

Report To: Council



Meeting Date: 28 April 2026
Subject: **Waikato Mayoral Forum – Collaborative Project Proposal**
Type: Decision Required
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Chief Executive

1 Purpose of Report

- 1.1 The purpose of this business paper is to outline a proposal from the Waikato Mayoral Forum for a collaborative project to consider the future form and function of local government across the Waikato Region and to seek Council's direction as to if, and how, it should participate in Stage 1 the project.

2 Suggested Resolutions

- 2.1 The following are suggested resolutions only and do not represent Council policy until such time as they are adopted by formal resolution.
- 1 The business paper on Waikato Mayoral Forum – Collaborative Project Proposal be received.
 - 2 Council agree to -
 - (a) Actively participate and resource Stage 1 of the Waikato Mayoral Forum's Future of Local Government project.

or

 - (b) Be an observer.
- or**
- (c) Not participate at this time.

3 Background

3.1 Why this work is being proposed?

- 3.2 Local government is entering a period of sustained and wide-ranging reform that will reshape the sector's purpose, responsibilities, and operating environment.
- 3.3 These reforms - spanning planning and environmental management, legislative and structural change, shifts in council purpose and services, and increasing central government prescription—coincide with escalating delivery and compliance costs, infrastructure backlogs, affordability pressures, and growing climate and resilience challenges. Together, these dynamics raise fundamental questions about scale, efficiency, capability, value for money, and the future of local autonomy, regardless of political cycles.
- 3.4 In this context, the risk for councils is not only that reform may proceed with limited timeframes for response, but also that reform may be shaped without sufficient regional input or understanding of local circumstances.
- 3.5 The Waikato Mayoral Forum has therefore agreed it is preferable to proactively explore options together, rather than wait for reform to be determined externally.

- 3.6 This work provides an opportunity for the Region to articulate a shared, evidence-based view of what effective local government could look like in the future, demonstrate leadership, and position the Waikato to influence reform outcomes while protecting local voice where it matters most.

4 Commentary

4.1 Executive Summary

4.2 This report responds to the significant and ongoing reform pressures facing local government nationally. Central Government has signalled wide ranging changes that will reshape the purpose, roles, functions, and operating environment of councils, including reform of planning and environmental legislation, simplification of the local government system, and renewed focus on core services, scale, and efficiency. These pressures are not new or politically isolated, and some form of change to the sector is widely expected regardless of Government.

4.3 In this context, the Waikato Mayoral Forum has agreed to take a proactive, regional approach by exploring options for the future form and function of local government in the Waikato. The intent is to ensure the Region is prepared for reform, able to influence discussions about what good looks like, and positioned to demonstrate leadership rather than respond reactively to externally driven change.

4.4 The proposed project is structured into four stages, each with a decision point that allows councils to determine whether and how they wish to continue participating. This business paper focuses on Stage 1 only.

4.5 Stage 1 focuses on information sharing, baseline evidence gathering, and early, high level options development. It is deliberately exploratory in nature and does not involve community consultation, binding decisions, or commitment to structural reform.

4.6 This business paper seeks Council's direction on if and/or how it should participate in Stage 1 of the proposed project, along with a commitment to provide staff resources and funding, as a prudent and low risk step to strengthen the Region's collective preparedness for anticipated local government reform.

4.7 Waikato Mayoral Forum Approach

4.8 The Mayoral Forum has agreed to a staged, decision-gated process, allowing councils to:

- Participate without commitment to later stages
- Pause or withdraw at agreed decision points
- Maintain local democratic control throughout

4.9 Guiding principles include:

- Communities at the centre of decisions
- Improved value for money and affordability
- Retention of local voice and identity
- A transparent, evidence-based process
- Better alignment of services and reduced duplication
- Strong regional resilience (economic and environmental).

4.10 The Mayoral Forum recognises the constrained financial environment councils are operating in, with ongoing cost escalation, unfunded mandates, extreme weather impacts, and affordability pressures on both councils and communities limiting discretionary capacity.

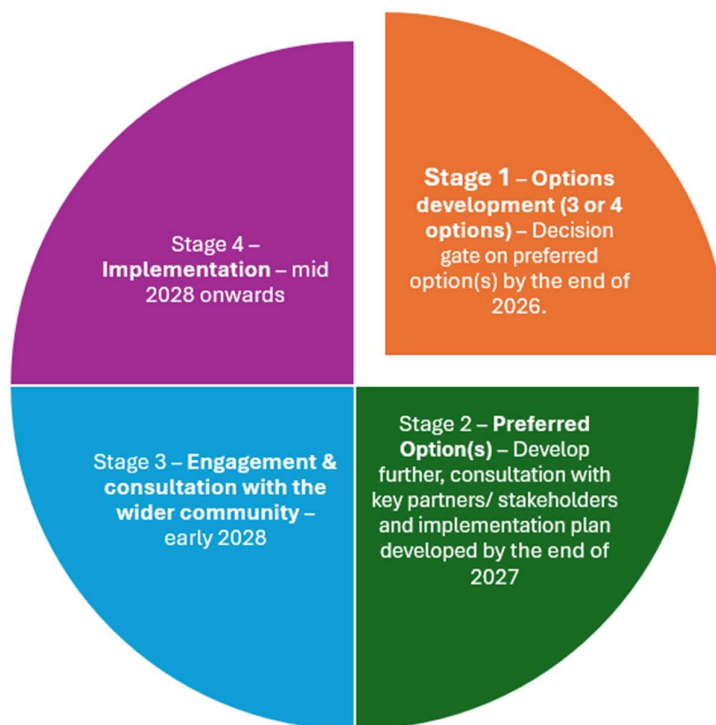
4.11 In response, the Mayoral Forum has written to the Minister of Local Government, Hon Simon Watts, seeking Central Government resourcing to support this work, on the basis that proactive consideration of the future of local government is in the national interest.

4.12 Regardless of the outcome of that request, the Mayoral Forum considers the work remains necessary and time critical. If external funding is not secured, councils will still need to progress

the work collectively, with careful consideration of scope and resourcing. The Mayoral Forum’s view is that the risk of inaction is greater than the challenge of undertaking this work in a constrained fiscal environment.

4.13 **Staged Approach**

4.14 The proposed project is structured in four stages, each with a decision point that allows councils to determine whether and how they wish to continue participating.



Future of local government in the Waikato - Project Stages

4.15 Stage 1 focuses on information sharing, baseline evidence gathering, and early, high level options development. It is deliberately exploratory in nature and does not involve community consultation, binding decisions, or commitment to structural reform Stage 1 of the work programme includes:

- The review of current local government functions across the Waikato
- An understanding where functions and delivery of services sit (local, regional, sub-regional or national)
- Development of a regional service catalogue
- Identification of duplication, gaps, and improvement opportunities
- Development of 3–4 high-level options for the potential future form and function of local government
- Identification of improvements that could be implemented regardless of any future structural reform.

4.16 Stage 1 Does Not Include:

- Community consultation

4.17 Participation in Stage 1:

- Is non-binding
- Does not commit the council to reform or structural change
- Enables the council to influence the options to be considered, help shape regional thinking and be better prepared for future reform.

4.18 Noting, any structural change would remain subject to central government processes/legislative change.

4.19 Governance and Resourcing

4.20 Stage 1 would be overseen by the Mayoral Forum, supported by:

- The Chief Executives' Forum
- An Independent Lead and Project Manager
- A cross-council collaboration team
- Engagement with iwi partners and central government agencies

4.21 Councils will receive updates and have opportunities to provide direction to their Mayors prior to each key decision gate.

4.22 What does actively participating in the review mean?

4.23 If elected members agree to participate in and resource Stage 1 then they are:

- Invited to provide staff resource for the Cross-Council collaboration team.
- Asked to commit to the funding required for external resources if this work is not done solely by Council staff that have been freed up through reprioritisation of workloads.
- Asked to commit to providing relevant information and data to inform the base-lining and evidence gathering work.

4.24 The Mayoral Forum has requested councils advise their position by 25 May 2026.

4.25 Timing (Indicative)

4.26 Key Stage 1 milestones in 2026 (Mayoral Forum scheduled meetings):

- April – Confirm scope, governance, and resourcing
- May – Decision on whether to continue
- August – Review of functions and service analysis
- November/December– Consideration of shortlisted options.

4.27 Cost

4.28 The indicative cost of Stage 1 is approximately \$335,000. WDC's share of these costs is estimated to be \$14,000 if all councils participate. This amount will change if all councils aren't involved.

4.29 The above estimate is based on the already agreed Mayoral Forum Triennial Agreement split, although other contributions are being explored.

4.30 This cost estimate covers specialist and consultancy support only and does not include future consultation or implementation costs.

5 Analysis of Options

5.1 Council has three options available to it as follows.

5.2 Option 1

5.3 To support the Mayoral Forum's proposal for a collaborative project to consider the future form and function of local government across the Waikato Region and participate and provide resource for progressing Stage 1.

5.4 Option 2

5.5 To be an Observer only.

5.6 Option 3

5.7 To not participate.