

F25/96/05 – D26/27307

Date: 21 July 2026 at 9.00am

Venue: Council Chambers, 63 Miranda Street, Stratford

Present

The District Mayor Neil Volzke (the Chairperson), the Deputy Mayor Amanda Harris, Councillors: Steve Beck, Jaime Bertie, Josh Best, Grant Boyde, Annette Dudley, Jono Erwood (Audio Visual Link), Ellen Hall, Katherine Sextus, and Mathew Watt.

In attendance

The Chief Executive – Sven Hanne, the Director – Environmental Services – Blair Sutherland, the Director – Corporate Services – Raelene Johnson, the Director – Community Services – Kate Whareaitu, the Director – Assets – Victoria Araba, the Governance Advisor & Executive Assistance – Gareth Hancock.

1. Welcome

The opening karakia and H&S message was read.

2. Apologies

THAT the apology from David Chadwick be received.

HARRIS/BECK
Carried
CL/26/61

3. Declarations of Members Interest

Elected members were asked to declare any real or perceived conflicts of interest relating to items on this agenda. There were no conflicts of interest declared.

4. Decision Report– confirmation of preferred option.

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Recommendations

1. THAT the report be received.

VOLKZE/BEST
Carried
CL/26/63

2. THAT Council notes the decision of New Plymouth District Council to progress a multi-option "[Pathfinder](#)" submission under the Head Start pathway.

3. THAT Council notes the decision of South Taranaki District Council with regards to this subject matter, ~~due to be made on Monday 20 July 2026.~~

SEXTUS/WATT
Carried
CL/26/64

4. THAT Council confirms a ~~(must strike out one)~~ **single / two** unitary council approach for Taranaki as its preferred option under the Simplifying Local Government Head Start process.

BOYDE/DUDLEY
Division
For 10 Against 1

Carried
CL/26/65

5. THAT Council authorises the Chief Executive to work with ~~(strike out one if necessary)~~ the Chief Executive(s) of South Taranaki District Council and New Plymouth District Council to draft an outline proposal in line with the adopted direction as per item 4 above for future council adoption prior to submission by 9 August 2026.

WATT/BECK
Carried
CL/26/66

6. *Agrees to inform the other Taranaki councils of Stratford District Council's decision on its preferred option for a Head Start pathway.*

VOLZKE/HARRIS
Carried
CL/26/67

Recommended Reason

On 26 May 2026, Council agreed to participate in the Government's Head Start pathway. To achieve this outcome, direction is required as to Council's preferred model for local government in Taranaki to allow staff to prepare such a proposal.

The CE and Mayor noted the following points:

- This decision process began on 26 May, with the general thinking that it is better to be doing it ourselves rather than having it done to us by the Government. It was noted that the matter has been through a number of reviews and frameworks, and that the Government is strongly committed to this direction of travel for local government reform.
- It was noted that the decision is between establishing one or two unitary authorities. South Taranaki's preferred option was noted as being two unitary authorities, while New Plymouth's position and potential amalgamation partners were also discussed. New Plymouth is pursuing the Pathfinder Option, which is aiming to meet the March deadline. It was noted that this option sits outside the current decision-making process.
- It was noted that South Taranaki's decision had not yet been formally made at time of the writing of the report. However, there was unanimous support for amalgamation with Stratford. There was limited debate on the matter.

Questions/Points of Clarification:

- The District Mayor noted the purpose of the meeting and that the Government submission is due on 9 August. The CE noted that it would be counterproductive to provide a pre-written proposal without a preferred option, or to prepare two full proposals. Therefore, the process has moved from a one-step process to a two-step process. The proposal will now return for decision on 5 August.
- It was noted that the purpose of today's discussion was to provide guidance and direction on one of the options. The District Mayor noted that this provides an opportunity to indicate the preferred direction of travel and ensure the Council is moving in the right direction. The survey and its results were also noted.
- Councillor Boyde sought clarity regarding the Pathfinder process. The CE noted that it extends the timeframe and includes five possible options. Further discussion occurred regarding New Plymouth's decision, including the timeframe, available options, and the Government's position.
- Councillor Erwood asked whether making this decision today would remove any opportunity for New Plymouth to join at a later date. The CE outlined possible pathways for New Plymouth to do so and noted that the aim remains to achieve a regional agreement. The door remains open and will continue to remain open.
- Councillor Sextus queried a possible cooperation of New Plymouth and Waitomo. The District Mayor noted that he had spoken with the Mayor of Waitomo and that this was not the case.

Points noted in the general discussion on recommendation four:

- The Deputy Mayor noted that community feedback was overwhelmingly in favour of retaining a strong local voice. While a single unitary authority may have benefits on paper, there are several concerning factors identified in the report, including staff costs exceeding budget and a lack of meaningful rates relief. She stated that her role is to represent and do her best for the community. Referring to the previous amalgamation of Stratford County and the Borough, she emphasised the importance of maintaining communities of interest. Given the time constraints, she expressed concern about moving to a single unitary authority without sufficient opportunity to undertake a thorough analysis or reconsider if issues occur. She concluded by noting that the community has spoken, and their views should be respected.

- Councillor Beck, expressed concern that the process has been rushed and lacks sufficient information for decisions of this significance. He reiterated his preference for Stratford District Council to remain an independent, stand-alone council but noted that maintaining the status quo has not been presented as being an option. He considered that inaction could result in a solution being imposed by central government. Emphasising the importance of retaining strong local representation not tokenism and protecting Stratford's rural interests, he raised concerns about dilution of Stratford's voice under amalgamating with New Plymouth District Council if that was to occur. While not endorsing the process itself, he saw that amalgamation with South Taranaki District Council represented the most responsible choice available where faced with limited choice and indicated his support for that option. Proverbs 16.3 was lastly read.
- Councillor Bertie noted that, after listening to the views of the community, she supports the two-unitary model. She said that the people she has spoken with have consistently expressed this preference, and she is listening to the community that has entrusted her with this role. In her view, two councils best align with the wishes of the community and we have a constructive a relationship with the South Taranaki community. She believes that this strong local connection may not be achieved under a single unitary authority, and referenced the recent New Plymouth decision, and emphasised that protecting a strong local voice is important. Based on the feedback she has received, she believes the two-council model is the best way to achieve this.
- Councillor Erwood wished to record his support for Option One, the proposal to amalgamate with South Taranaki and form a sub-regional authority. His position was based primarily on the evidence presented to Council and the clear views expressed through the community survey. He noted that option aligns with those views and preserves a meaningful local voice. In his opinion, this option satisfies section 10 of the Local Government Act. He acknowledged the wider regional context and that New Plymouth District Council has taken a different approach. He also noted that the Taranaki Regional Council's position adds further complexity, given that regional councils cannot submit proposals. He considered that the option meets the threshold required to submit a proposal and, given the overwhelming community preference and the risks associated with inaction, supports a two-unitary-council model.
- Councillor Watt noted that he was not completely sold on either model and remained concerned about what would happen to TRC assets, how the transition involving TRC would be managed, and the potential impact on rates. However, given these uncertainties, he expressed support for the two-unitary model. He noted that, if further analysis over the coming months showed that a single unitary was the better option, the Government would welcome a change. He believed that there may not be another opportunity to pursue a two-unitary model if it is not progressed now. He stated that Council owes it to the community to give the two-unitary option a go. Councillor Watt also noted that the costs of the different models had not been made sufficiently clear and emphasised that cost was not the primary factor in his decision.
- Councillor Boyde noted that he supports the two-unitary model. He considered the timeframe for making a decision to be too short and emphasised that the outcome requires genuine working together. In his view, this willingness has been lacking in the north, whereas South Taranaki has been committed to working collaboratively from the outset. He also referred to the strong community feedback and available information and he had reached a clear decision that he believes is in the best interests of the community.
- Councillor Dudley noted that it is not about dollars; it is about having a voice and ensuring that the local voice is not lost. These are long-term decisions. She noted that Inglewood represents a community of interest too. She added, I need to listen to the ratepayers who elected me.
- Councillor Best noted that, in his view, there are a number of different options. However, he supported maintaining the status quo and the potential for a regional submission that promotes the current structure while strengthening collaboration through the combining of high-cost functions, back-office services, and other regulatory functions to achieve long-term efficiencies. He considered that this approach would respond to the Government's call for reform while preserving local representation. Should greater change be required by the Government, his preferred option would be the two-unitary model. He supported a willingness to reform.
- Councillor Sextus noted that local government reform was not on their bingo card and platform which elected members were elected. She said that any reform needs to genuinely suit Taranaki and expressed concern about the rushed timeline. She also noted that the reforms represented another unfunded cost being placed on ratepayers. After reviewing the available information, supported the two-unitary model, stating that Taranaki is not a homogeneous community and that the model would need to represent both urban and rural voices while remaining conscious of costs and avoiding the pitfalls of an overburdened council. She referred to Morrison Low's advice regarding the risks of dismissing community sentiment and stated that Taranaki's future would be best served by remaining aligned with community voice. She confirmed her preference for the two-unitary model.
- Councillor Hall noted that she was bereaved by the situation and was grieving. She said this district has a history of advocating for itself, and here we are. Local government has been under sustained attack from central government. She noted her first LGNZ conference and read an excerpt from a reading. She noted the utter lack of information on the impact of change and the lack of funding from central government. Like all of you, she felt the Government's process has set us up to fail and

questioned what will be done to us at the end. Regarding consultation with the community, there has been very little information available to inform them. She questioned how backwards it is to go back to the community after a decision, as people are over-consulted. She thanked those who submitted, noting that there were some excellent submissions and that these were valid. She shared all of these concerns. She said that we just do not know which model would best address those concerns. Rates were noted as the priority but also has a history of not making decisions solely based on rates. She questioned how the two-unitary model would remove duplication and noted concerns around the assumptions. She referred to New Plymouth and the issue of trust. She noted that regional collaboration has been poor and referred to previous decisions. When forming her view, she listened to her colleagues and recognised that they all want the same thing. She stated that she was voting against the recommendation, that she listens to her community and sees this issue through the faces of her children. She said a single unitary authority would provide local boards and other options, offer a fresh page for the region, and allow it to look from the past to the future, while ensuring local boards and communities are well supported and funded.

- The District Mayor acknowledged and thanked members, noting that everyone has given the matter a lot of thought and that it has not been an easy journey. The Mayor raised a couple of comments, the first being around risk. Looking at the report, delivery implications, community resistance, complexity, and service levels, there are trade-offs within the criteria we are trying to meet. While there is no weighting, one criteria focuses on efficiencies, often favouring economies of scale and larger organisations, while another focuses on local voice, which tends to favour smaller organisations, creating a tension between the two. There are risks and trade-offs, and how services are delivered on a regional basis is perhaps the biggest risk that will need to be worked through in the coming months. The submission from Ngāti Ruanui particularly resonated with the District Mayor, especially the comments regarding relationships with councils. As organisations become larger, trust can be diluted and effectively has to be rebuilt. The Mayor acknowledged the partnership with iwi and noted the iwi boundaries. The Mayor also commented on the survey asking whether people preferred one council or two. This was largely dismissed by the Regional Council, despite more than 2,000 people submitting responses. It is not an emotional response, and dismissing it belittles those responses. The Mayor noted that the feedback should be taken seriously. Reference was also made to the NSW changes and the reaction against them. With survey results showing support of 80 percent for a two unitary authority, it would be foolish to ignore that level of public support. Once past 9 August, there will be six months to develop the final proposal and work through issues such as financial matters. Some of these issues will not be resolved within that timeframe and may take years to work through. There is still the ability to change direction or stop. The Mayor concluded by noting that it has been an interesting journey, responding to the Government while also dealing with a number of other Government bills, and that this decision is being made in the middle of a storm.

Division called for recommendation four.

Those voting yes: Cr Beck, Bertie, Best, Boyde, Dudley, Erwood, Deputy Mayor Harris, Cr Sextus, Watt, The District Mayor.

Those voting no: Cr Hall.

5. Closing Karakia

The closing karakia was read.

The meeting closed at 10.17am.

N C Volzke
Chairman

Confirmed this 11th day of August 2026.

N C Volzke
District Mayor