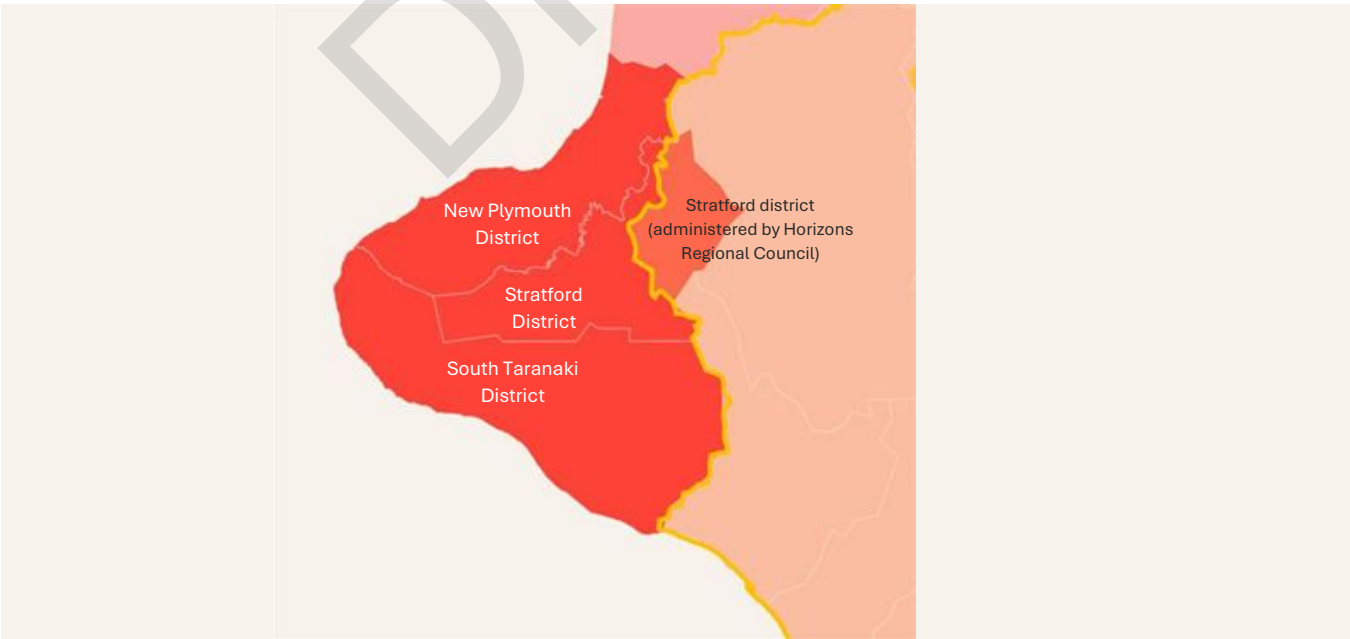
Proposed Structure



The other key change proposed is that the Stratford and South Taranaki unitary council boundaries will comprise all the area currently covered by SDC and STDC, including the area of Stratford District that is currently administered by Horizons Regional Council.

While much of the Taranaki catchment area is integrated, there is already cross boundary coordination required because the Waitōtara catchment extends into Whanganui District and the Pātea catchment extends into parts of Rangitikei District, meaning catchments already cross territorial authority boundaries and these will be managed similarly under this proposal.

Existing Taranaki region boundaries





Key workings of the Stratford and South Taranaki unitary council

The key workings of this structure are outlined below:

Key workings of a Stratford and South Taranaki unitary council and shared regional governance

Aspect	Description
Basic structure	One unitary council, with its own mayor, councillors, and local mandate, plus shared regional governance (joint committee) for a tightly defined set of regional functions.
Governance	Stratford and South Taranaki unitary council hold the democratic mandate, rating powers, and ultimate accountability for their area. Shared regional governance is the mechanism that keeps a small number of regional functions whole. Delivered through a joint council comprising elected members from the Stratford and South Taranaki unitary council and the New Plymouth district unitary council. The joint committee does not have an independent mandate.
Community voice	Stratford and South Taranaki unitary authority supported by local bodies and other mechanisms to ensure community views can be fed through to elected members.
Funding	Stratford and South Taranaki unitary council retains its own rating powers. Funding for the Joint Committee and the functions it oversees has to be guaranteed and not renegotiated each year.
Service delivery	The model assumes local by default, regional only by exception. The joint committee will oversee delivery of the functions that depend on scale, natural systems, or cross-boundary coordination. Everything else will stay with the Stratford and South Taranaki unitary council (or be delegated to local bodies) unless there is a compelling reason otherwise.
Organisation and staffing	One chief executive, leadership structure and workforce for the Stratford and South Taranaki unitary council. Shared delivery is right-sized for the specific functions delivered
Ultimate accountability	Ultimate democratic accountability sits with the Stratford and South Taranaki unitary council.
Requires legislation	A joint committee does not need new legislation.

Regional function allocation assumes local by default, regional by expectation

A Stratford and South Taranaki unitary council will deliver the regional functions that are primarily Stratford and South Taranaki focused, while retaining formal regional interfaces through joint committee where necessary. The indicative allocation of core key regional functions is outlined below:

Regional function allocation

Function	Proposed treatment	Why	Detailed design issue
Spatial and environment planning	Governed regionally through the joint committee	Four of six freshwater management units are split across district and region boundaries	Align Taranaki spatial plan boundaries with Stratford and South Taranaki unitary council boundary
Land use planning	Delivered by the Stratford and South Taranaki unitary council	Aligns with territorial authority functions	Confirm transitional plan arrangements
Freshwater and catchments	Governed regionally through the joint committee	Four of six freshwater management units are split across governance boundaries	Align Taranaki spatial plan boundaries with Stratford and South Taranaki unitary council boundary



Function	Proposed treatment	Why	Detailed design issue
Environmental monitoring	Delivered by the Stratford and South Taranaki unitary council	Requires technical capacity	Confirm data, systems, and monitoring arrangements
Compliance and enforcement	Delivered by the Stratford and South Taranaki unitary council	DIA guidance notes a possible national regulator	Maintain flexibility pending national policy decisions
Emergency management	Delivered by the Stratford and South Taranaki unitary council and supported by contracted arrangement	Existing Regional Emergency Management Office capability	Confirm service agreement and accountability
Maritime regulation and harbourmaster functions	Delivered through existing shared arrangement with New Plymouth unitary council	Specialist function	Confirm statutory responsibilities, costs, service levels, and accountability
Regional transport planning	Potentially governed regionally through the joint committee	State highway links	Confirm Land Transport Management Act roles and committee structure
Public transport and investments	Delivered through existing shared arrangement with New Plymouth unitary council	Majority of public transport services NPDC	Confirm funding, service levels, and governance
Regional strategic assets including Port Taranaki, Stadium Taranaki and three regional gardens	Managed through existing shared management and rates funding arrangements with New Plymouth unitary council or consider creation of CCO	Assets benefit all districts and existing legislation already in place for some aspects	Confirm governance, responsibilities, provider, costs, service levels, and accountability

Our approach to developing this proposal

This proposal has been shaped by:

- engagement with participating and affected councils
- community engagement
- iwi feedback
- evidence on communities of interest, service patterns, catchments, transport, affordability, and financial sustainability
- existing collaboration and shared service experience
- assessment against the five Cabinet criteria for Head Start proposals.

This proposal has been developed jointly by the participating councils through a series of workshops with councillors and senior officers, including a joint workshop with both SDC and STDC. Discussions reflect a shared view that councils are well placed to lead the design of future arrangements through the Head Start pathway and shape a model that reflects Stratford and South Taranaki conditions.

NPDC and TRC were both involved in a workshop with all four Taranaki councils to consider multiple options for the region, including formation of one unitary council or two unitary councils for the whole of the Taranaki region. NPDC has since decided to explore alternative arrangements.



SDC and STDC ran surveys asking their communities about the future of local government in the region. Each council asked similar underlying questions about what shape local government should take, what the benefits of change could be, what concerns people had, and what mattered most to them if change went ahead.

There are eight Iwi in Taranaki as a whole, some crossing the existing boundaries of SDC, STDC, NPDC and neighbouring councils. Any changes to representation arrangements will require detailed engagement and consultation with iwi, hapū, and communities.

Options considered

SDC and STDC considered two options to test the right scale for future governance.

Option one – single unitary council

- Brings planning, funding, and delivery into one organisation, providing a single point of accountability and making trade-offs transparent.
- Offers the greatest opportunity to realise benefits of scale, particularly in capability, coordination, and potential efficiency gains, although financial impacts are likely to be modest and take time to emerge.
- Simplifies the system externally, with one council responsible for all functions, but requires strong internal capability and well-designed local representation to maintain connection with communities.
- Requires region-wide consistency in governance and representation settings, limiting the ability to reflect different local preferences across Taranaki.

Option two – two unitary councils

- Supports community views with preliminary engagement showing a very high level of support for the creation of two unitary authorities.
 - In SDC, 83% of over 600 respondents supported the two unitary model.
 - In STDC, 94% of almost 1400 respondents supported the two unitary model.
- Maintains locally focused decision-making through two independent unitary councils with their own mandates, allowing representation and governance arrangements to reflect different community preferences.
- Retains a need for regional coordination through a shared regional governance, meaning key decisions on planning, strategic infrastructure, environmental management, and in particular the management of four of the six water catchments, must be agreed regionally.
- Delivers less benefits of scale compared to a single unitary model, with duplication of governance, policy, and corporate functions only slightly reduced from the status quo.
- Creates a system where regional alignment must be actively maintained through legislation. Careful design and legislative drafting are required to prevent delays on cross-boundary issues.



Summary of options assessment against Head Start Criteria

Criteria	Option 1 Single unitary council comprising Stratford, South Taranaki and New Plymouth districts	Option 2 A Stratford and South Taranaki unitary council and a New Plymouth unitary council
1. Supports the new planning system		
2. Simplifies local governance		
3. Economies of scale		
4. Maintains local voice		
5. Deliverability		

A single Taranaki unitary authority will offer the greatest organisational scale and the simplest external structure. However, scale alone is not the only test. For Stratford and South Taranaki, the preferred model provides a more balanced outcome as it reduces the number of councils, strengthens local accountability, preserves regional coherence through the joint committee, and better reflects the different community, economic and governance profiles across Taranaki.



3. Our case for change

Taranaki is connected

Taranaki combines strong local identities with shared environmental, infrastructure and economic systems that operate across district boundaries. Future local governance arrangements need to support coordinated regional decision making while also recognising the differences in communities across the region.

Taranaki comprises the Stratford District Council (SDC), South Taranaki District Council (STDC), and New Plymouth District Council (NPDC). Together, these districts form a single regional council area administered by Taranaki Regional Council (TRC) and are home to approximately 126,000 residents which is expected to reach 138,000 within the next 20 years. Māori comprise approximately 22 percent of Taranaki’s population, compared with approximately 18 percent nationally.

Taranaki is geographically large, covering approximately 7,986 square kilometres, and contains a diverse mix of urban, rural, and coastal communities. Taranaki Regional Council's boundaries do not align directly with district boundaries, specifically in the Stratford district where approximately one-third of that district is administered by Horizons Council.

Matching the scale and form of local governance to the communities they represent

Taranaki’s communities are connected through common economic, environmental and infrastructure systems. Taranaki’s river catchments, freshwater systems, flood management schemes, and coastal environments operate across existing territorial authority boundaries and require coordinated management at a regional scale.

Taranaki communities are diverse

Stratford and South Taranaki share a strong productive economy, underpinned by significant rural, energy, utilities and manufacturing activity. Their economic profiles reflect their different drivers and opportunities.

Communities of interest and characteristics of the districts are similar between Stratford and South Taranaki. The key aspects being low population, mix of rural and urban population, low density population across large land areas, low economic activity and growth indicators, and iwi that cross shared boundaries. In contrast, New Plymouth district has higher population, greater urban population and land area, higher density of population and higher economic activity.

Communities of interest and characteristics of Stratford and South Taranaki

Indicator	Stratford district	South Taranaki district	Assessment
Population	10,000	29,000	Both have low population base making up only 31% of Taranaki region
	8% of Taranaki region	23% of Taranaki region	
	62% urban	56% urban	Similar urban and rural population mix
	Approx. 50% over 40 years of age	Approx. 50% over 40 years of age	Similar age profiles
	Approx. 12% deprivation levels 9 and 10	Approx. 35% deprivation levels 9 and 10	



Indicator	Stratford district	South Taranaki district	Assessment
Māori population and iwi	15% Māori 8 iwi in Taranaki as a whole, some cross existing district and neighbouring council boundaries	29% Māori	Iwi cross shared boundaries
Scale	2,205 sq. km 28% of Taranaki region About 4 people per sq. km About 9 sq. km urban land (0.4%)	3,575 sq. km 44% of Taranaki region About 8 people per sq. km About 40 sq. km urban land (1.1%)	Both large rural districts making up 72% of total Taranaki region Both low density population
Economic activity	\$600m GDP approx. 1,521 businesses	\$3,000m GDP approx. 4,368 businesses	Both relatively low GDP
Top 3 industries	Agriculture, forestry and fishing Education and training Retail trade	Manufacturing Agriculture, forestry and fishing Construction	Some alignment of Top 3 industries
Household income	\$75,500	\$75,700	Similar household income
Live and work in same district	67%	93%	Different mobility
Growth projections	14% by 2053 2.0 consents per 1000 population	2.9% by 2037, then decline by 2.1% from 2037 to 2054 2.6 consents per 1000 population	Both low growth areas

Stratford and South Taranaki are the right fit

SDC and STDC have chosen a Stratford and South Taranaki unitary authority because there is value for their districts to come together to provide a joined-up approach to territorial and regional functions specific to their area.

The proposed structure is a deliberate choice to match the scale and form of governance to the communities and systems that operate across Stratford and South Taranaki.

The combined Stratford and South Taranaki district has natural synergies. The combined Stratford and South Taranaki district has a large land mass, low population base, and density, growing tension between rural and urban communities, low growth expectations, modest economic activity, and shared iwi.

The councils also operate under similar rating frameworks and funding approaches, reducing complexity associated with rating harmonisation and transition into a single authority. They both have internal business units for managing water services and use a First Past the Post voting system, whereas New Plymouth have formed a Water CCO and use Single Transferable Vote for voting.

SDC and STDC also have similar views in terms of representation going forward. Both value meaningful local representation and agree that ward systems work well, iwi representation is important, and the need for some form of local bodies to ensure local voice continues to be heard in a community where population per councillor is relatively low.



Key systems including river catchments, transport networks, environmental management and economic activity, and planning frameworks cross district and regional boundaries in and around Taranaki so there are already cross-regional complexities in the Taranaki region. It is essential, under any new governance structure for Taranaki, that the region has a mechanism to provide robust regional governance for these systems.

Governance and service delivery is local by default, regional by exception

Shared regional governance through the joint committee is again designed to provide regional coherence through a scale and form that matches the communities the councils represent. It is not intended to recreate the current regional council in another form, its purpose is narrower. It is intended to allow Stratford and South Taranaki to make integrated decisions for the communities, infrastructure and services that are best managed at that scale, while preserving coherence for the small number of regional systems that need to remain whole. The joint committee as a vehicle for regional interfaces is not only intended to serve the councils within the Taranaki district, but also the relationships between Taranaki councils and those in neighbouring regions.

Simplification and accountability

Taranaki's councils have increasingly worked together to address issues that are regional in nature. Current examples include shared strategic assets including Port Taranaki, Stadium Taranaki and three regional gardens, regional solid waste collection contract with district specific levels of service, civil defence, and regional transport planning. SDC and STDC are motivated to use this baseline of successful collaboration to join together in a more formal sense to serve their combined communities.

The limits of the current system depend on collaboration to make connected decisions across land use, infrastructure, catchments, transport, resilience, and local services. Collaboration has value, but it does not remove separate mandates, separate budgets, separate planning cycles, or separate accountabilities. A Stratford and South Taranaki unitary council will move these arrangements from coordination between institutions to decision making within one accountable institution.

Community and iwi support the proposed changes

In SDC, 83% of over 600 respondents supported this model, and in STDC support came from 94% of almost 1400 respondents. Strong community support from Stratford and South Taranaki confirms that the proposed model has a local mandate.

A Stratford & South Taranaki Unitary Council has overwhelming public support

In STDC, communities saw the biggest opportunities arising from change as simplifying local governance arrangements, shared services opportunities and reducing duplication. Their biggest concerns were loss of local voice and representation, and one size fits all policies that do not suit different communities. In terms of what matters most about how council services are delivered in the future, it was fair representation for different communities of interest. The Stratford and South Taranaki unitary council will provide benefits and address these concerns.

Ngāti Ruanui and Ngā Rauru have stated their support of a two-unitary-authority model for Taranaki, and informally, a third iwi supports the proposed model. One iwi has indicated informally that they support a single unitary for the region. These views will be explored in more detail during detailed design.

Based on the benefits outlined and strong community and iwi support, the participating councils endorse the progression of this proposal to detailed design.



4. Assessment criteria

Supports the new planning system

Improvements to the system

The proposal supports the new planning system by separating matters that are best managed at a local unitary scale from matters that must remain regionally integrated. Land use, local infrastructure, service delivery, and local implementation will sit with the Stratford and South Taranaki unitary council. Regional spatial planning, natural environment planning, and catchment management will be coordinated through the shared regional governance of the joint committee where a regional approach is necessary. This preserves regional coherence while reducing the number of organisations involved in local delivery.

How the proposal improves current arrangements

This proposal reduces the need to coordinate regional and district planning functions across four councils. This will support more consistent decision making, reduce duplicated engagement and analysis, and give communities a clearer line of accountability for planning choices.

The table below outlines which party will be responsible for which activity under the new planning system under the Current State and the Stratford and South Taranaki unitary council structures.

We note that the existing bills have been drafted with the current regional and district council structures in mind. Some interpretation is required to apply the proposed bills to the options with new entities.

Indicative roles and responsibilities under the new planning system

Function	Current state	Stratford and South Taranaki unitary council
Regional Spatial Plan (RSP)	All four councils appoint the Spatial Plan Committee to develop the plan.	Stratford and South Taranaki unitary council (and the New Plymouth unitary council) appoint the Spatial Plan Committee to develop the plan.
Natural Environment Plan	TRC leads development of a single regional plan.	The joint committee leads development of a single regional plan, while a Stratford and South Taranaki unitary council influences local environmental priorities and delivery issues. This responsibility could be explicitly assigned to the joint committee.
District Land Use Plan	NPDC, STDC and SDC each prepare a District Land Use Plan.	Stratford and South Taranaki unitary council will prepare their own Land Use Plan. Note that this reflects the new planning system's separation of regional environmental regulation from territorial land-use planning.
Infrastructure Strategy (delivery of RSP)	Multiple organisations at regional and local level with multiple funding pathways.	Stratford and South Taranaki unitary council develops an Infrastructure Strategy, which includes their obligations to deliver commitments of the RSP.
Long Term Plan (LTP)	Four organisations each develop an LTP.	Stratford and South Taranaki unitary council develops an LTP, that includes their obligations to deliver commitments of the RSP.



Function	Current state	Stratford and South Taranaki unitary council
Strategy, policy, and plans	All four councils need to approve draft RSP for notification and adopt final RSP, each with its own decision-making process. Deadlocks referred to the Minister.	Stratford and South Taranaki unitary council approves draft RSP for notification, and adopts final RSP, with deadlocks referred to the Minister. Joint committee recommends adoption of the Natural Environment Plan and any regional strategies, policies, and plans to each council. Stratford and South Taranaki unitary council approves their own Land Use Plan and other sub-regional strategies, policies, and plans.
Infrastructure Delivery	Split between regional and three district councils.	Most delivery by Stratford and South Taranaki unitary council, unless compelling reason to deliver regionally.
Consent and Enforcements	Split between TRC and three district councils.	Potential for shared governance through the joint committee and local delivery through each unitary council.
Monitoring & Reporting	Monitoring is split and can be hard to compare.	Potential for shared governance through the joint committee and local delivery through each unitary council.
Community Consultation	Multiple engagement rounds across separate plans and budgets.	Potential for shared governance through the joint committee and local delivery through each unitary council.
Iwi Engagement	Multiple relationships and multiple plan-making processes across four councils.	Potential for shared governance through the joint committee and local delivery through each unitary council.

Trade-offs and considerations for detailed design

The key element requiring further consideration is integrated catchment management. This proposal creates a simpler framework than current state and regional functions can be kept intact through the joint committee, but this still retains some of the existing complexity to relationships, plan making and approval processes creating potential for delay and deadlocks.

However, because these key systems will cross boundaries beyond Taranaki under any regional or subregional governance model, this regional interface is required in any case. These challenges are not unique to Stratford and South Taranaki. Similar cross-boundary planning, catchment management, transport and infrastructure issues exist throughout New Zealand and would need to be managed under any future local government structure.

Matters to confirm through detailed design

Under the Stratford and South Taranaki unitary council structure, four of the six Taranaki catchments are split between a Stratford and South Taranaki unitary authority and NPDC. If a catchment is split between councils, then planning, monitoring and enforcement can become fragmented, which increases the chance of duplication and inconsistent decisions. Catchment management will be the responsibility of the joint committee to ensure stable and consistent management of catchments.

A catchment within the existing SDC boundary is currently administered by Horizons Council. SDC and STDC both recommend that this catchment moves to the new Stratford and South Taranaki unitary council, but this will need to be worked through with Horizons Council.



In addition to this matter, in detailed design:

- Allocation of other roles and responsibilities under the regional planning system (as outlined above) need to be confirmed.
- Further work is also required to map planning staff, data, systems, consents, monitoring programmes, and transitional plan changes to ensure transfer without delaying current work or weakening statutory continuity. Existing plans, designations, consents and regional workstreams will need clear transitional arrangements, supported by agreed interim decision-making processes.

These matters are important to protect continuity and ensure the new Stratford and South Taranaki unitary council has enough planning, environmental, and technical capability from day one.

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Simplifies local governance

Improvements to the system

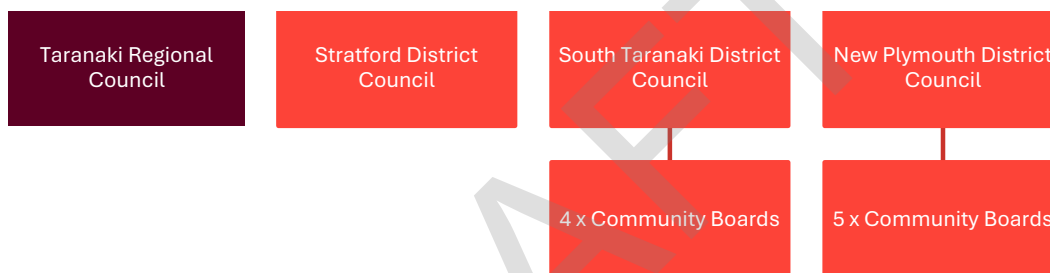
The proposal will simplify local governance by turning current collaboration into formal accountability when territorial and relevant regional responsibilities for Stratford and South Taranaki are brought together into one unitary council.

A single Stratford and South Taranaki unitary council will reduce duplicated governance, policy, engagement, reporting, and administration. The model will make decision making easier to understand for communities. For most matters, Stratford and South Taranaki residents, iwi, businesses, and partners will have one clearer point of accountability.

How the proposal improves current arrangements

The current arrangements comprise a two-tier local government structure, with TRC responsible for regional functions and SDC, STDC, and NPDC responsible for local services.

Existing council structure



While these roles are formally defined, this structure will require increased coordination across multiple organisations under the new planning system, which can add complexity for decision-making, planning, and delivery.

The current arrangements are not always simple for communities to navigate. Residents often experience local government as one system and accountability can be unclear between TRC, SDC and STDC for issues that are connected in practice.

A Stratford and South Taranaki unitary model will:

- Create one set of elected members and local body members to provide joined-up governance for the broader Stratford and South Taranaki areas.
- Reduce the regional–territorial split and the need for coordination between four councils. It will not remove every regional interface, but it will simplify the matters that are clearly related to Stratford and South Taranaki areas.
- Allow many services to be considered together, rather than through separate regional and district processes making it easier for communities to understand requirements, reducing ambiguity about who is responsible for decisions and outcomes, and providing a coordinated approach to community consultation.
- Reduce duplication through the consolidation of core statutory and planning documents, e.g. Long Term Plans, Annual Plans, Annual Reports, strategies, policies, bylaws, and asset management plans. This impact is not limited to the number of instruments as it also reduces the effort required to develop, maintain, update, and consult on these documents.



Trade-offs and considerations for detailed design

The main trade-off is that simplification across the broader area will reduce the direct autonomy currently held by SDC and STDC. Smaller towns, rural communities, and coastal communities may be concerned that decisions could become more centralised or shift towards South Taranaki as the larger area with the biggest urban area, Hawera. This concern will be addressed through deliberate representation design, accessible local services, and clear ways for local priorities to influence budgets and service levels.

There is also a possibility that some complexity is shifted rather than removed as some functions will still need coordination across, and beyond, the wider Taranaki region. These interfaces will be limited to functions that genuinely require regional scale and will have clear roles, funding arrangements, decision rights, and accountability.

Matters to confirm through detailed design

Further work is needed to confirm which regional functions the Stratford and South Taranaki unitary authority will deliver, which functions require joint or shared arrangements with neighbouring councils, and how staff, systems, data, contracts, assets, liabilities, rating arrangements, and customer service functions will transition. These matters are essential to ensure the model simplifies governance without weakening local voice or creating unclear shared accountability.

Detailed design needs to confirm the local representation model, including wards, at-large representation, community boards, local boards, committees, advisory groups, community forums, or another local mechanism. It also needs to define the scope of any local delegations, how local priorities will influence budgets and service levels, and how local service access will be maintained across smaller towns, rural areas, and coastal communities. Further detail is outlined in the maintaining local voice section of this proposal.



Economies of scale

Improvements to the system

The Stratford and South Taranaki unitary council will create:

- economies of scope by bringing territorial and regional functions together
- practical scale from a larger organisation than either SDC or STDC alone
- resilience allowing stronger capacity to absorb workforce, systems, and delivery pressures.

The strongest case for the Stratford and South Taranaki unitary council is the creation of a more resilient operating platform.

Estimated 5 - 7 % efficiency gains

A Stratford and South Taranaki unitary council will have greater scale than either district council alone, while remaining focused to reflect rural, coastal, and town-based priorities. This provides a stronger base for specialist capability, procurement, asset management, environmental planning, and service continuity.

How the proposal improves current arrangements

The current model relies on four separate councils maintaining their own governance, planning, financial, policy, reporting, and corporate arrangements. While SDC and STDC already collaborate on some aspects of service delivery, collaboration does not remove the need for separate decisions, separate systems, and separate accountabilities. A Stratford and South Taranaki unitary council will reduce this structural duplication and allow resources to be deployed as one organisation.

Practical scale will also support more integrated investment decisions. A Stratford and South Taranaki unitary council will plan and prioritise infrastructure, rural resilience, local roads, community facilities, and environmental programmes through one framework, rather than relying on alignment between separate council plans and funding decisions. This will strengthen the link between strategy, funding, and delivery.

The larger Stratford and South Taranaki unitary council will have greater workforce resilience than two smaller councils operating separately. It will be better placed to attract and retain specialist staff, reduce reliance on small teams or key individuals, and create stronger professional capability in areas where local government faces capacity pressures. The combined authority would also have a larger balance sheet, broader revenue base and wider rating base than either council individually. Subject to detailed design and allocation of regional functions and assets, this is expected to improve financial resilience and borrowing capacity, providing greater flexibility to fund future infrastructure and resilience investment.

The economies of scale will remove duplication as summarised in the table below:

Expected reduction in duplication

Area	Where duplication reduces
Governance, policy, and reporting	Fewer separate strategies, policies, bylaws, consultations, reports, and governance processes. This will reduce duplicated effort and create a more consistent approach.
Asset management and infrastructure investment	One Stratford and South Taranaki asset and investment framework will allow infrastructure, local roads, community facilities, and resilience investment to be prioritised across the area.
Procurement and contract management	Consolidated procurement will reduce duplicated tendering, improve supplier visibility, support stronger contract management, and create better market signals for regional work programmes.
Corporate systems and customer service	Over time, common systems, processes, data, and service channels will reduce duplication and improve customer experience, although integration costs and sequencing will need careful management.



Efficiencies should be framed carefully. The proposal should not promise immediate rate reductions. However, a Stratford and South Taranaki unitary council will provide a better platform for managing affordability, reducing duplicated processes, prioritising investment and making transparent trade-offs over time.

The evidence suggests:

- There is potential for operating costs of a Stratford and South Taranaki unitary council to be between 5 – 7% lower than they currently are, after taking into account potential duplication and changes to levels of service.
- During amalgamation direct cost savings are uncertain, can take time to realise, and are often affected by transition costs, service level choices, representation arrangements, systems integration, and workforce decisions.
- Transition costs need to be explicit, including systems, staff, contracts, assets, liabilities, data, and customer channels.
- Rates are likely to rise under any scenario, especially because of transport, flood protection, infrastructure renewal, and resilience pressures.
- Rates, debt, and reserves need fair treatment, including what is ringfenced, what transfers, what is shared and what moves over time.
- Reform will not remove rating pressure or deliver immediate savings, so the proposal should not overclaim financial benefits.

Trade-offs and considerations for detailed design

The key trade-off is the economies of scope and scale from a Stratford and South Taranaki unitary council will most likely be more limited and may take more time to emerge than if a single Taranaki wide unitary authority was formed. While a larger model may offer greater organisational scale, it will dilute the Stratford and South Taranaki focus both in terms of community outcomes and local voice.

Matters to confirm through detailed design

Direct operating savings, transition costs, and rating impacts will be tested through detailed design.

STDC residents benefit from subsidisation of rates from the dividends of the STDC investment fund. These benefits are protected by specific legislation and STDC are requesting that these provisions are protected in the immediate future while longer-term arrangements are considered. The details of these arrangements need to be explored as part of detailed design.



Maintains local voice

Improvements to the system

Local voice is a core design condition for a Stratford and South Taranaki unitary council. It assumes Stratford and South Taranaki unitary council governance is paired with a deliberate representation and engagement model to provide practical local influence for towns, rural communities, coastal communities, iwi, Māori, and other communities of interest.

This proposal uses a wards-based model as the starting point. Population equality alone is not enough for ward design. Representation must also reflect geography, community identity, rural production, coastal communities, Māori participation, and local service access.

The indicative representation model proposed for the Stratford and South Taranaki unitary council includes:

- one mayor elected at large
- approximately 14 ward-based councillors
- design of wards to best reflect communities of interest, not just population or land area
- Māori representation protected by legislation
- local bodies, with possibilities including community boards, local boards, or alternate forms of more localised representation and input into decisions.

The indicative number of councillors is based on comparisons with similar territorial authorities, the recognition by both SDC and STDC councillors that there will be reduced numbers of councillors compared to the current combined total of 26, and the expectation that councillors' workloads are likely to increase with the new unitary council having a broader scope of functions and a higher population base.

The aim is to give communities practical influence without creating unnecessary governance complexity. The final view on how to maintain local voice may be best decided by completing a representation review at the appropriate time in the transition process.

How the proposal improves current arrangements

A Stratford and South Taranaki unitary council will connect local input to one decision-making system. Local priorities will be considered within one governance framework, rather than being split across district and regional institutions.

Under the current state, all electoral populations are included in a ward, both SDC and STDC have Māori Wards, and STDC has community boards while SDC does not. The current system protects district-level representation, but local influence can be indirect where issues operate across the combined area.

The benefit is clarity. Not every decision will be local, but local priorities will sit within one accountable Stratford and South Taranaki unitary council that balances regional coherence with town, rural, coastal, iwi and Māori interests.

Trade-offs and considerations for detailed design

The shift from two district councils to one Stratford and South Taranaki unitary council is a material change, but it is also an opportunity to design a new platform for local voice for these communities deliberately. Communities will need confidence that their likely concerns about centralisation, reduced influence for smaller communities, and weaker connections between elected members and



residents will be addressed. This proposal supports local voice by placing it at the heart of the design process.

Matters to confirm through detailed design

Detailed design will confirm how to make ward design, councillor accessibility, service centres, and local engagement strong enough to provide effective local influence without adding unnecessary structure. Detailed design will consider:

- a suitable name for the new unitary council which provides a joined-up local identity
- the number and boundaries of wards
- whether councillors are elected by ward only, at large, or through a mixed model
- the number and design of Māori wards or alternate representation
- whether ward names and boundaries will be catchment-based, place-based or district-based
- whether local bodies exist or not, and the form they take
- how all communities of interest are represented
- how service centre access and customer contact will be maintained
- how iwi relationships, Treaty settlement obligations, Māori representation, partnership forums and mana whenua involvement in planning and environmental management are protected or redesigned.

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Deliverability

The proposal is deliverable because it has a clear end-state and builds from existing collaboration between SDC and STDC. It will establish a Stratford and South Taranaki unitary council by the 2028 local elections, with territorial and relevant regional functions brought into one organisation.

The starting point is strong. SDC and STDC are already working together through existing shared arrangements across various functions. Both councils are already implementing significant organisational changes associated with water services reform, including dedicated business unit models, enhanced financial ring-fencing and regulatory compliance frameworks. This provides a practical foundation for integration and supports day-one readiness of the proposed authority.

A dedicated transition will be established immediately after Government approval. That body will have clear authority, milestones, programme support, and direct involvement from the participating councils, NPDC, TRC, mana whenua and PSGEs, and central government officials.

The transition can be staged. The Head Start timetable is demanding, but workable if the detailed design phase is treated as an establishment programme. The first stage will confirm governance and establishment settings. The second stage will prepare the new authority for the 2028 elections, including representation arrangements, transfer planning, interim governance, financial planning, and day one readiness. The third stage will complete operational integration after establishment, including systems consolidation, service model refinement, rating harmonisation, and longer-term organisational design. Day one readiness will be the central test as the new authority will need to maintain uninterrupted delivery of core services and statutory functions from day one.

Risks

Timing is the main delivery constraint, but it can be managed through early establishment decisions, a dedicated transition body and clear escalation points. The highest priority is to resolve matters that affect legislation, elections, service continuity, and funding before implementation begins.

The Head Start pathway is compressed and depends on timely Cabinet decisions, enabling legislation, transition governance, and clear establishment settings before the 2028 local elections.

The transition pathway will need to align with wider local government reform and implementation programmes, including those shown in Appendix 4. There is a significant programme of work for local government, with each programme needing to be adequately resourced by councils, central government, and their supply partners.

Matters to confirm through detailed design

Detailed design will focus on the establishment matters that determine deliverability, including:

- Transition governance: establish the body, authority, milestones, and programme support needed to manage the transition.
- Legislation and transfer powers: confirm the statutory changes, transfer instruments and decision rights needed before the 2028 elections.
- Local voice: design representation around Stratford and South Taranaki communities of interest, including wards, Māori representation, rural and coastal communities, service access, and practical local input into area-wide decisions.
- Day One readiness: confirm how services, statutory functions, staff, processes, systems, data, contracts, customer channels, and communications will continue.



- Regional function arrangements: confirm which functions will be governed and delivered by the Stratford and South Taranaki unitary council, governed by the joint committee and delivered by the unitary councils or governed by the joint committee and delivered regionally through other shared arrangements, and those that will continue through interim arrangements where national policy decisions are still pending.
- Affordability and service levels: test rating impacts, service levels, transition costs, and any Crown support needed to avoid sudden rate shocks.
- Rates, debt, and reserves: confirm what is ringfenced, what transfers, what is shared and what moves over time, with rating glidepaths where reform creates material shifts between communities or functions.
- Treaty settlement continuity: confirm how existing settlement obligations, statutory relationships and partnership arrangements transfer or continue with the same or equivalent effect.

Critical path to implementation by the 2028 local elections

The critical path is clear alongside other local government reform. Identified dependencies are manageable if work begins immediately after outline proposal approval and is sequenced through a transition plan.

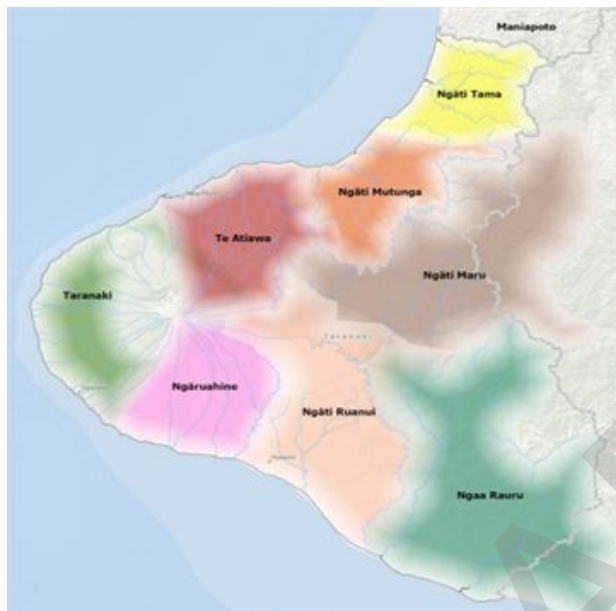
Period	Critical milestone	Main dependency
September 2026	Cabinet decision on outline proposals	DIA assessment against Head Start criteria.
October 2026 to March 2027	Detailed proposal developed	Support from councils, TRC, iwi, PSGEs and central government officials.
March 2027	Detailed proposal submitted	Resolved policy choices and evidence base.
May 2027	Cabinet agreement in principle	Clear transition model, costs, risks, and support requirements.
Mid to late 2027	Legislation and establishment settings	Cabinet policy decisions and Parliamentary timetable.
Late 2027 to mid 2028	Transition implementation	Transition body, council resources, and Crown support.
Mid 2028	Elections preparation	Legislation enacted before nominations open.
October 2028	New Stratford and South Taranaki unitary council established	Day one readiness, service continuity, and interim regional arrangements.
Late 2028 onwards	Post-establishment integration	Stable governance, funding pathway, and implementation plan.



5. Treaty obligations and the views of mana whenua

There are eight Iwi in Taranaki as a whole (shown below), some crossing the existing boundaries of SDC, STDC, NPDC and neighbouring councils.

Taranaki Iwi



Councils across SDC and STDC have long-standing relationships with iwi and hapū, grounded in Te Tiriti o Waitangi and a shared commitment to working together. Councils and iwi and hapū work together through Treaty settlement arrangements and partnership agreements, and councils carry obligations to Māori under settlement legislation, the Resource Management Act 1991 and the Local Government Act 2002.

Currently SDC has not received any obligations arising from settlements. SDC has healthy, informal working relationships primarily with Ngāti Ruanui, Ngāruahine and Ngāti Maru.

While STDC has a partnership agreement with representatives of Te Kaahui o Rauru, Te Rūnanga o Ngāti Ruanui, Te Korowai o Ngāruahine and Te Kāhui o Taranaki, and the post-settlement governance entities (PSGEs) of Ngāi Tahu, Ngāti Ruanui, Ngāruahine and Taranaki Iwi.

Engagement to date

Ngāti Ruanui and Ngāi Tahu have stated their support of a two-unitary-authority model for Taranaki (refer to Appendix 3), and informally, a third iwi supports the proposed model. One iwi has indicated informally that they support a single unitary for the region. Any changes to representation arrangements will require detailed engagement and consultation with iwi, hapū, and communities.

From workshops held with SDC and STDC councillors as part of the process to develop this proposal, the protection of Māori representation was raised. The 2025 referendums removed Māori seats across SDC and STDC, and there was concern that any new structure should not compound that loss. A suggestion for consideration at detailed design was that Māori seats could be entrenched in founding legislation. The sentiment was that the impact of any proposed changes needs to be considered as a whole across Taranaki as in the words of a councillor, “there is only one maunga”.



A path forward

A Stratford and South Taranaki unitary council will be required to maintain all existing Treaty settlement obligations and relationships with Post Settlement Governance Entities (PSGE).

Key matters for detailed design include:

- continuity of Treaty settlement redress, statutory acknowledgements, and associated governance arrangements
- future arrangements for settlement commitments
- treatment of existing regional partnership and advisory mechanisms
- recognition of iwi planning documents and mana whenua interests in freshwater, land use, biodiversity, natural hazards, and catchment management
- mana whenua participation in governance, strategic planning and decision making
- resourcing, accountability, and monitoring arrangements to ensure partnership commitments are maintained through transition
- a partnership transition plan

A **partnership transition plan** (as shown below) will be developed with mana whenua and relevant post-settlement governance entities during detailed design. Detailed design will be undertaken in partnership with mana whenua and PSGEs to ensure Treaty settlement arrangements, statutory obligations, partnership commitments, and mana whenua relationships are carried forward with the same or equivalent effect.

Partnership transition plan

Workstream	Purpose	Detailed design output
Settlement obligations	Identify all Treaty settlement redress, statutory acknowledgements, statutory boards, and settlement-derived mechanisms affected by the proposal.	Settlement obligation register and agreed approach to same or equivalent effect.
Existing relationships	Map current iwi, Māori, and PSGE relationships with the district councils and TRC.	Relationship transfer plan, including partnership forums, protocols, and points of contact.
Planning and environmental roles	Confirm how mana whenua participation will be maintained in freshwater, moana, catchments, land use, biodiversity, and environmental management.	Agreed participation model for planning, monitoring, decision making, and advisory roles.
Governance and representation	Confirm how mana whenua voice and Māori representation will operate at area-wide and local levels.	Indicative governance settings for Māori wards, committees, partnership forums, and local voice mechanisms.
Resourcing and accountability	Ensure partnership commitments are supported through capability, funding, monitoring, and reporting.	Implementation plan with resourcing, reporting, and accountability arrangements.



6. Requests of Central Government

Successful implementation will require partnership with central government. The participating councils are seeking timely central government support that enables a staged, practical, and locally led transition to a Stratford and South Taranaki unitary council, while maintaining service continuity and community confidence. Likely support includes:

- bespoke legislation and transfer powers
- transitional governance arrangements
- electoral and representation provisions
- timing relief for Long-term Plans, Annual Plans, representation review requirements, or rate capping, if needed
- support for rates and debt transition, where required
- implementation support for day one readiness.

Planning management

We request that spatial and regional planning boundaries, as defined in the new Planning and Natural Environment Bills are aligned with the proposed Stratford and South Taranaki unitary council boundaries (those being the combination of the existing SDC and STDC boundaries with the associated adjustment of the Horizons Council boundary).

Financial, planning and transition support

Councils will welcome targeted support to help manage transition to a Stratford and South Taranaki unitary council. This will include flexibility in relation to long-term and annual plans, support for transition costs or resourcing to ensure BAU service delivery, and assistance in establishing appropriate transition governance arrangements.

Rate capping flexibility

We request flexibility in applying rate capping requirements during transition, recognising that establishment, rating harmonisation, and service continuity may require temporary transitional settings.



7. Transitioning outline into detailed design

The detailed design phase will test whether a Stratford and South Taranaki unitary council can be implemented in a practical, affordable, and deliverable way by 2028. A transition governance arrangement will be established immediately following Government approval to provide clear leadership, oversee detailed design, manage risks, and maintain momentum through to implementation.

Priority areas for detailed design include:

- governance, representation, and local voice
- delivery of regional functions and Taranaki wide interfaces
- Treaty settlement continuity and mana whenua participation
- rates, debt, affordability, and financial impacts
- workforce, systems, and service transition
- legislative requirements and Government support.

The detailed design phase will identify what must be ready on day one, what can operate through interim arrangements, and what can be harmonised over time. This staged approach will support service continuity while reducing transition risk.

Engagement with communities, mana whenua, PSGEs, staff, elected members, NPDC, TRC and central government will help test options, refine the preferred model, and build confidence in the final proposal.

The outcome will be a detailed proposal that provides Government with a clear implementation pathway, transition arrangements, and evidence that the new authority can be successfully established by the 2028 local elections.

Transition governance

The first priority following approval will be the establishment of a transition governance arrangement to oversee detailed design and implementation planning. This arrangement will have sufficient authority while maintaining appropriate oversight by councils, mana whenua, and Government. It will also provide a clear framework for programme management, reporting, stakeholder engagement, and preparation for establishment of the new authority.

Detailed design will be run as a managed programme, with each workstream having a nominated lead, agreed scope, defined deliverables, reporting rhythm, decision points, and dependencies. A programme management office or equivalent function will hold the overall programme view for the critical path to establishment.

This will help ensure the detailed proposal is not a set of disconnected technical workstreams, but a single integrated establishment plan.

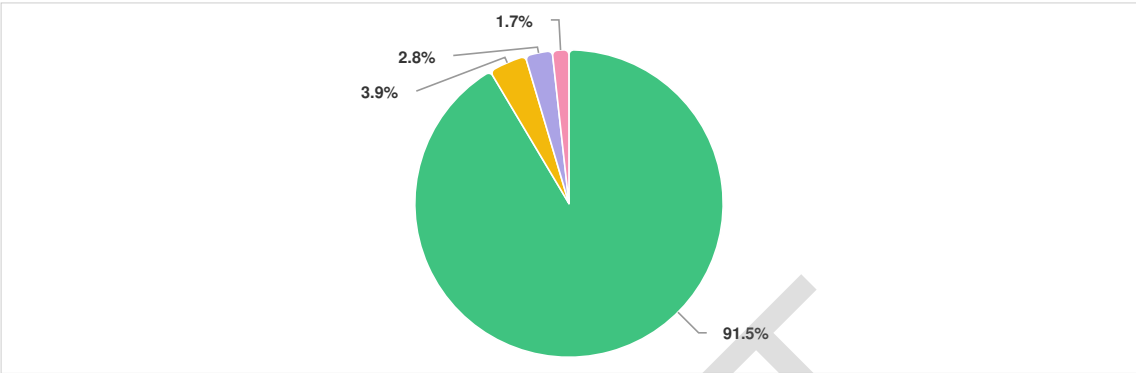


Appendix 1 Stratford District Council Community Survey Responses

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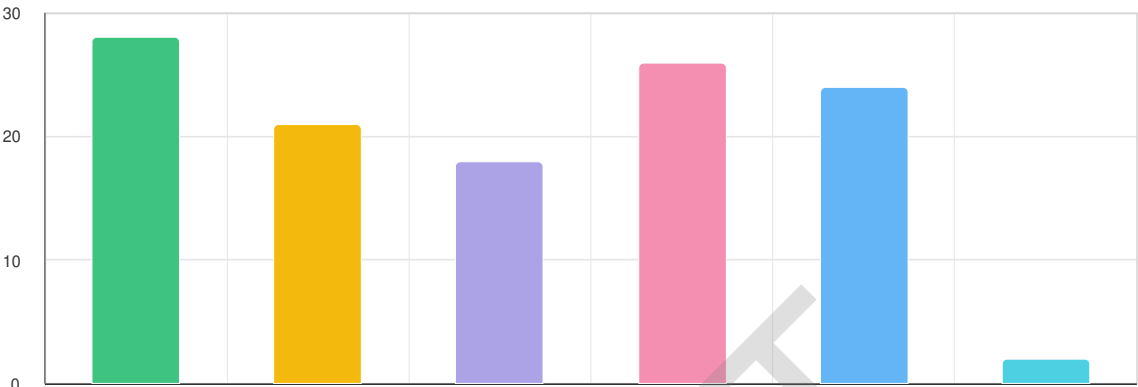
Q1. Where do you live?



Question options	responses	%
● Stratford District	579	91.5
● New Plymouth District	25	3.9
● South Taranaki District	18	2.8
● Outside of Taranaki	11	1.7

633 responses · 0 skipped
Question type : Radio Button Question

Q2. What is your connection to the Stratford District?You can tick more than one.

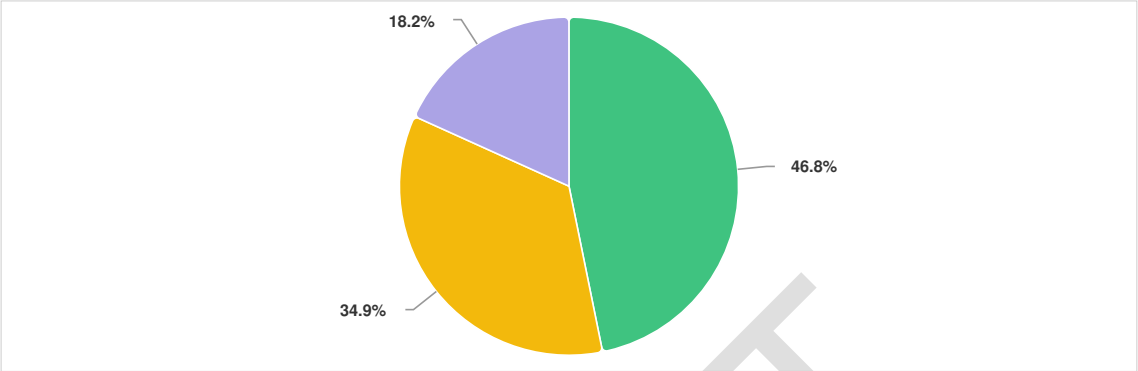


Question options	responses	%
I work or do business in Stratford	28	51.9
I own property in Stratford	21	38.9
I used to work or live in Stratford	18	33.3
I have whānau or friends in Stratford	26	48.1
I travel to Stratford regularly for events, recreation etc	24	44.4
Other (please specify)	2	3.7

54 responses · 579 skipped
Question type : Checkbox Question



Q3. How do you feel about changing the way Local Government works in Taranaki?

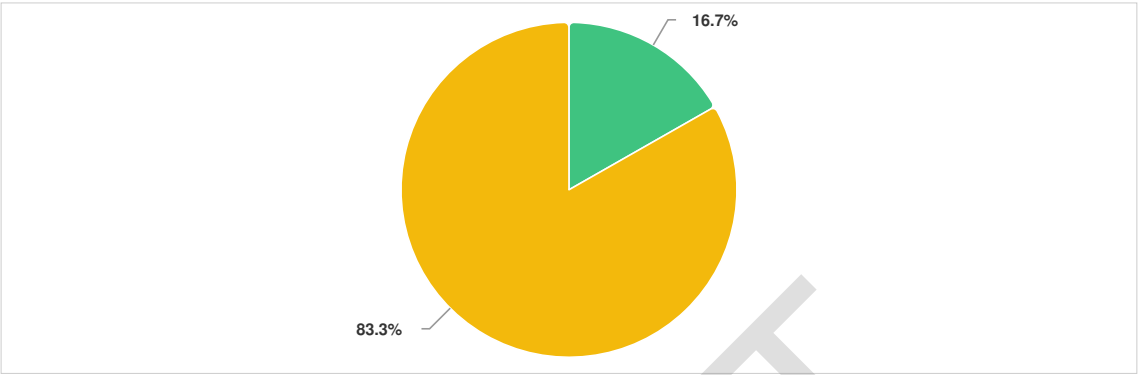


Question options	responses	%
Unhappy	280	46.8
Neutral	209	34.9
Happy	109	18.2

Optional question · 598 responses · 35 skipped
Question type : Emoji Question



Q4. What model do you prefer (remember the status quo is not an option):



Question options	responses	%
● One council for Taranaki - A single Taranaki unitary authority covering the whole region.	106	16.7
● Two councils for Taranaki - Two unitary authorities covering Taranaki. One covering the New Plymouth District Council area and one covering the Stratford and South Taranaki District Council areas.	527	83.3

Optional question · 633 responses · 0 skipped
Question type : Radio Button Question



Appendix 2 South Taranaki District Council Community Survey Responses

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South Taranaki District Council

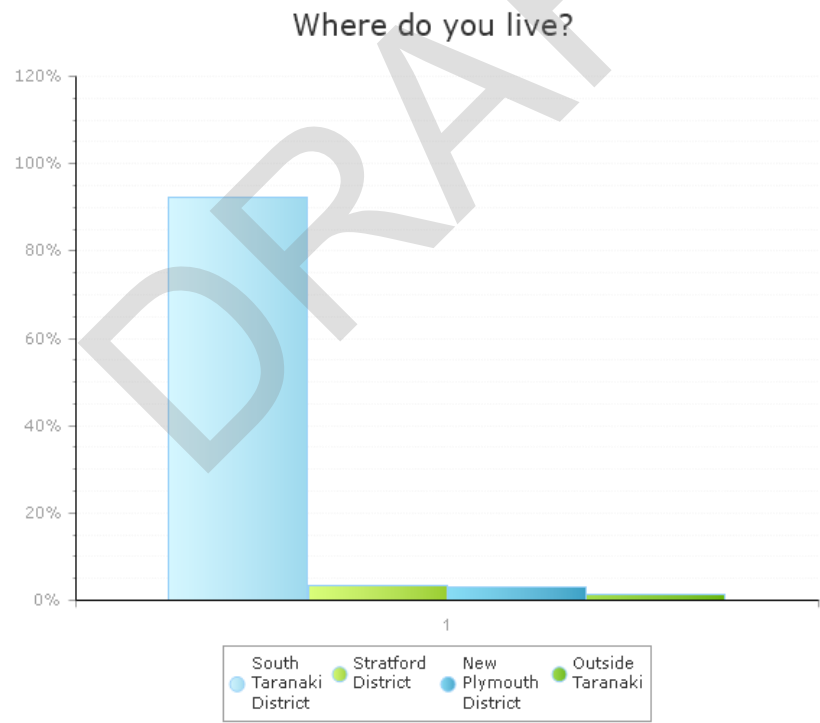
Head Start Survey

Summary of Feedback

Where do you live?

Total number of responses: 1388

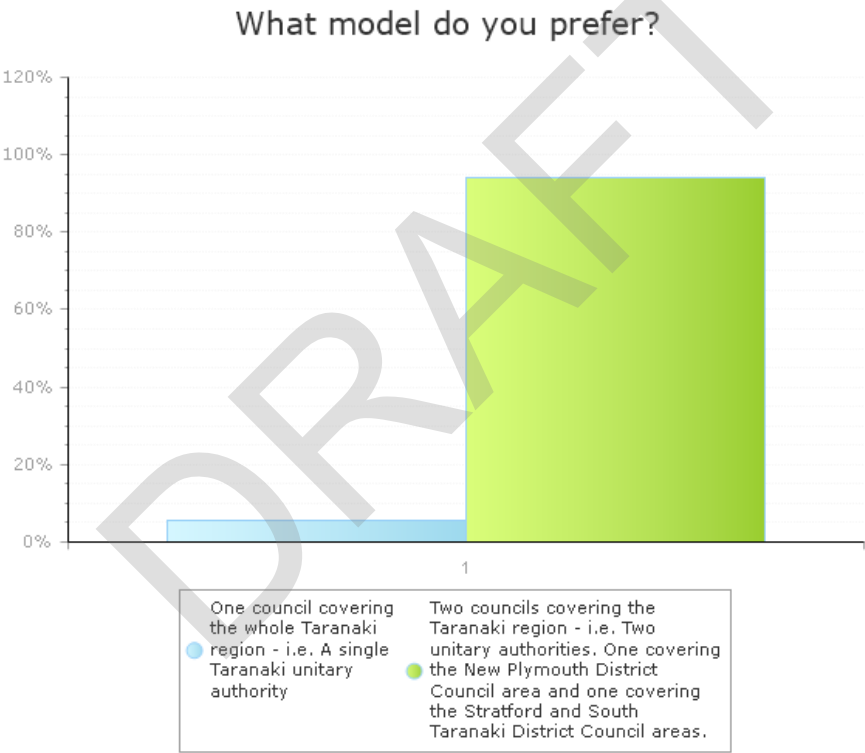
	Number of people	%
South Taranaki District	1279	92.15%
Stratford District	47	3.39%
New Plymouth District	42	3.03%
Outside Taranaki	20	1.44%
Total	1388	



What model do you prefer?

Total number of responses: 1373

	Number of people	%
One council covering the whole Taranaki region - i.e. A single Taranaki unitary authority	79	5.75%
Two councils covering the Taranaki region - i.e. Two unitary authorities. One covering the New Plymouth District Council area and one covering the Stratford and South Taranaki District Council areas.	1294	94.25%
Total	1373	

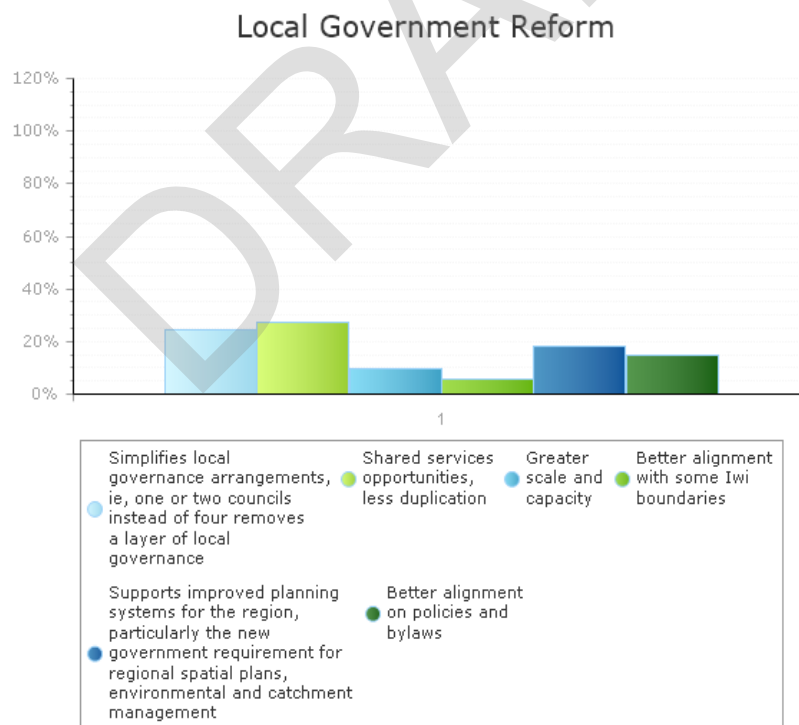


Local Government Reform

Thinking about how local government reform might affect you and your community, what do you see as the biggest opportunities arising from a change in council structures? (you can select up to 3).

Total number of responses: 1033

	Number of people	%
Simplifies local governance arrangements, ie, one or two councils instead of four removes a layer of local governance	583	24.36%
Shared services opportunities, less duplication	651	27.20%
Greater scale and capacity	231	9.65%
Better alignment with some Iwi boundaries	142	5.93%
Supports improved planning systems for the region, particularly the new government requirement for regional spatial plans, environmental and catchment management	436	18.22%
Better alignment on policies and bylaws	350	14.63%
Total	2393	

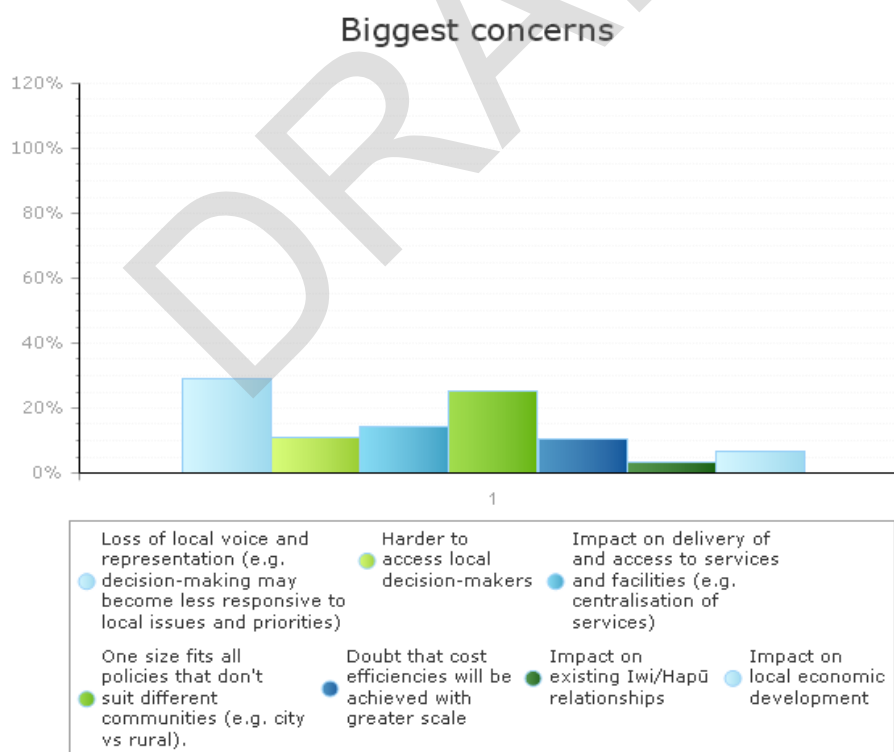


Biggest concerns

What do you see as the biggest concerns arising from a change in council structures? (you can select up to 3).

Total number of responses: 1298

	Number of people	%
Loss of local voice and representation (e.g. decision-making may become less responsive to local issues and priorities)	1043	28.90%
Harder to access local decision-makers	387	10.72%
Impact on delivery of and access to services and facilities (e.g. centralisation of services)	522	14.46%
One size fits all policies that don't suit different communities (e.g. city vs rural).	905	25.08%
Doubt that cost efficiencies will be achieved with greater scale	386	10.70%
Impact on existing Iwi/Hapū relationships	128	3.55%
Impact on local economic development	238	6.59%
Total	3609	

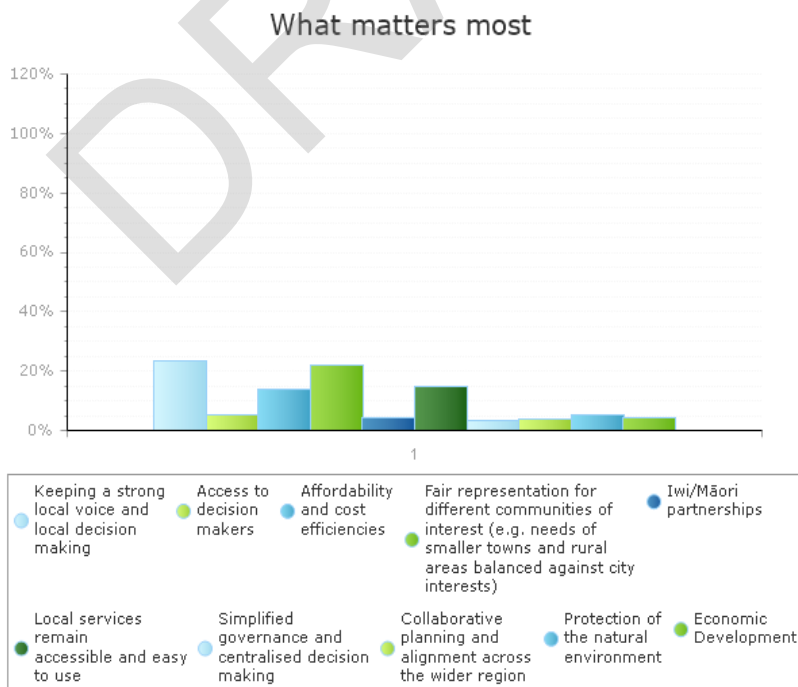


What matters most

What matters most to you about how council services are delivered in the future? (you can select up to 3).

Total number of responses: 1334

	Number of people	%
Keeping a strong local voice and local decision making	920	23.24%
Access to decision makers	215	5.43%
Affordability and cost efficiencies	556	14.04%
Fair representation for different communities of interest (e.g. needs of smaller towns and rural areas balanced against city interests)	870	21.98%
Iwi/Māori partnerships	171	4.32%
Local services remain accessible and easy to use	586	14.80%
Simplified governance and centralised decision making	127	3.21%
Collaborative planning and alignment across the wider region	144	3.64%
Protection of the natural environment	205	5.18%
Economic Development	165	4.17%
Total	3959	





Appendix 3 Iwi letters of support

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SUBMISSION OF TE RŪNANGA O NGĀTI RUANUI TRUST
to
South Taranaki District Council
on the
Head Start
Simplifying Local Government

Submitter: Te Rūnanga o Ngāti Ruanui Trust
Name: Rachel Arnott
Designation: Kaiwhakahaere
Address: 74 Princes Street, Hawera
Telephone: 06-278 0148
Facsimile: 06-278 1358
Email: office@ruanui.co.nz

Ngāti Ruanui

1. Te Rūnanga o Ngāti Ruanui Trust is the mandated voice of the 16 hapū of the Iwi, with more than 12,000 registered descendants. The takiwā of Ngāti Ruanui is bounded by the Whenuakura River in the south, the Waingongoro River in the north, the moana (including the coastal marine area) between the two rivers to the west, and the Matemateonga Ranges to the east.
2. As tangata whenua, Ngāti Ruanui is intimately related to the taiao – whenua, wai māori, moana, takutai moana – in a manner that is expressed through a range of cultural, social, economic and historical associations. We regard land, soil and water as taonga which provide unity and identity to us. These taonga are also a source of sustenance and enjoyment as well as economic development and employment.
3. Ngāti Ruanui is the kaitiaki of these taonga and is acknowledged as having mana whenua in its takiwā through te Tiriti o Waitangi, the Ngāti Ruanui Deed of Settlement 2003 (the Deed) and the Ngāti Ruanui Claims Settlement Act 2003 (the Ruanui Settlement Act).
4. Ngāti Ruanui has a long and practical engagement with the Council working constructively in ways that recognise mana whenua, protecting our environment, and working towards improving outcomes for our people and communities.
5. We further acknowledge "**Poua ki raro, tōtika ki runga He Pou Tikanga.**" Being a strategy that outlines how the council and the district's four iwi (Ngāti Ruanui, Ngā Rauru Kītahi, Ngā Ngāruahine, and Taranaki) collaborate on decision-making and uphold *Te Tiriti*.
6. For Ngāti Ruanui, the strength of this partnership lies not only in formal consultation, but in an ongoing and respectful working relationship that enables both parties to plan well, solve problems early, and pursue outcomes that are practical, and enduring over time.
7. We are concerned about the limited time available to properly consider and develop proposals for local government reform under the Government's Head Start pathway. The current process requires outline proposals for new unitary authorities to be prepared within a very compressed timeframe, with proposals due by 9 August 2026 and decisions on which options proceed expected shortly after. In our view, reform of this scale and significance requires careful analysis, meaningful engagement, and sufficient time for councils, iwi, and communities to understand the implications of different models and to contribute in an informed way.
8. A process that is too rushed may undermine public confidence in decisions that will have long-term consequences for local representation, partnership, and governance across Taranaki.

Our Comments

9. Ngāti Ruanui welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the South Taranaki District Council on the Head Start – Simplifying Local Government proposals.
10. Ngāti Ruanui Trust supports local government reform that strengthens effective decision-making while preserving meaningful local representation, enduring relationships, and the ability of iwi to participate in matters that affect our people, whenua, wai, and future development.
11. **We support a two-unitary-authority model for Taranaki because it is the option most capable of balancing structural reform with the realities of community identity, existing relationships, and effective public participation.** In our view, reform should not be assessed solely on the basis of simplicity or scale. It must also be judged by whether it produces governance arrangements that are workable, locally responsive, and capable of sustaining partnerships with iwi and communities over time.

Reasons for Support

12. Firstly, a two-unitary-authority model will preserve existing relationships between iwi and our connectedness local authorities in the south and central parts of Taranaki. Established relationships matter because they provide the basis for trust, continuity, and practical collaboration across planning, infrastructure, environmental management, community wellbeing, economic development, and broader strategic decision-making. A restructure that disregards these relationships risks creating distance between decision-makers and the communities most affected by their decisions. By contrast, a model that builds from existing patterns of engagement is more likely to support stability during transition and deliver more enduring outcomes over the long term.
13. Secondly, the two-unitary-authority option better reflects communities of interest within the Taranaki Region. The south-central grouping has distinct geographic, social, cultural, and economic connections that should be recognised in any future structure. Local government arrangements are strongest when they align with the way people actually live, move, work, and relate to place and cultural connection. Reorganisation should therefore strengthen local voice.
14. A governance structure that is closer to the communities it serves is more likely to remain responsive, accountable, and representative, particularly where important decisions affect service delivery, environmental outcomes, and the wellbeing of whānau and hapū.
15. Thirdly, preserving a strong iwi voice must be a central consideration in any reorganisation. The Government's Head Start pathway is intended to simplify governance and improve service delivery, with outline proposals due by 9 August 2026 and broader reform otherwise proceeding after the 2028 local elections. Those reform objectives are important, but they should not come at the expense of Māori participation, partnerships and influence.

16. For Ngāti Ruanui, the preferred model is one that enables iwi to continue to engage meaningfully in regional and local decision-making, including on environmental kaitiakitanga, land use, resource management, infrastructure, and the broader wellbeing of whānau and hapū.
17. **If reform produces structures that are larger but less accessible, or simpler in theory but weaker in relationship, then it will fail to meet the needs of mana whenua and the communities it is meant to serve.**

Principles for Assessing Reform

18. It is our position that any proposal advanced under the Head Start pathway should be assessed against more than structural efficiency alone. It should be assessed against whether it is deliverable, whether it reflects real communities of interest, whether it supports fair and effective representation, whether it maintains strong accountability to local communities, and whether it enables iwi participation to remain practical and meaningful. These are not secondary considerations. They are central to whether a reorganisation model will work in practice.
19. The Department of Internal Affairs has made clear that the Head Start pathway is a voluntary and streamlined route for councils willing and able to reorganise before wider reform. This confirms that there is policy space for a Taranaki model that is tailored to the region's actual circumstances, rather than forcing a single structure simply because it appears more uniform at a high level. The existence of that flexibility should be used to support the most credible and locally grounded and culturally accepted option.

Decision-Makers to Recognise

20. The status quo is not available under the current reform programme, and therefore the community should be supported to shape the most workable local option rather than have an outcome imposed later through the backstop process.
21. A two-unitary-authority model for Taranaki is strongly recommended and considered as a credible and practical option under the Head Start pathway, particularly where it better reflects the region's communities of interest and existing working relationships.
22. Any assessment of reorganisation options should give substantial weight to continuity of relationships, public accountability, local representation, and the practical ability of iwi to engage with decision-making including giving effect to Te Tiriti.
23. Decision-makers should recognise that structural simplification does not by itself produce better outcomes. The chosen model must also be workable in practice, capable of implementation, and able to maintain public confidence across the communities affected.
24. The final structure should ensure fair and effective local representation and should not dilute the voice of south Taranaki communities or iwi in future governance arrangements.

25. Iwi engagement and partnership should be embedded early and meaningfully throughout the development of any proposal, not treated as a later procedural step or limited to consultation after major decisions have already been shaped.

Conclusion

26. Ngāti Ruanui supports reform that is practical, locally grounded, and ensures iwi relationships and regional diversity.
27. **Based on the matters outlined above, we support a two-unitary-authority model for Taranaki and submit that this option best protects local voice, reflects communities of interest, and maintains the conditions for effective iwi participation in future governance arrangements.**
28. We recommend the Council to adopt an approach that is not only efficient on paper, but legitimate, durable, and responsive in practice.
29. Reform of this scale should strengthen the capacity of local government to work with iwi, not reduce that capacity through structures that are more distant or less representative.
30. **We strongly recommend that South Taranaki District Council support and advance a two-unitary-authority model for Taranaki as the option that best preserves local voice, reflects genuine communities of interest, and provides the strongest foundation for enduring, effective partnership with iwi. In our view, this is the most credible, balanced, and workable local government reform available, and it should be adopted with confidence.**

Graham Young
Strategy and Policy Team
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Hawera 4640
Email: Graham.Young@ruanui.co.nz
Phone: 06 278 0148



09 July 2026

Mayor Phil Nixon
South Taranaki District Council
Via email – phil.nixon@stdc.govt.nz

Teena koe,

Re: Simplifying Local Government – Future Governance Arrangements for Taranaki

Te Kaahui o Rauru appreciates the opportunity to provide feedback regarding the proposed future local government arrangements for Taranaki under the Government's Head Start pathway.

As an iwi with significant interests across South Taranaki and beyond, we have carefully considered the options presented. We note that Te Kaahui o Rauru previously expressed concerns regarding the Government's broader Simplifying Local Government proposals and opposed aspects of the reform programme due to concerns regarding local democracy, Te Tiriti relationships, environmental stewardship, and the potential erosion of local decision-making.

Notwithstanding those concerns, it is clear that local government reform is progressing and that maintaining the status quo is no longer being presented as an option by central government. We therefore consider it important that our communities, councils, and iwi actively participate in shaping the future rather than having outcomes imposed upon us.

In that context, Te Kaahui o Rauru supports the establishment of **two unitary authorities within Taranaki**, comprising:

- A New Plymouth-based unitary authority; and
- A South Taranaki/Stratford-based unitary authority.

Our support is founded on the importance of maintaining strong local representation, preserving community voice, and ensuring decision-makers remain connected and accountable to the communities they serve. This includes the ability for this unitary authority to resource the design of this work alongside of Iwi Maaori to ensure that meets the expectations of our binding partnership to build a successful community together.

Importantly, our support is conditional upon the retention and enhancement of existing relationships with mana whenua and iwi. Te Kaahui o Rauru wishes to see the mana, influence, and partnership arrangements that currently exist with local authorities carried forward into any future governance structure.

We also consider it essential that Maaori representation is maintained and strengthened under any future local government structure. The existing Maaori Ward arrangements established by South Taranaki District Council reflect an important commitment to inclusive representation and participation in local decision-making. Any future unitary authority model must not result in any

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diminution of Maaori representation, voice, or influence. We would expect existing gains in Maaori representation to be protected and enhanced, and for any new governance arrangements to provide clear pathways for meaningful Maaori participation through both elected representation and strengthened partnerships with mana whenua.

We expect any future model to:

- Recognise, uphold and implement the obligations of Te Tiriti o Waitangi;
- Retain meaningful local representation and decision-making;
- Strengthen iwi participation in governance and strategic planning;
- Protect existing relationships between councils, marae, hapuu, and iwi;
- Maintain, strengthen and activate Maaori representation and voice across the new structure;
- Ensure local knowledge and place-based decision-making are not lost through structural change; and
- Improve outcomes for future generations rather than simply changing governance arrangements. These considerations have been identified by our representatives as key issues when assessing any reform option.

A key measure of success for Te Kaahui o Rauru will be whether any new structure strengthens, not weakens, the voice of mana whenua and Maaori within local government decision-making. Partnership allows for transformational change that weaves the identity of Ngaa Rauru into the community for positive growth with our culture, identity, economic growth opportunities, environmental protection and social connection of our region.

Te Kaahui o Rauru looks forward to continuing discussions with both councils as proposals are further developed. We remain committed to working collaboratively to ensure any future local government structure reflects the aspirations of our people and preserves the relationships and influence iwi have built over many years.

Naaku noa, naa



Tahinganui Hina
Tumu Whakarae

cc: Fiona Aitken, CEO, South Taranaki District Council – fiona.aitken@stdc.govt.nz

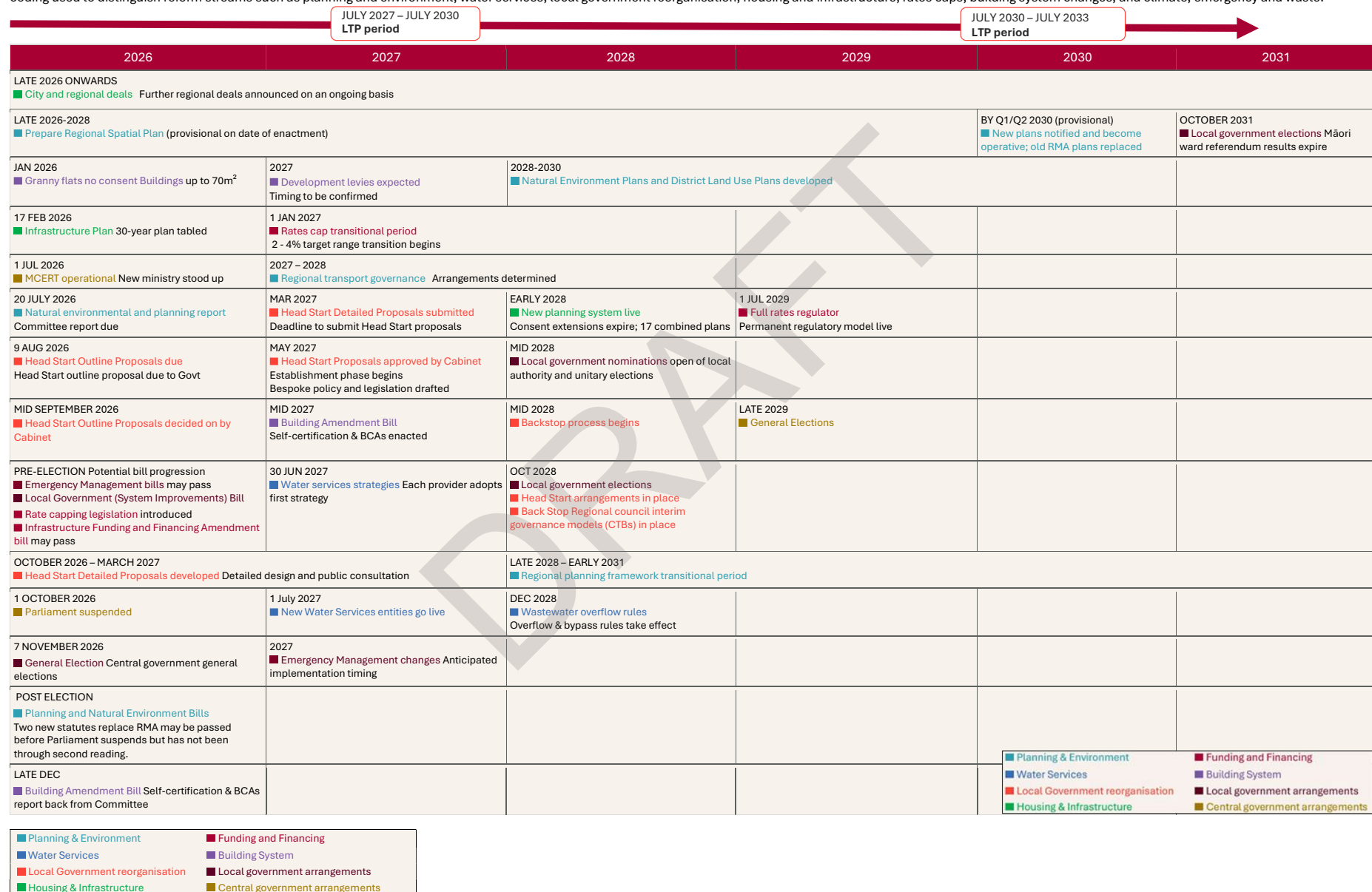


Appendix 4 Local Government Reform – Timeline of changes

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Local Government Reform – Timeline of changes

The timeline below brings together the key national reform milestones that are expected to affect councils between 2026 and 2031. It shows when major policy, legislative and implementation events are expected to occur, with colour coding used to distinguish reform streams such as planning and environment, water services, local government reorganisation, housing and infrastructure, rates caps, building system changes, and climate, emergency and waste.



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Document Status

Job #	Version	Written	Reviewed	Approved	Report Date
3147	1 – DRAFT	A. Hildred	J. Williams-Shigeeda	D. Bonifant	28/07/2026
3147	2 - DRAFT	A. Hildred	J. Williams-Shigeeda	D. Bonifant	29/07/2026



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Our reference
F19/13/03-D21/40748

Karakia

Kia uruuru mai
Ā hauora
Ā haukaha
Ā haumāia
Ki runga, Ki raro
Ki roto, Ki waho
Rire rire hau Paimārire

I draw in (to my being)
The reviving essence
The strengthening essence
The essence of courage
Above, Below
Within, Around
Let there be peace.