



Agenda

Extraordinary Council Meeting

Tuesday 4 August 2026
9.00am

Council Chambers
Queen Street
TE KUITI

Waitomo District Council is committed to conducting its business in a manner that is open, transparent and facilitates accountability and public participation. Any member(s) of the public wishing to address the Council at a Meeting or Workshop are asked to make arrangements through the Mayor's Office at least three clear working days before the scheduled Meeting or Workshop.

All attendees at this meeting are advised that the meeting will be electronically recorded (audio and video) for the purpose of webcasting to the Council's website. Every care will be taken to maintain individuals' privacy; however, attendees are advised they may be recorded as part of the general meeting proceedings.



NOTICE OF **EXTRAORDINARY** MEETING

AN **EXTRAORDINARY MEETING OF THE WAITOMO DISTRICT COUNCIL IS TO BE HELD IN THE COUNCIL CHAMBERS, QUEEN STREET, TE KUITI ON TUESDAY 4 AUGUST 2026 COMMENCING AT 9.00AM**

COUNCIL MEMBERS

Mayor John Robertson
Councillor Allan Goddard
Councillor Isaiah Wallace

Deputy Mayor Eady Manawaiti
Councillor Janette Osborne

Councillor Olivia Buckley
Councillor Dan Tasker

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Michelle Higgie".

MICHELLE HIGGIE

MANAGER – GOVERNANCE SUPPORT

ORDER PAPER

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PLEASE NOTE

1. The business papers attached to this Order Paper set out recommendations and suggested resolutions only. Those recommendations and suggested resolutions **DO NOT** represent Council policy until such time as they might be adopted by Council resolution.
2. This Order Paper may be subject to amendment either by the addition or withdrawal of items contained therein.
3. This Meeting will be **webcast** in real time to the Waitomo District Council website and will also be available for viewing on demand as soon as reasonably practicable following the meeting.

Document ID: 997204

Report To: Extraordinary Council Meeting



Meeting Date: 4 August 2026

Subject: **Simplifying Local Government – Head Start Process:
Approval of Outline Proposal for Submission**

Type: Decision Required

Author(s): Ben Smit
Chief Executive

1 Purpose of Report

- 1.1 The purpose of this business paper is to seek Council approval for the Head Start outline proposal, developed jointly with Ōtorohanga District Council (ŌDC), to be submitted to the Department of Internal Affairs (DIA) under the Head Start pathway by 9 August 2026.

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 Simplifying Local Government – Head Start Process: Approval of Outline Proposal for Submission be received.
 - 2 That Waitomo District Council approves the Head Start outline proposal for the creation of a new unitary authority, prepared jointly with Ōtorohanga District Council, for submission to the Department of Internal Affairs under the Head Start pathway by 9 August 2026.

3 Background

- 3.1 On 26 May 2026, Council resolved to participate with ŌDC in developing a Head Start outline proposal to form a new unitary authority covering the Waitomo and Ōtorohanga districts, and to assume the relevant Waikato Regional Council (WRC) functions within the district.
- 3.2 The proposal has been developed in-house by the Head Start Project Team, with input from subject matter experts on specific matters including Treaty settlements, iwi relationships, and planning matters, and direct input from elected members on representation.
- 3.3 The proposal has been reviewed through two workshops with both councils' councillors, and through review by senior leadership of both councils.
- 3.4 The proposal must be submitted to DIA by 9 August 2026. Both councils are considering approval of the proposal for submission at Council meetings on 4 August 2026.

4 Commentary

- 4.1 The proposal sets out the case for establishing King Country Council, a new unitary authority combining WDC, ŌDC, and the relevant WRC functions for the district. A summary of key content is set out below.
- 4.2 The two districts form one community of interest. Waitomo and Ōtorohanga districts share a rural economy built on farming, forestry, mining and tourism. Residents cross the district boundary daily

for work, education, health and commercial services, and the area shares an identity rooted in Te Rohe Pōtae. Three organisations (WDC, ŌDC and WRC) currently make decisions for a combined population of 20,650 across 5,534 square kilometres. This proposal reduces that to one.

DELIVERABLE

- 4.3 The two councils already share services and core systems, providing a strong foundation for integration. Transition governance is planned through a joint committee and a dedicated transition team, with the new council in place in time for the October 2028 local elections. The risks associated with the transition have been identified, and each has a clear pathway for resolution through detailed design.

SUPPORTS THE NEW PLANNING SYSTEM

- 4.4 A single authority would hold land use and natural environment planning, consenting, monitoring and compliance for the whole area. Plan inputs for the combined district reduce from three to one, and the Waikato regional spatial planning process gains a single sub-regional partner in place of two territorial authorities. Catchments that cross the proposed boundary would continue to be managed with neighbouring councils, and the Joint Management Agreements (JMAs) that provide for river co-management continue with equivalent effect.

SIMPLIFIES LOCAL GOVERNANCE

- 4.5 The proposal removes duplicated structures across two territorial authorities and a regional council. One elected Council, one Mayor, one chief executive, and one district plan process replace the current arrangements, and communities would know who is accountable for the decisions that affect them.

ECONOMIES OF SCALE

- 4.6 A combined rating base, consolidated specialist capability and existing shared services provide better value than two small councils operating separately. Reduced costs in preparing Annual Plans and Reports, Audit and LTP, and revaluations, due to producing one set rather than two.

MAINTAINS LOCAL VOICE

- 4.7 Ward-based representation with a Mayor elected at large would enable a voice for the area's distinct communities, including the isolated coastal settlements. Building on existing arrangements, Māori participation in decision-making would continue and be strengthened in partnership with iwi and hapū to ensure meaningful participation in governance and decision making. Community engagement in June and July 2026 affirmed the shared identity of the King Country and shaped the approach set out in this proposal.

TREATY SETTLEMENTS

- 4.8 All identified Treaty settlement arrangements would transfer to the new authority with equivalent effect. Engagement with Post-settlement Governance Entities, iwi and hapū continues through the detailed design phase.

5 Analysis of Options

OPTION 1 SUMMARY

- 5.1 Approve the Head Start outline proposal for the creation of King Country Council for submission to DIA by 9 August 2026.

Option 1 Advantages

- 5.2 Enables WDC to influence the future structure and governance of local government affecting the district. Provides a practical and achievable pathway to meet Government deadlines. Positions WDC to shape outcomes rather than react to them.

Option 1 Disadvantages

- 5.3 Requires alignment with ŌDC's own approval of the same outline proposal, given it must be submitted jointly.

OPTION 2 SUMMARY

- 5.4 Decline to approve or submit the outline proposal.

Option 2 Advantages

- 5.5 Avoids any commitment to the proposal as currently drafted.

Option 2 Disadvantages

- 5.6 Loss of ability to influence future governance structures and service delivery arrangements. Increased likelihood of externally imposed amalgamation outcomes that may not align with community needs or Council priorities. Reduced local input into decision-making processes. Potential for greater long-term disruption and uncertainty.

PREFERRED OPTION

- 5.7 The preferred option is Option 1.
- 5.8 Option 1 reflects a proposal that is informed by initial community and iwi engagement and joint elected member workshops with ŌDC.
- 5.9 Option 2 removes the ability for WDC and ŌDC to influence outcomes and increases the likelihood of the King Country being subject to the Government's Back Stop process, with reduced local input into any resulting amalgamation.
- 5.10 On this basis, Option 1 is considered the most effective option to retain local input into the future structure and delivery of local government services affecting the district.

6 Considerations**RISK**

- 6.1 There are no immediate capital or operational expenditure commitments arising directly from this decision.
- 6.2 The financial information in the outline proposal reflects each council's current financial position. Detailed financial modelling of the combined, post-amalgamation position, including a combined position on the costs, revenues and operations of the current Waikato Regional Council activities that will be undertaken by the proposed unitary, balance sheet, debt management approach, and a phased rates transition model, is deferred to the detailed design phase.
- 6.3 Should the proposal proceed to detailed design, additional resourcing, including staff time and possible external advisory support, will be required and reported to Council separately.
- 6.4 There is a risk that the Head Start process will not be carried through by the incoming Government following the November 2026 elections, however, it is considered highly likely that local government reform will continue under any new Government.
- 6.5 There remains a risk that DIA and Cabinet do not accept the outline proposal. This risk exists regardless of Council's decision; not approving a proposal for submission increases the likelihood of the King Country being subject to the Government's Back Stop process, with reduced local input into any resulting amalgamation.

CONSISTENCY WITH EXISTING PLANS AND POLICIES

- 6.6 Amalgamation of the Waitomo District with any other territorial authorities is not consistent with Council's existing Plans and Policies. However, the Government has made clear that if councils do not present their own proposals, the Government will impose an outcome through the Back Stop process. We assume legislation will follow that will clarify this.
- 6.7 This report seeks a decision to approve a Head Start outline proposal for submission. Approval does not, in itself, commit Council to any structural change; final decisions on any resulting amalgamation rest with Cabinet and would require further legislation.
- 6.8 Council is required to meet its decision-making obligations under the Local Government Act 2002, including sections 76–77, which require consideration of reasonably practicable options and identification of the reasonably practicable option.
- 6.9 Section 10 of the Local Government Act 2002, which sets out the purpose of local government, remains relevant in considering whether approving the outline proposal for submission will support the long-term provision of good-quality local infrastructure, services, and performance of regulatory functions.

SIGNIFICANCE AND COMMUNITY VIEWS

- 6.10 The Government's mandate for local government reform continues to override the requirements of Council's Significance and Engagement Policy at this stage. Formal community consultation is expected to occur during the detailed design phase, once an outline proposal is accepted.
- 6.11 Ahead of that formal consultation, Council has kept the community informed and gathered feedback through the community sentiment survey, a dedicated project website, and community events. This engagement does not constitute a formal submission process.
- 6.12 Since the May 2026 decision, initial engagement with mana whenua has been undertaken, including the Hui Māori on 15 June 2026 and ongoing engagement with TNN through its Chief Executive.
- 6.13 Further, more formal engagement and co-design of the Māori representation and participation model is committed to as part of the detailed design phase, should the proposal proceed.
- 6.14 Section 82 of the Local Government Act 2002 (principles of consultation) is expected to become directly relevant at the detailed design stage, should the proposal progress.
- 6.15 The Government has signalled that specific legislation will be introduced to enable local government reform. The scope and statutory requirements of that legislation remain unknown, presenting ongoing legal uncertainty.
- 6.16 Council must continue to meet its obligations under the Local Government Official Information and Meetings Act 1987 and the Public Records Act 2005 in relation to transparency, decision-making, and recordkeeping.

7 Recommendation

- 7.1 The preferred option is Option 1.

8 Attachments/Separate Enclosures
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Separate Enclosures:

- 1 Appendix 1: Head Start Outline Proposal – Our King Country Future (Doc # 997327)

HEAD START OUTLINE PROPOSAL

**A JOINT SUBREGIONAL PROPOSAL BY ŌTOROHANGA DISTRICT
COUNCIL AND WAITOMO DISTRICT COUNCIL**

SUBMITTED UNDER THE SIMPLIFYING LOCAL GOVERNMENT PROGRAMME



**OUR DISTRICTS.
OUR FUTURE.**



TE KAUNIHERA Ā-ROHE O
ŌTOROHANGA
DISTRICT COUNCIL

Waitomo
District Council

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Appendices:

1. Co-Lab Memo – letter of support for the King Country Council Head Start Proposal
2. Waikato Federated Farmers – Position on Local Government Reform (Unitary Councils)
3. Te Nehenehenui – letter of support

The Story of Te Rohe Pōtae

Ask anyone from Waitomo or Ōtorohanga where they are from, they will say the King Country, Te Rohe Pōtae. For the people here this is not a line on a map. It is the whenua they belong to, their tūrangawaewae, named with pride.

The story begins with the land itself, once known as Te Nehenehenui, the great forest. The Tainui waka came ashore on this coast at Kāwhia and Mōkau, and from its captain descend Ngāti Maniapoto, the iwi whose rohe gives the district its shape. Rivers carried the first communities inland, the Waipā running north to the Waikato and the Mōkau west to the sea, and beneath the hills lies the limestone country of caves and glow-worms that the world now travels to see.

The name Te Rohe Pōtae holds a deeper story again. In the late 1870s the Māori King Tāwhiao is said to have laid his hat upon a map and drawn a line around the whenua that would remain under Māori authority. The head is tapu, the most sacred part of a person, and the hat spoke of a crown, of mana held over the land beneath its brim. For the generations since, the people of this rohe have lived on this whenua, cared for it, and held to their authority over it.

That belonging, carried by Māori and the wider community alike, is who the people of Waitomo and Ōtorohanga are today. Two districts, one identity, drawn from the same history and the same land. It is from this shared ground that Ōtorohanga District Council and Waitomo District Council bring forward their case for a King Country Council.



Executive Summary

Waitomo District Council (WDC) and Ōtorohanga District Council (ŌDC) propose the amalgamation of their two districts into a single new unitary authority, the King Country Council (KCC). The new council would take on the regional functions currently delivered for the area by Waikato Regional Council (WRC), bringing the full range of local and regional services for the King Country under one democratically accountable body. Both councils resolved on 26 May 2026 to develop and submit a proposal jointly under the Head Start pathway. Both councils believe this is an achievable amalgamation that is able to be delivered by the October 2028 local body elections.

The two districts form one community of interest

Waitomo and Ōtorohanga districts share a rural economy built on farming, forestry, mining and tourism. Residents cross the district boundary daily for work, education, health and commercial services, and the area shares an identity rooted in Te Rohe Pōtae. Three organisations (WDC, ŌDC and WRC) currently make decisions for a combined population of 20,650 across 5,534 square kilometres. This proposal reduces that to one.

Deliverable

A joint project team was established for the Head Start proposal in May 2026. The two councils already share services and core systems, providing a strong foundation for integration. Transition governance is planned through a joint committee and a dedicated transition team, with the new council in place in time for the October 2028 local elections. The risks associated with the transition have been identified, and each has a clear pathway for resolution through detailed design.

Supports the new planning system

A single authority would hold land use and natural environment planning, consenting, monitoring and compliance for the whole area. Plan inputs for the combined district reduce from three to one, and the Waikato regional spatial planning process gains a single sub-regional partner in place of two territorial authorities. Catchments that cross the proposed boundary would continue to be managed with neighbouring councils, and the Joint Management Agreements (JMAs) that provide for river co-management continue with equivalent effect.

Simplifies local governance

The proposal removes duplicated structures across two territorial authorities and a regional council. One elected Council, one Mayor, one chief executive, one district plan process and one rating system would replace the current arrangements, and communities would know who is accountable for the decisions that affect them.

Economies of scale

A combined rating base, consolidated specialist capability and existing shared services provide better value than two small councils operating separately. Both councils are shareholders in Co-Lab, which gives the new authority access to capability shared across the wider Waikato region.

Maintains local voice

Ward-based representation with a Mayor elected at large would enable a voice for the area's distinct communities, including the isolated coastal settlements. Building on existing arrangements, Māori participation in decision-making would continue and be strengthened in partnership with iwi and hapū to ensure meaningful participation in governance and decision making. Community engagement in June 2026 affirmed the shared identity of the King Country and shaped the approach set out in this proposal.

Treaty settlements

All identified Treaty settlement arrangements, including the Joint Management Agreements with Te Nehenehenui Trust and Raukawa Settlement Trust, would transfer to the new authority with equivalent effect. Engagement with Post-settlement Governance Entities, iwi and hapū continues through the detailed design phase.

The councils seek acceptance of this outline proposal into the detailed design phase, together with early Government direction on the next steps of any enabling legislation and reorganisation assistance.

1. Context

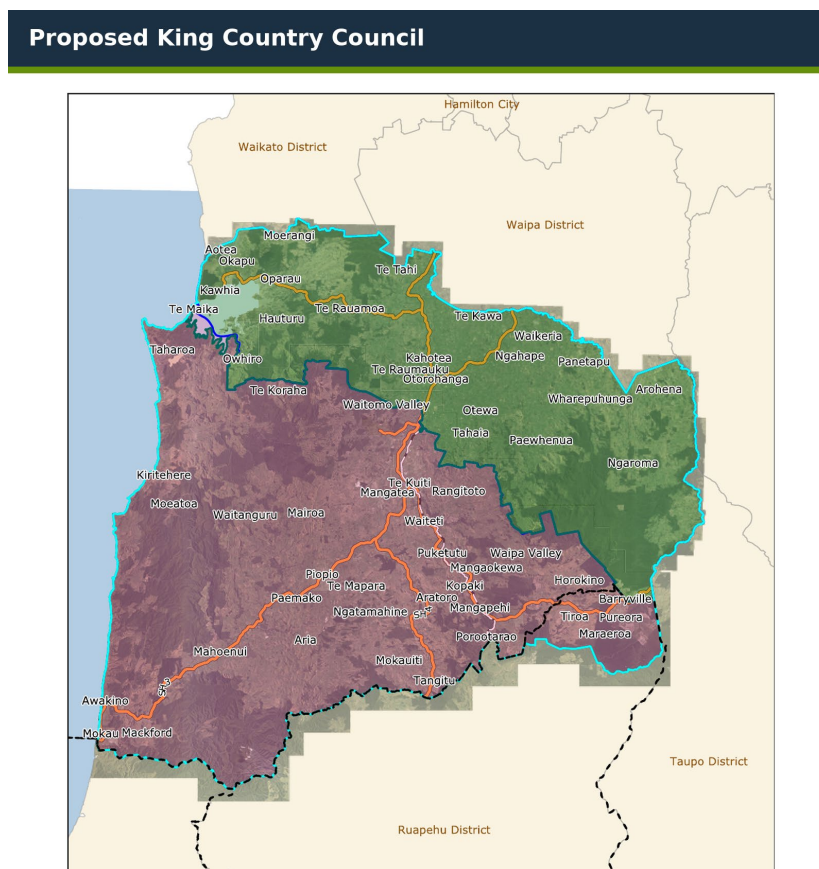
Current arrangements

Waitomo District Council and Ōtorohanga District Council are two separate territorial authorities. Regional functions for the two districts are currently provided by Waikato Regional Council. Communities across the two districts are therefore served by a two-tier arrangement, with district functions held by each territorial authority and regional functions held separately by the regional council. This proposal seeks to establish a single unitary authority combining the functions of both territorial authorities and the regional functions currently delivered for the two districts by WRC.

The two districts

The combined district covers approximately 5,534 square kilometres and has a combined population of 20,650 as of 30 June 2025. It is predominantly rural, with the main urban centres being Te Kūiti and Ōtorohanga. Land use is characterised by farming, forestry, mining and tourism, with the Waitomo Caves a significant contributor to the Waitomo visitor economy. The two districts sit within Te Rohe Pōtae, the King Country, and the district boundary broadly aligns with the rohe (tribal boundaries) of the Ngāti Maniapoto iwi. In a regional context, the parts of the two districts within the Waikato Region make up approximately 22.1% of the region's 24,539 square kilometres. Almost all the combined area sits within the Waikato Region and is served by Waikato Regional Council. A small southern portion of the Waitomo district, sits within the Manawatū-Whanganui Region and is served by Horizons Regional Council. The regional functions of both Regional Councils would transfer to the new authority.

The Māori population of both districts is well above the national average of 17.5 percent - 43.6 percent in Waitomo District and 31.6 percent in Ōtorohanga District. The needs and interests of Māori, and the significance of the King Country to iwi and hapū, are central to this proposal.



Rationale for a joint proposal

The Head Start pathway is a voluntary, locally led option for councils that are ready to shape their own reorganisation and to progress at pace. WDC and ŌDC have resolved to develop and submit a joint proposal under this pathway.

Both Councils believe the Head Start proposal and the merge of the two councils into a unitary authority is the best way to maintain the local voice of two districts which are distinctly different from the rest of the Waikato Region. We are, as Mayor Dow from Ōtorohanga says 'the same kind of people'. The two councils' shared geography, communities of interest, economic base, demographics, and strong cultural identity provide the logical basis for a single unitary authority for the two districts. We will be able to develop a workable unitary council that meets the needs of our people and reinforces the strong relationship we have with Maniapoto. The shared identity of the King Country is rooted in the history of Aotearoa New Zealand.

Residents regularly cross the district boundary for employment, education, health, and commercial services, and many secondary school students travel between the two districts. Sport and recreation activity further reinforces this cross-boundary community of interest. Junior football, junior hockey, North King Country junior rugby, touch rugby, and basketball are among the codes that already operate on a combined ŌDC-WDC basis, drawing players, volunteers, and spectators from both districts into shared competitions, administration and facilities, including the Gallagher Recreation Centre and the Ōtorohanga Memorial Pool Complex. This existing pattern of shared sporting and recreational activity reflects the practical, day-to-day connections between communities that underpin the case for a single King Country Council.

Detail on eligibility and the councils' formal decisions to proceed is provided in the Eligibility section.

Shared Service Arrangements: An Existing Foundation for Delivery

ŌDC and WDC already have access to a range of shared-service arrangements that reduce the practical risk of consolidation and support the case for a King Country Council. Co-Lab, a council-controlled organisation jointly owned by 12 councils across the Waikato and Bay of Plenty regions, is one example, giving both councils a proven track record of accessing regional-scale specialist services and procurement outside their own organisations. Co-Lab's footprint already extends beyond its current shareholders, and its model is not limited to the Waikato region — pointing to a wider pool of shared-service options the new authority could draw on as reform progresses across local government. Further detail on Co-Lab's services and role in supporting the new authority is set out in the Economies of Scale section.

Naming – King Country Council

The new unitary authority is referred to throughout this proposal as King Country Council. This is a working title. The name of the new authority will be confirmed in the detailed design phase but there is strong positive feedback from our communities on this name, due to the history of the Rohe Pōtae.

2. Eligibility

This is a subregional outline proposal submitted jointly by Ōtorohanga District Council and Waitomo District Council. It provides for the amalgamation of the two districts into a single new unitary authority, to be referred to as King Country Council, which will include the functions currently delivered for the King Country area by Waikato Regional Council.

A proposal from two or more territorial authorities

The proposal is submitted by two territorial authorities acting jointly. It is not submitted by a regional council, an individual territorial authority, an individual unitary authority, or any other organisation that is not eligible to submit.

Each council resolved at its meeting on 26 May 2026 to develop and submit a joint Head Start proposal.

A proposal for amalgamation into a new unitary authority

The proposal provides for the amalgamation of at least two territorial authorities into a new unitary authority, as required for an eligible reorganisation. The two districts would be combined into one authority that exercises both the territorial functions currently held by ŌDC and WDC and the regional council functions currently exercised by WRC within the current territorial authority boundaries of the two districts.

Directly affected territorial authorities and majority test

The two directly affected territorial authorities for this subregional proposal are ŌDC and WDC. Both are parties to the proposal. Together they constitute the whole of the directly affected territorial authorities for this subregional area, so the proposal satisfies the requirement to represent a majority of the directly affected territorial authorities.

Role of the affected councils and the regional council

ŌDC and WDC have jointly led the development of this proposal. Development has been carried out collaboratively by elected members and a shared project team drawn from both councils, covering proposal development, community and Māori engagement, financial analysis, and governance design.

WRC is not a submitting party but is affected insofar as regional functions currently exercised within the King Country area would transfer to the new unitary authority. The project team have engaged with the WRC Chief Executive and Chair, and they are aware of what is being proposed. WRC have also made data available regarding their services, costs and funding tools to support the evidence base for this proposal.

Requirement	How the proposal meets it
Submitted by two or more territorial authorities	Joint proposal of Ōtorohanga District Council and Waitomo District Council
Not submitted by an ineligible body	No regional council, individual authority or other body is a submitting party
Amalgamation into a new unitary authority	The two districts combine into one new unitary authority taking on the regional functions delivered within the area
Majority of directly affected territorial authorities	Both directly affected authorities are parties: two of two
Support confirmed	Both councils support the proposal, none undecided or opposed
Role of affected authorities and the regional council explained	Jointly developed by both councils, with the WRC role described

3. Deliverability

This section addresses the Head Start assessment criterion of Deliverability: whether the proposal is realistic and provides confidence that a King Country Council can be established and operating by, or shortly after, the October 2028 local elections.

How the proposal would be implemented

Ōtorohanga District Council and Waitomo District Council have taken the first practical steps toward implementation. Both councils passed formal resolutions at their respective council meetings on 26 May 2026 to jointly develop and submit a Head Start proposal, and a joint project team has operated since that date to prepare this outline proposal. This established working relationship provides the foundation for the transition governance described below.

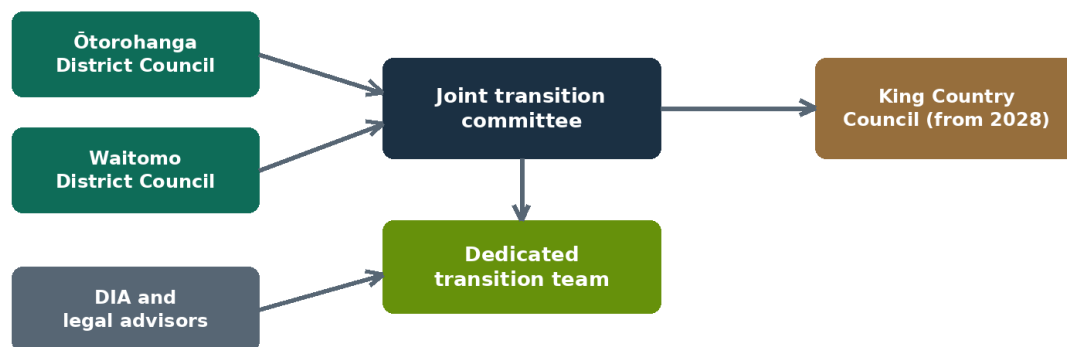
Transition governance

- A joint transition governance committee, comprising elected members and staff from both councils, will be established to oversee the transition from outline proposal acceptance through to the establishment of the King Country Council.
- Both Councils commit to establishing and funding a dedicated transition team, separate from business-as-usual staffing, to lead the establishment of the King Country Council. Both councils support this approach and acknowledge that it carries budget implications. Both councils are targeting completion of organisational transition by October 2028.
- The dedicated transition team will develop and deliver a transition plan, covering shared-services agreements, systems integration, workforce planning and an interim governance framework.
- The transition team will develop the interim governance framework in consultation with the Ministry for Cities, Environment, Regions & Transport (MCERT) and external advisors during the detailed design phase, addressing decision rights and accountability for the two incumbent councils during the transition window.
- Both councils already share several services and are in the process of combining more, use much of the same core software systems, and have been progressively aligning policies and processes. This existing alignment reduces integration risk relative to a merger of less familiar organisations.
- WDC transferred its water and wastewater services to Waikato Waters Ltd (WWL) under the Local Water Done Well programme on 1 July 2026, and ŌDC will do so on 1 July 2027. The experience of establishing shared arrangements and staged implementation for that transition can inform aspects of the transition approach for the new council, recognising that a council amalgamation with an elected governing body differs from the appointed-board model used for water services.

Key decisions already made

- Both councils have formally resolved to jointly develop and submit this Head Start proposal.
- The proposal is a subregional amalgamation of the Ōtorohanga and Waitomo districts.
- Elected members propose to keep the model of representation as simple as possible.

Transition governance



Elected members and senior staff from both councils sit on the committee.
The team delivers the transition plan: shared services, systems, workforce, interim governance.

How changes would be timed

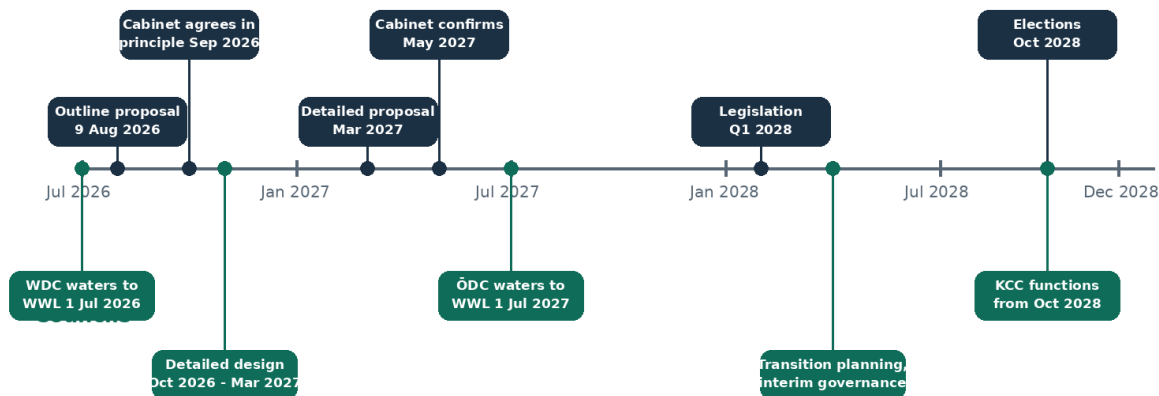
The proposal is designed to align with the Government's Head Start milestones. The two-council scale of the proposal allows the project team to maintain direct oversight of design, engagement, financial analysis and transition planning.

Milestone	Timing	Lead
Outline proposal submitted to DIA	9 August 2026	Joint project team
Cabinet agrees proposals in principle	September 2026	Cabinet
Detailed design phase, covering governance, financial modelling, transition planning, PSGE and mana whenua engagement, and community consultation	October 2026 to March 2027	Transition committee and team with legal and iwi input
Detailed proposal submitted	March 2027	Transition team
Cabinet confirms final proposals and makes final policy decisions	May 2027	Cabinet
Legislation enacted to implement Head Start proposals	Q1 2028	Government
Community engagement plan in place and underway	September 2026 to December 2028	Transition committee and team
Transition plan and interim governance arrangements finalised	July 2027	Transition committee and team
Operational systems, asset management and capital delivery processes merged	June 2028	Transition committee and team
Assets, liabilities merged. Contracts novated. Financial	June 2028	Transition committee and team

Milestone	Timing	Lead
reporting ready for the new financial year		
Information system, technology and management process integration completed	August 2028	Transition committee and team
Organisation change and people processes completed for staff integration	September 2028	Transition committee and team
King Country Council governance structure established	By the October 2028 local elections	Incoming King Country Council
Operational functions transferred to the King Country Council	By October 2028, per the transition plan developed in detailed design	Transition team

Head Start milestones and council-led steps

Government



Interaction with other local government programmes

The proposal has one significant interaction with the Local Water Done Well programme that requires explicit management through transition. WDC transferred its water and wastewater services to Waikato Waters Ltd (WWL) on 1 July 2026, while ŌDC's transfer occurs a year later, on 1 July 2027.

Both councils will continue to align their approach with the Local Water Done Well programme as it progresses and will ensure the transition plan is designed to fit around, rather than duplicate or conflict with water services reform.

In addition to Local Water Done Well, the proposal will maintain alignment with other current local government reform programmes, including implementation of the Planning Bill and the Natural Environment Bill, any future City and Regional Deals affecting the Waikato region, and wider reforms such as those to emergency management and the building system. While none currently presents a barrier to implementation, each will be monitored and incorporated into the detailed design phase to ensure that transition arrangements remain compatible with broader local government reform objectives.

What still needs to be worked through

The following matters are expected to be resolved in the detailed design phase, should the outline proposal be accepted:

- Detailed costs and benefits of amalgamation, including a full financial model covering rates, future rates harmonisation and the treatment of the post-transfer asset, debt and investments in subsidiary companies (e.g. Inframax) and other Council Controlled Organisations (CCO) currently held by ŌDC and WDC.
- Design of the interim governance framework for the period between Cabinet approval in principle and the first King Country Council elections in October 2028, including the role and decision-making authority of the two incumbent mayors and chief executives. This will require a Representation Review.
- A workforce transition plan addressing role development and continuity, organisational structure, retention of institutional knowledge, and change management implications.
- Transition planning for financial systems, organisational information systems, technology and processes, and contractual and property transfers.
- Detailed mapping of WRC functions to be delivered directly, versus those to be delivered through joint arrangements with other councils or through shared services.
- Transition planning and engagement for the transfer of obligations under all Treaty Settlements, JMAs and other iwi/Māori obligations to maintain and enhance our relationship and obligations under Te Tiriti o Waitangi.
- Detailed internal and external communications and engagement plans to maintain community confidence, staff retention and accountability throughout the transition period.
- Any implications arising from other Head Start proposals that are approved that may affect the King Country Council proposal.

Trade-offs and risks

The following table sets out the principal deliverability risks and trade-offs identified to date, and the mitigation proposed. This is not exhaustive, and further risks may be identified as the detailed design phase progresses.

Trade-off or risk	Nature of the risk	Proposed mitigation
Two councils undertaking transition alongside business as usual	Running transition planning at the same time as normal service delivery and the water services transitions risks for ŌDC may stretch staff and slow either workstream.	A dedicated transition team, separate from business-as-usual staff, will be resourced for the detailed design and transition phases. Experience from the WWL transition will be invaluable.
Service delivery disruption during transition	Amalgamation, combined with the absorption of new regional functions, carries a risk of temporary disruption to consenting, regulatory and frontline services during the changeover period.	Existing shared services and common software systems reduce integration complexity. A service continuity protocol will maintain current service levels until systems and processes are consolidated.
Workforce retention and capability loss	Amalgamation processes elsewhere have seen loss of experienced staff and institutional knowledge during periods of uncertainty about future roles.	A workforce transition plan will be developed with staff in the detailed design phase, addressing role continuity, communication, retention of key capability, and recruitment, particularly for functions absorbed from WRC.

Trade-off or risk	Nature of the risk	Proposed mitigation
Complexity of absorbing WRC regional functions	The new authority will take on regional functions such as transport planning, catchment management, biosecurity, coastal and harbour management, air quality, biodiversity and consenting that it does not currently deliver.	Detailed mapping of WRC functions will distinguish those absorbed directly from those delivered through joint arrangements with other councils through transfer of powers, CCO's or through shared services, allowing capacity to be built or shared where it makes most sense.
Water services transfer date asymmetry	WDC transferred water and wastewater services to WWL on 1 July 2026, a year ahead of ŌDC's 1 July 2027 transfer. This creates a period where the ŌDC staff will remain focused on its own water transition, reducing capacity available for the amalgamation transition.	Additional capacity will be jointly resourced to support the transition team.
Legal and Treaty settlement risk	Treaty settlement obligations, settlement implementation arrangements, or unresolved iwi interests may affect the timing and complexity of implementing aspects of the proposal. This requires additional engagement, due diligence and agreement with iwi, mana whenua and relevant Crown agencies.	Legal review of all Treaty settlement content will be completed during the detailed design phase, and the proposal will avoid pre-empting matters before the Court. Both councils hold existing relationships with iwi and mana whenua and will continue engagement with iwi and legal advisors through detailed design.
Reduced community confidence during the interim period	Between Cabinet approval in principle and the first King Country Council elections in October 2028, no elected members will represent the new authority, which could affect community trust and accountability.	An interim governance framework, developed with MCERT and external advisors, will set out clear decision rights for the incumbent councils during transition, supported by a communications and engagement plan to keep communities informed.
Uncertainty in Backstop and enabling legislation	The detail of how the proposed Backstop and enabling legislation will operate for a subregional proposal is not yet confirmed by Government.	The proposal seeks early guidance from Government on these matters and will adjust the detailed design approach once further clarity is provided.
Long-term costs may be higher than the current model	The long-term cost of a unitary authority may be higher than what ratepayers currently pay across territorial and regional council rates.	Financial modelling is being developed around the delivery of WRC services to King Country communities to test and manage this risk in the detailed design phase.

What is needed from Government

The proposal is considered achievable within the proposed implementation timeframe. Several matters require early Government direction and support to reduce uncertainty, enable detailed design work, and maintain project momentum. The project team seeks the following assistance from Government:

- Early in-principle confirmation of the proposal, as soon as practicable following submission, to provide certainty for councils and stakeholders and allow detailed design, due diligence and transition planning to commence without delay.
- Policy and legislative guidance on the treatment of WRC functions, assets, liabilities and statutory responsibilities within a subregional unitary authority model, to support functional mapping, service design, financial modelling and the development of transition arrangements.
- Regulatory relief, specifically an exemption for ŌDC from the Representation Review process otherwise required before the 2028 elections, given that a full Representation Review will be conducted for the new unitary authority.
- Clarity on the requirements of the 2027 to 2037 Long Term Plan process.
- Guidance on the application of the proposed Backstop and enabling legislation and the transfer of Treaty settlement arrangements, including how the proposed equivalent effect approach would operate in a subregional reorganisation context, to help manage legal and implementation risks and support engagement with affected iwi and Crown agencies.
- Reorganisation assistance to support detailed design and implementation planning. Targeted support through funding, specialist advisory services, or access to technical expertise would assist with detailed financial and rates modelling, legal and governance design, organisational design and workforce transition planning, information technology and system integration planning, asset, infrastructure and service transfer analysis, and programme management and implementation support. This support would help ensure the proposal proceeds efficiently and with minimal disruption, protecting services during transition and securing the intended long-term benefits for King Country communities.

Summary

The King Country Council proposal is a realistic and deliverable option for Head Start. The plan is to have a fully merged council by October 2028. It builds on a joint working relationship between ŌDC and WDC that predates this process, on existing shared services and systems alignment, and on transition governance that can draw on both councils' recent water services transition experience. The two-council scale keeps the proposal manageable within the available timeframe. The transition risks that exist are identified, and each has a clear pathway for resolution during the detailed design phase.

4. Supports the New Planning System

The proposed amalgamation of Waitomo District Council and Ōtorohanga District Council into a single unitary authority, is intended to make the new planning system easier to deliver and operate across a coherent, predominantly rural sub-region. Within the combined area, resource management functions currently exercised by two territorial authorities and Waikato Regional Council would be consolidated into one authority. This reduces the number of plans and the layers of governance and provides a single sub-regional partner in Waikato regional spatial planning.

How the proposal helps the new planning system work better

One authority for a coherent area

Within the proposed boundary, resource management responsibilities are currently divided between WDC, ŌDC and WRC, with a small number of properties in the south of the Waitomo district falling within the Manawatū-Whanganui region administered by Horizons Regional Council. Under the new planning system, a single unitary authority would hold the land use and natural environment planning, consenting, monitoring and compliance functions for the combined area. Where several entities currently exercise overlapping functions across the same King Country landscape or catchment, one entity would do so. This supports the coordination the new planning system is designed to achieve, through fewer plans and fewer layers of governance.

A single partner in a stable regional spatial planning process

Regional spatial plans under the Planning Bill and Natural Environment Bill will be prepared on the regional boundaries that applied when those Bills were introduced. This proposal does not seek to alter the Waikato regional boundary for that purpose. The combined authority would contribute to the Waikato regional spatial planning process as a single sub-regional partner rather than as two separate territorial authorities, which brings a single voice for the area, one land use plan and one natural environment plan to align with the regional spatial plan once rather than twice, and the ability to sustain the specialist planning, environmental science and geospatial capability that regional plan processes require.

The councils recognise that, irrespective of the Head Start outcome, they must move at pace following enactment of the Bills to prepare regional spatial plans on current boundaries, and they intend to do so.

Fewer plans, fewer layers, simpler coordination

Under the new planning system, the natural environment plan and land use planning are brought together. The proposal reduces the plan inputs for the combined area from three to one and consolidates the consenting, monitoring and compliance functions that support them. The practical effects are that resource consent applicants, who across this area are predominantly rural and primary sector operators, would deal with a single authority rather than two territorial authorities and a regional council applying different provisions across the same productive landscape, and that a single natural environment monitoring programme would operate across the combined area.

Iwi and hapū whose rohe span the two districts would engage with a single planning authority on land use and natural environment matters. The detail of Treaty settlement arrangements, Joint Management Agreements and iwi participation is addressed in the Treaty Settlements section of this proposal.

Plan inputs: three become one



Trade-offs and risks

The principal risks to the new planning system arising from the proposal, and how they would be managed, are set out below.

Trade-off or risk	Nature of the risk	Proposed Mitigation
Transition disruption to consenting and plan delivery	Amalgamation carries a risk of a temporary reduction in planning and consenting performance during transition, affecting delivery of obligations under the new system.	Transition planning will provide for continuity of existing plan provisions and consenting service levels until the new land use and natural environment plan is operative. The proposal presumes amalgamation would be timed to coincide with the disestablishment of regional councils, so natural environment and regional functions remain with WRC until that point.
Disrupted participation in regional spatial planning during transition	During the transition period there is a risk that the combined entity's contribution to Waikato regional spatial plan development is disrupted by internal reorganisation.	A Waikato regional spatial plan working group is currently being established. A joint Waitomo/Ōtorohanga planning working group would also be established early, drawing on both councils' existing planning staff, to act as the combined entity's vehicle for regional spatial plan participation and to operate continuously through transition. This is set out further under Initial Steps below.
Capability to assume natural environment functions	Assuming natural environment and regional functions from WRC requires specialist capability that neither council currently holds at full depth.	The detailed design phase would include a capability and workforce assessment. Where specialist functions cannot be built cost effectively in house, shared service or CCO arrangements, or delegation to another entity, would be scoped alongside essential in-house capability.

In addition, the compliance and enforcement functions of the new planning system may in time transfer to a national regulator, with policy work to follow enactment of the Bills. The proposal would provide for interim arrangements for these functions until Government decisions are made and will be settled in the detailed design phase.

Integrated catchment management

The guidance asks how the proposal reflects integrated catchment management and, where an existing catchment is split, that the implications, risks and mitigations be described. The Head Start Pathway policy document also asks outline proposals to explain how effective river catchment management can be maintained.

The catchments relevant to the two districts fall into four broad groupings. The Upper Waikato River catchment drains the most eastern part of the Ōtorohanga district from Waipapa Dam. The Waipā River catchment, the principal tributary of the Waikato River, drains the eastern and northern parts of both districts. The West Coast catchments, including Aotea, Kāwhia, Tahāroa, Marokopa, Kiritehere and Awakino, drain directly to the Tasman Sea. The Mōkau River catchment in the south runs along the boundary with Taranaki but drains into the sea at Mōkau which is in the current WDC boundary.

Consolidating the two districts and the relevant WRC functions into one authority removes the current division of catchment responsibilities within the combined area, which is an improvement on the present position where those responsibilities sit across a regional council and two territorial authorities. Three of the four groupings extend beyond the proposed boundary. The Waikato catchment borders South Waikato district and continues north into the Waipā and Waikato districts, and Hamilton City boundaries. The Waipā catchment continues north into the Waipā and Waikato districts, the Mōkau catchment is shared with Taranaki and the small southern part of the Waitomo district (near Benneydale) crosses the regional boundary into the Manawātū-Whanganui region. These catchments would remain shared with neighbouring authorities across the new boundary.

The councils would manage these cross-boundary catchments through contribution to Waikato regional spatial planning and limit-setting on current boundaries, coordination with neighbouring authorities on shared catchments, participation in Manawātū-Whanganui regional spatial planning in respect of the southern part of the Waitomo district, and continued effect for the JMAs that provide for river co-management, including obligations relating to the Waikato and Waipā rivers. A unified freshwater and land-use monitoring programme across the combined area would improve the coherence of the data that supports regional limit-setting.

A further catchment-related benefit of King Country amalgamation is improved coordination of hazard management and emergency management. Both Councils share common catchment-based topography and hazardscapes and already work closely as part of a shared service emergency management arrangement.

Matters to be resolved in the detailed design phase

The following matters are identified for resolution in the detailed design phase and may require more detailed provision at that stage. The outline proposal does not pre-determine them:

- Governance arrangements for plan-making, including committee structures, delegations and any shared-service arrangements for specialist planning functions.
- Workforce and capability transition arrangements, particularly for environmental science, monitoring and consenting functions transferring from WRC.
- A planning continuity protocol with WRC and Horizons Regional Council covering the transfer of natural environment functions, including interim service arrangements so there is no gap in consenting and compliance coverage during transition.
- Interim arrangements for the new planning system compliance and enforcement functions, pending Government decisions on a national regulator.
- Shared-service and council-controlled organisation options where specialist functions benefit from scale beyond the combined entity.
- Governance arrangements for iwi participation in plan-making, developed in partnership with iwi and mana whenua, as addressed further in the Treaty Settlements section.

Practical impacts and initial steps

Practical improvements for the planning system

- One combined plan covering a continuous area with a coherent rural character, catchment profile and economic base.
- One consenting authority across the area, simplifying the process for rural landowners, primary sector operators, infrastructure providers and iwi.
- A single planning team able to engage substantively in regional spatial plan development.
- A single natural environment monitoring programme, improving the quality and coherence of the data that informs regional limit-setting.

Initial steps to support a stable regional spatial plan process

The following steps are proposed to support development of a stable regional spatial plan process from the outset of the transition.

- Establish a joint Waitomo and Ōtorohanga planning working group on acceptance of the outline proposal, drawing on both councils' existing planning staff, to act as the combined entity's vehicle for regional spatial plan participation. This working group will operate continuously through transition and forming the nucleus of the merged planning team.
- Engage iwi partners as co-design partners in transition planning, so the combined entity's approach to natural environment planning reflects integrated catchment management obligations arising from settlement legislation and JMAs.
- Agree a planning continuity protocol with WRC and Horizons Regional Council covering the transfer of natural environment functions, including interim service arrangements during the transition window.

Both councils have been progressing joint work toward combining their district plans, which provides a foundation for the steps above.

5. Simplifies Local Governance

This section addresses the Head Start assessment criterion of Simplifies Local Governance. It sets out how the proposed King Country Council would reduce complexity, remove a layer of governance, improve accountability, and support effective decision-making for the communities of the King Country.

Overview of the change

The proposal would amalgamate Ōtorohanga District Council and Waitomo District Council into a single new unitary authority, referred to in this proposal as the King Country Council, and would bring the regional functions currently delivered within the two districts by Waikato Regional Council into that authority. Three organisations currently make decisions for King Country communities. The proposal reduces this to one. The combined authority would serve a population of approximately 20,650 across a land area of approximately 5,534 km².

Simpler governance than the status quo

ŌDC and WDC currently maintain separate elected bodies, separate chief executives and leadership teams, and the full range of planning, finance, infrastructure, regulatory and community functions, in order to serve adjacent rural communities with substantially similar needs. Some of this is duplicated activity rather than additional service capacity.

A single unitary authority removes this structural duplication. The new council would operate one elected governing body, one chief executive, one leadership team, one set of bylaws, one rating system and one set of operational systems and staff. The two councils already share a number of services, including animal control, building control, emergency management and traffic management, which shows that the shift toward common arrangements is underway and reduces integration risk. The table below summarises the proposed change in governance arrangements (subject to a representation review process).

Governance element	Status quo	Proposed (King Country Council)	Change
Territorial authorities	2 (ŌDC, WDC)	1 unitary authority	Reduction of 1
Regional council functions in the King Country	Delivered by WRC as part of the wider Waikato region	Absorbed into the new unitary authority for the King Country area	Separate regional layer removed for this area
Governance bodies making decisions for King Country communities	3 (ŌDC, WDC, WRC)	1 (KCC)	Reduction of 2
Elected Mayors	2	1	Reduction of 1
Elected members (councillors)	17 ŌDC – 9 Councillors WDC – 6 Councillors WRC – 2 Councillors	Maximum 10	Reduction of 7
Community Boards	ŌDC has 2 Community Boards with 4 Elected Members on each – 1 for Ōtorohanga and 1 for Kāwhia	Subject to ongoing discussion. To be considered through the representation review, with alternative options for local representation to be considered.	

Governance element	Status quo	Proposed (King Country Council)	Change
Standing Committees	4 (Risk and Assurance and CE Performance for both councils)	1 Risk & Assurance and 1 CE Performance	Reduction of 2 duplicated Standing Committees
Māori advisory and relationship committee	Relationship and engagement arrangements held separately by each council	A dedicated standing committee for Maori participation, with name, terms of reference and membership developed in partnership with iwi and hapū	New standing committee providing iwi and hapū a pathway to the council table
Governance of regional functions	Governed through WRC's committee structure as part of the wider Waikato region	Governed through the new authority's committee structure and joint arrangements, to be confirmed in detailed design	Regional functions brought under one governance structure including joint committees between unitary councils

Removing a layer of governance and consolidating regional functions

Under the status quo, ŌDC, WDC and WRC all make decisions that affect the same King Country communities. Residents deal with different bodies depending on the matter, and regulatory, planning and environmental decisions can involve two or three organisations with separate lines of accountability.

The proposal consolidates the regional functions delivered within the two districts, including transport and public transport planning, catchment and freshwater management, biosecurity and pest management, environmental monitoring, resource consenting and natural hazard management, into the new unitary authority. This creates a single democratically accountable body for the full range of local and regional services affecting King Country communities and removes a separate governance layer for this area. The detailed allocation and delivery model for these functions is a matter for the detailed design phase.

Clearer accountability

The proposed structure is designed to be straightforward for communities to understand. There would be one Council, one Mayor, one chief executive, and a single elected governing body responsible for decisions across the King Country. Where responsibility today is split between two district councils and a regional council, a single authority would be accountable, so communities would know who is responsible and who to contact at both a district-wide and a local level.

The roles and responsibilities of any local representative bodies would be clearly defined so that it is clear who is accountable for what. The approach to representation and to maintaining local voice across a large and dispersed rural area, including how local decision-making is provided for, is addressed under the Maintains Local Voice criterion and will be finalised in the detailed design phase. Consistent with the Head Start guidance, detailed committee structures and decision-making delegations are not set out at outline stage.

Governance of key regional services as a subregional proposal

As a subregional proposal, some regional functions, particularly catchment and freshwater management, extend beyond the boundaries of the two districts. Where a function or catchment crosses the subregional boundary, the new authority proposes to work with neighbouring Waikato councils through joint committees or equivalent arrangements, so that catchment integrity is maintained, duplication is avoided, and the King Country retains a voice in regional decisions that affect it. The role of iwi and hapū as kaitiaki within Te Rohe Pōtae particularly for catchment and freshwater management would be reflected in these arrangements. The specific arrangements for

transport and for catchment management are addressed under the Economies of Scale and Supports the New Planning System criteria respectively.

These arrangements would be developed in the detailed design phase. This approach is consistent with the Head Start guidance, which looks for simple and effective arrangements for subregional unitary authorities to work with other councils within the region. The guidance does not expect agreement to have been reached with non-submitting councils at outline stage. The way the proposal supports integrated catchment management is addressed further under the Supports the New Planning System criterion.

Trade-offs and risks

Trade-off or risk	Nature of risk	Proposed Mitigation
Reduction in total number of elected members	Following a representation review, the new structure will have fewer elected representatives than the combined total across ŌDC and WDC today. This is a deliberate simplification but means fewer elected voices for communities.	Maintaining local voice will rely on ward-based representation and accessible council processes. This trade-off is addressed in detail in the Maintains Local Voice section of this proposal.
Scale of the new authority's responsibilities	Absorbing WRC regional functions creates capability and capacity challenges. The authority will need to either build specialist capacity (particularly for catchment management, biosecurity and transport planning) or enter into service agreements or shared arrangements.	The new authority's existing Co-Lab shareholding provides access to specialist capability across asset management, geospatial services, water services and regulatory functions that reduces the need to build all capability in-house. A full capability assessment and workforce plan will be completed in the detailed design phase, with joint or shared service arrangements with other Waikato councils scoped where in-house capability cannot be cost-effectively built.
Subregional catchment and regional function complexity and fragmentation	Several regional functions — including catchment management across shared river systems, biosecurity, and regional transport planning — span the broader Waikato region and cannot be managed solely within the King Country boundary.	The King Country Council proposes to participate in a joint committee or equivalent arrangement with other Waikato councils for functions that span the wider region. This ensures catchment integrity is maintained and the King Country has a voice in regional decisions affecting its communities. The proposal is also structured to remain open to future expansion should other Waikato councils wish to join the King Country unitary at a later stage.
Transition risks to service delivery and community confidence	Two councils merging while simultaneously assuming new regional functions represents a	The two councils already share a number of services, utilise much of the same core software and

Trade-off or risk	Nature of risk	Proposed Mitigation
	significant operational undertaking. The risk of disruption to service delivery and community confidence during transition is real and will need active management. Staff and workforce transition will be a particular focus.	systems, and have been actively working to align policies and processes, which significantly reduces integration risk compared to a merger of less familiar organisations. A structured transition approach, developed with staff during the detailed design phase, will address workforce planning, role continuity, and the retention of institutional knowledge critical to service delivery. The new council or trade-off will be designed to retain capability and avoid the loss of experienced staff that has affected other amalgamation processes.

What will be worked through in detailed design

Consistent with the Head Start guidance, the following matters are not resolved at outline stage and will be developed in the detailed design phase:

- The detailed allocation and delivery model for the WRC functions being absorbed, including whether each is delivered in-house, through transfer of powers, or through CCO's or shared services.
- The local representation model, including any local or community representative bodies, their roles, and any delegations, addressed under the Maintains Local Voice criterion.
- Committee structures and decision-making delegations for the new authority.
- Joint arrangements with neighbouring councils for cross-boundary regional functions and catchments. Interim governance arrangements during the transition period are addressed under the Deliverability criterion.

6. Economies of Scale

This section addresses the Head Start assessment criterion of economies of scale. It sets out how a King Country Council would support the effective delivery of key regional functions, where efficiencies are expected to arise, the high-level financial impacts of reorganisation, and the trade-offs and risks to be managed. Consistent with the criterion, it gives particular attention to transport and catchment management, the two regional functions the guidance identifies for demonstration of effective delivery.

Effective delivery of functions requiring regional integration

The proposal would bring the territorial functions of Ōtorohanga District Council and Waitomo District Council together with the Waikato Regional Council functions currently delivered within the two districts into a single unitary authority. This creates one accountable body for functions that presently sit across three organisations.

Beyond the efficiency of a single organisation, bringing these regional functions into the new authority is expected to improve their effectiveness. Land use, catchment, biosecurity and transport decisions that currently sit across separate bodies would be made by one authority with a direct stake in the King Country, aligning regional and local decisions, reducing duplication and delay, and strengthening accountability to the communities affected. For catchment and freshwater management in particular, a single authority working within Te Ture Whaimana o Te Awa o Waikato can take a whole-of-catchment view that is difficult to achieve when responsibilities are split across three organisations.

There is also an opportunity to have a catchment wide authority that goes across the unitaries. The Parliamentary Commissioner for the Environment, Simon Upton, has noted in discussion of potential alternative options: “An agency like the Environmental Protection Authority (EPA) would take back responsibility for complex technical functions, such as catchment management or adaptation planning. Such an approach could assist the standardisation of data, processes and frameworks. The scale also allows for the retention – and sharing nationwide – of very specialised expertise.”¹

Transport

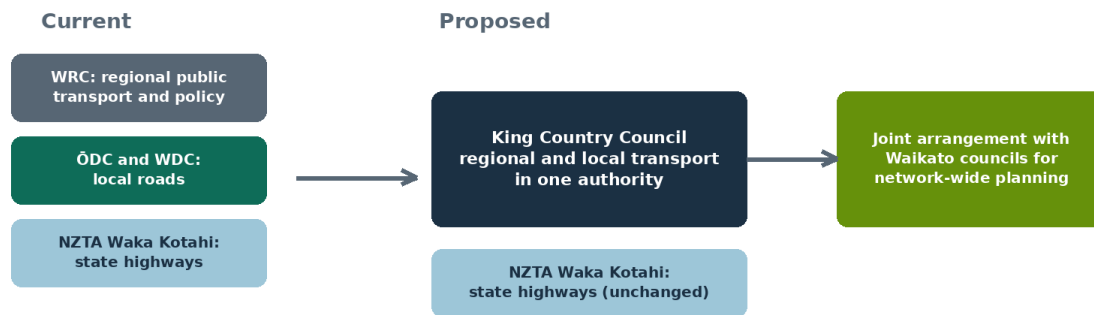
Transport responsibilities for the King Country are currently divided between WRC for regional public transport and transport policy, NZTA Waka Kotahi for state highways, and ŌDC and WDC for local roads. Public transport within the two districts is limited, comprising a daily InterCity coach stop, a weekday connector service between Te Kūiti and Hamilton, and the Kiwi Rail Northern Explorer rail service operating three days each week. Regional transport planning nonetheless depends on connections that extend beyond any single district boundary.

Under the proposal, the regional transport planning and public transport functions delivered by WRC for the King Country would transfer to the new authority. This would align local roading and regional transport decisions within one accountable body, in partnership with NZTA, and reduce the current need to coordinate across three organisations. Where transport planning depends on the wider Waikato network, the new authority would participate in a joint committee or equivalent arrangement with other Waikato councils so that regional network integrity is maintained.

Existing shared services already provide a practical platform. Both councils’ access transport asset management and modelling capability through Co-Lab, which provides regionally consistent asset valuation, traffic counts and pavement and footpath condition assessment, and the Waikato Regional Transport Model. Continuing to draw on this shared capability would allow the new authority to deliver transport planning and asset management to a consistent regional standard without building specialist capability from the outset. WDC's ownership of Inframax Construction Limited provides an established local capability for physical roading construction and maintenance.

¹ Parliamentary Commissioner for the Environment, Submission on the Simplifying Local Government: A draft proposal consultation document (20 February 2026), p.10.

Transport responsibilities



Catchment management

Catchment management cannot be divided effectively along territorial boundaries, because the cumulative and downstream effects of land use are felt across a whole catchment. The two districts sit within two principal river systems, the Mōkau, which drains the western King Country to the Tasman Sea, and the Upper Waikato and Waipā, (principal tributary of the Waikato awa).

Bringing catchment planning and management, flood protection, natural hazard management of a contiguous hazardscape, biosecurity, river management, land drainage and biodiversity functions into one authority would reduce the fragmentation that currently exists across WRC and two territorial authorities. Where catchments extend beyond the King Country boundary, the new authority would participate in joint arrangements with other Waikato councils to maintain catchment integrity and to retain a voice in decisions affecting King Country communities. This matters particularly given the legal status of Te Ture Whaimana o Te Awa o Waikato (Vision and Strategy) as the primary direction-setting document for the Waikato and Waipā rivers, including all the tributaries, noting that Te Ture Whaimana has the legal status of a National Policy Statement that also takes precedent over other National Policy Statements. Efficiency and effectiveness around integrated catchment management lies at the heart of this approach.

Effective delivery can again draw on existing shared services. Co-Lab's geospatial team maintains the Waikato Open Data Hub and shared GIS infrastructure used for environmental and catchment data, and Co-Lab Water Services delivers trade waste auditing, sampling and laboratory testing relevant to water quality monitoring. Accessing this capability through Co-Lab, alongside joint arrangements with other Waikato councils, would support regionally integrated catchment management without duplicating capability that already exists at a shared-service level.

Where functions cannot sensibly sit within either the King Country Council or in shared-services alone, the proposal recommends joint committees with other Waikato councils for catchment-scale functions — potentially river catchment management, flood protection, and pest management. A joint committee model would allow the King Country Council to retain a direct governance voice in decisions affecting the Mōkau and Waipā catchments, while sharing technical capability, cost and risk with other affected councils. This complements the shared-service role envisaged for Co-Lab: joint committees would provide the governance and decision-making mechanism for catchment-scale functions, while Co-Lab and similar arrangements would continue to provide supporting technical and operational capability such as geospatial data and water quality monitoring.

How increased economies of scale would add benefits

Bringing ODC, WDC and the relevant WRC functions into one authority is expected to add benefits in four main areas: greater financial scale, consolidated specialist capability, a King Country-wide approach to economic development, and existing shared services and procurement scale combined with the operational efficiencies of larger teams.

- A combined rating base serving a population of approximately 20,650, with combined rates revenue of approximately \$45.6 million from 10,694 rateable properties (2025/26, excluding water), spreads the cost of services and infrastructure.

- Specialist and technical capability, for example in catchment management, biosecurity, transport planning, regulatory functions and corporate services, can be consolidated and used more efficiently across a larger organisation than either council can sustain on its own.
- A single authority is better placed to take a King Country-wide view of economic development, including primary sector growth, tourism, mining, and infrastructure, across a combined economy generating approximately \$1.615 billion in GDP (year to March 2025), rather than two councils planning separately for adjoining communities with shared economic interests.
- The two councils already share services including animal control, building control, regulatory services, emergency management, and traffic management, and use much of the same core software systems, and both are shareholders in Co-Lab. This existing alignment means some benefits of scale are already being realised in a modest way, and it reduces the practical risk of consolidation.

Where efficiencies would come from

Access to regional scale beyond the council's own population base

Access to shared service arrangements strengthens the economies of scale case, because the new authority would not need to rely on its own population base to access specialist capability and procurement scale. It would continue to draw on capability shared across the wider Waikato region for functions that benefit from greater scale.

Services already available to both councils through Co-Lab, which the new authority would continue to access, include Road Asset Technical Accord asset management, geospatial services and the Waikato Regional Transport Model, joint procurement arrangements, Co-Lab Water Services, Co-Lab Building Services and the Waikato Building Consent Group, Regional Infrastructure Technical Specifications, and energy and carbon management. This relationship reduces both the cost and the risk of building the specialist capability the new authority would need in order to absorb WRC functions such as catchment management, biosecurity and transport planning.

Beyond Co-Lab, both councils also participate in other shared service arrangements. This includes Western Waikato Civil Defence Emergency Management, delivered jointly with Waipā District Council, shared Environmental Health capability, and shared access to the Sport Waikato Regional Connectivity Coordinator – West role, which supports community sport and recreation participation across western Waikato districts. These arrangements further reduce the need for the new authority to build specialist capability in isolation and support the case that the new authority would draw on established regional networks rather than starting from a narrower base alone.

The table below sets out where efficiencies are expected across the areas identified in the guidance. Consistent with the outline stage, gains are described qualitatively. Savings will be quantified through financial modelling in the detailed design phase.

Function	Where efficiency is expected	Indicative scale
Governance and corporate services	One governance structure, one leadership team, and one set of corporate systems and bylaws in place of two. Existing shared software reduces transition cost. Reduction in overhead operating costs.	Moderate to high
Planning and regulatory functions	Consolidated consenting, compliance and policy capability, and one district plan chapter of the proposed Combined Regional Plan rather than two. Some near-term cost from resource management reform implementation will offset early gains.	Low to moderate, near term

Function	Where efficiency is expected	Indicative scale
Emergency management	A single civil defence emergency management capability across the combined district, supporting consistent planning and response.	Low
Science, data, systems and capability	Consolidated specialist capability, for example catchment science, GIS and asset data, that neither council can fully sustain alone, reducing reliance on contracted expertise over time.	Low
Asset management and infrastructure procurement	Combined procurement scale for infrastructure and professional services. Roading cost is driven largely by network size and density rather than council size, so gains are more modest than in back-office functions.	Low to moderate
Service delivery (shared services)	Extension of existing shared services across the combined district, with scope to identify further opportunities in the detailed design phase.	Moderate
Audits, Annual Plans and Reports, LTP	Reduced costs in preparing Annual Plans and Reports, Audit and LTP, and revaluations, due to producing one set rather than two.	High

Regional scale through Co-Lab



Other than the initial resizing of both organisations' governance and management structures, efficiency savings are expected to accrue gradually rather than immediately, and some functions, such as community facilities and frontline delivery, may see limited direct savings because local presence and staffing still need to be maintained.

Expected financial impacts of reorganisation

At the outline stage this proposal sets out the following high-level expectations. Detailed financial modelling, including a combined balance sheet, debt capacity, and a phased rates transition, will be developed in the detailed design phase.

- **Asset management and stewardship:** consistent asset management practice can be applied across a larger asset base, supporting more consistent levels of service and longer-term capital planning than two councils managing similar assets independently.
- **Infrastructure investment:** a larger rating base may support more effective sequencing of infrastructure investment.
- **Financial sustainability of services:** combining corporate and back-office functions is expected to be the most reliable source of recurring savings. Savings in service delivery and infrastructure areas are likely to be more modest and slower to be realised.
- **Resourcing to perform statutory responsibilities:** the new authority would build or secure specialist capability for functions currently delivered by WRC, through in-house capacity, joint arrangements with other Waikato councils, or Co-Lab services.
- **Debt management:** the combined post-transfer debt position is modest. On current projections, combined debt as at 30 June 2027 is approximately \$9.27 million, primarily WDC roading investment, with ŌDC effectively debt-free following its water services transfer. Debt pooling and prudent limits will be addressed in the detailed design phase.
- **Council-controlled organisations:** both councils' Co-Lab shareholding would continue. WDC wholly owns Inframax Construction Limited, a roading construction and maintenance trading organisation that already delivers for both districts and beyond, giving the new authority an established local delivery capability. The future ownership and operating model for Inframax will be reviewed in the detailed design phase but is expected to transfer to the King Country Council. ŌDC shareholding in Waikato Regional Airport Ltd would also transfer to the new entity and provides an economic link to the wider Waikato region.
- **Implementation costs:** one-off transition costs are expected, particularly for systems integration, governance transition and workforce planning. Existing systems alignment is expected to reduce these costs relative to a merger of less familiar organisations, though a realistic transition budget will still be required.
- **Appetite for risk and innovation:** a larger, more financially resilient authority is expected to have greater capacity to invest in innovation and to absorb the impact of unexpected events than either council does individually.

The cost of delivering the WRC functions within the two districts is not yet confirmed. WRC allocates funding and delivers these functions on a zone-based or regional basis and not by district, so district-level cost and revenue figures are not readily available. Determining the costs of delivering these regional services for the new King Country Council is a priority for the detailed design phase.

Trade-offs and risks

This section outlines the trade-offs and risks associated with pursuing economies of scale, including the impact on maintaining local voice, and how these would be managed or mitigated.

Trade-off or risk	Nature of risk	Proposed mitigation
Realisation of efficiency savings	The long-term operating cost of delivering combined territorial and regional functions through a single authority is not yet confirmed and will be established through financial modelling. This creates a degree of cost uncertainty to be tested before establishment.	Financial modelling in the detailed design phase will test the long-term cost of delivering regional functions and identify where economies of scale and shared service arrangements can offset new costs.
Rates impact during transition	Combining two rating systems, and absorbing new regional functions, creates a risk of rates increases during the transition period. Rates impact is consistently the top concern raised by communities and elected members.	A phased rates harmonisation path will be developed in the detailed design phase, with conservative assumptions for the first Long Term Plan and savings recognised as they are expected to arise.
Capability to absorb WRC functions	The new authority will need specialist capability for catchment management, coastal and harbour management, air quality, biodiversity, biosecurity and transport planning that neither council currently holds at full depth.	A capability assessment and workforce plan will be completed in the detailed design phase. Joint and shared-service arrangements, external service providers such as Earth Sciences NZ, and CCO's, will be used where in-house capability cannot be built cost-effectively.
Impact on local voice	Consolidating governance and regional functions into a single authority reduces the number of elected representatives and may be seen as moving decision-making further from communities.	Simple ward-based representation and accessible council processes are proposed to maintain local responsiveness. This is addressed in detail in the Maintains Local Voice section of this proposal.
Savings slower or smaller than expected	Evidence from other amalgamations shows that efficiency savings are often overestimated and can take longer to materialise than anticipated.	Detailed financial modelling, with ranges and sensitivity testing, will be undertaken in the detailed design phase.

What still needs to be worked through

At outline stage this section makes the strategic case for economies of scale. The following matters will be resolved in the detailed design phase and are not developed further here:

- Detailed financial modelling, including a combined balance sheet on a WWL adjusted like-for-like basis, projected transition costs, a phased rates harmonisation model, debt pooling arrangements, and quantification of efficiency savings by function;
- A full mapping of WRC functions delivered within the two districts, confirming which transfer to the new authority, and which are delivered through joint arrangements, transfer of powers, CCO's or third party service providers;
- Identifying the costs and improvements expected from delivering the regional functions such as catchment management, biosecurity and transport planning, through a single authority, including the service levels and outcomes against which these, would be measured as part of detailed design.
- A capability and workforce plan for absorbing WRC functions;
- The terms of continued Co-Lab shareholding and the future ownership model for Inframax Construction Limited;
- The design of joint arrangements with other Waikato councils for catchment management, biosecurity and interregional transport.
- Engagement with WRC has been initiated, and WRC has begun making data on its services, costs and funding tools available to support the evidence base for this proposal, though district-level cost data remains limited because regional operations (and therefore budgets) are delivered by zone or as a total regional rather than district. This engagement will continue through the detailed design phase to confirm the functions to be absorbed, those to be delivered through joint arrangements and Co-Lab services, and any transition support WRC may provide.

7. Maintains Local Voice

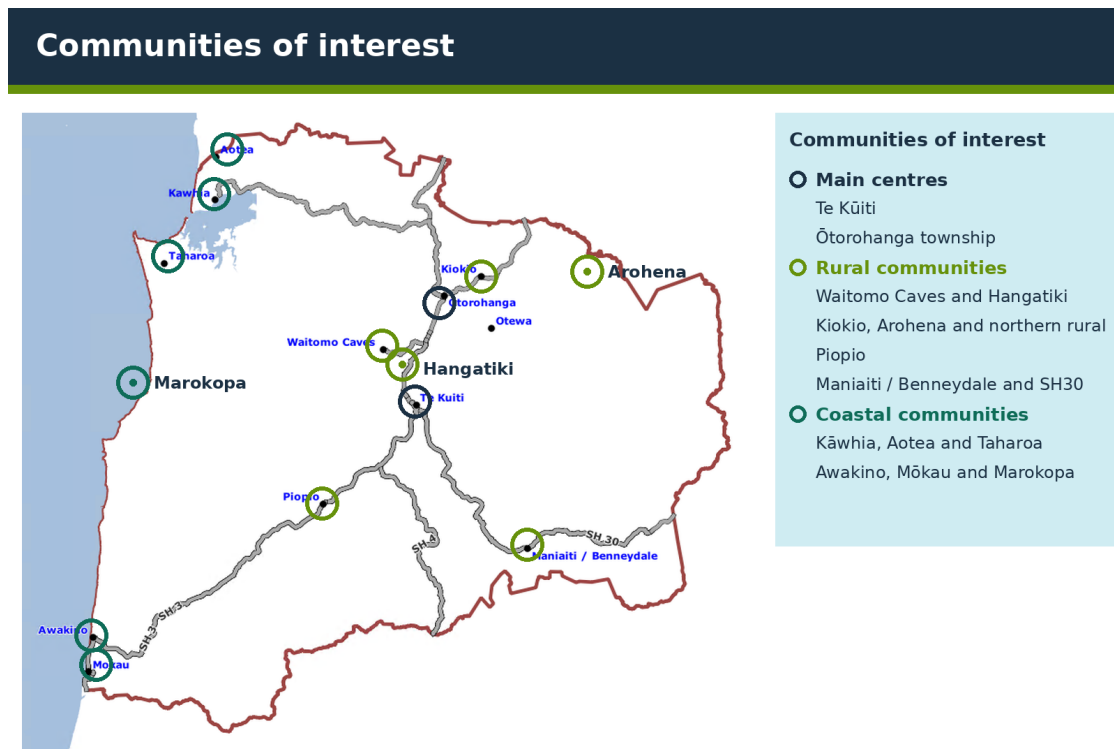
Overview

This section responds to the Maintains Local Voice criterion in the Guidance for Head Start outline proposals. It sets out how communities across the proposed King Country Council area would continue to be represented and heard, how decisions would be made at the local level, and how the interests of urban and rural communities would be balanced within a single unitary authority.

The King Country is a predominantly rural area. Both Ōtorohanga District Council and Waitomo District Council are classified as rural councils, and the proposed King Country Council would retain that character. The approach to local voice set out below is shaped by the specific communities, geographies, and relationships of the two districts.

Communities of interest

The proposed King Country Council area combines the current Ōtorohanga and Waitomo districts. This area contains several distinct communities of interest, understood across geographic, economic, and cultural dimensions.



Geographic and place-based communities

Each of the following communities has its own character, economic base, and relationship to local government services.

Community	Character and significance
Te Kūiti	Main urban centre of the Waitomo district and the largest town in the combined area. A services hub with the district's main hospital, secondary school, and commercial centre. Large Māori population and historical significance as a centre of Te Rohe Pōtae.
Ōtorohanga township	Main service centre of the Ōtorohanga district. Retail, health, and community services hub for the northern part of the combined area, with a growing visitor economy, including the Ōtorohanga Kiwi House.
Kāwhia, Aotea and Tahāroa	Distinct west coast communities, geographically isolated from the main highway corridor and consistently raised in engagement as at risk of feeling remote and underrepresented. Kāwhia and Aotea Harbours carry significant cultural importance. The Tahāroa Ironsands operation is a significant economic asset.
Waitomo Caves and Hangatiki	Centred on a nationally significant tourism asset, with an economy driven by tourism, hospitality, and adventure activities, while geographically close to Te Kūiti and Ōtorohanga.
Arohena, Kiokio and rural northern Ōtorohanga	Farming communities economically connected to Ōtorohanga township as their main service centre.
Piopio	Rural service community in the southern Waitomo district, with a community identity distinct from Te Kūiti.
Maniaiti / Benneydale (SH30 corridor)	Rural community in the eastern Waitomo district serving a dispersed farming population, and the gateway to the Timber Trail.
Awakino, Mōkau and Marokopa	Remote southwest coastal communities with small permanent populations, significant seasonal bach communities, and among the most geographically isolated in either district.

Economic communities of interest

Farming and primary production are the dominant economic activity across both districts and are dispersed across rural areas rather than concentrated in any township. Tourism is centred on the Waitomo Caves and extends to Kāwhia, the Ōtorohanga Kiwi House, a Timber Trail and rural and adventure attractions, with different service needs and interests from farming.

Small business and retail are concentrated in Te Kūiti and Ōtorohanga, with shared interests in town centre vitality, economic development, and infrastructure. The primary sector includes manufacturing with meat processing, timber mills and limestone processing, and mining. The King Country economy also includes Waikeria Prison, road construction, transport and logistics.

Māori communities and iwi

Māori make up a significant proportion of the population, approximately 43.6 percent in the Waitomo district and 31.6 percent in the Ōtorohanga district, well above the national average. The area sits at the heart of Te Rohe Pōtae. A majority of both districts includes the tribal lands of the Ngāti Maniapoto iwi. Other iwi with relationships across the area include Raukawa in the east, Ngāti Te Wehi across the Aotea harbour, Te Patupō, Ngāti Hikairo in the Kāwhia harbour and inland toward Pirongia, and Ngāti Apakura. Iwi rohe cross district boundaries and are organised around whakapapa and cultural sites of significance rather than local government lines. This has direct implications for how Māori representation is designed. This is addressed in section 7.5. The identification of Treaty settlement arrangements and how these would transfer to the new authority is addressed in the Treaty Settlements section.

The King Country as a coherent community of interest

Together, the two districts form a coherent community of interest. They share a rural and agricultural economy, with farming and primary production as the dominant economic base. They share infrastructure and service patterns, with residents regularly crossing the district boundary for employment, education, health, and commercial services, particularly between Te Kūiti and Ōtorohanga township.

They share an identity rooted in the history of Aotearoa New Zealand with the significance of Te Rohe Pōtae, and an established track record of collaboration through shared services and joint work. Community and iwi engagement in June 2026 affirmed this shared identity, with over 75 percent of public survey respondents identifying the area's rural character and community identity as a unifying factor.

How people will elect representatives

The councils propose that the new unitary authority be elected through a ward-based model, with the Mayor elected at large across the whole district. This is a high-level direction. Consistent with the Guidance for Head Start outline proposals, representation arrangements are not fully agreed at this stage.

Why ward-based representation

The combined council covers a large, dispersed area whose communities have different service needs, economic interests and relationships to local government. Having councillors elected at large across the King Country would risk councillors being elected largely from Te Kūiti and Ōtorohanga, where most voters live, potentially leaving rural and coastal communities without direct representation. Kāwhia, Aotea, Tahāroa, Awakino, and Mōkau were raised specifically in community and iwi engagement as communities at risk of being overlooked, and a ward encompassing the west coast and coastal communities would be a reliable mechanism to guarantee them a voice at the council table. The former district boundaries of Ōtorohanga and Waitomo also represent established communities of interest and could provide continuity and familiarity during a period of significant change.

Mayor elected at large

The Mayor would be elected at large across the whole district, providing a whole-of-council mandate that is not tied to any single ward, urban centre, or community of interest. The mayoralty would be a key integrating mechanism between ward-based representation and whole-of-district decision-making.

Indicative ward areas

The following indicative ward areas illustrate the communities of interest identified above. They are indicative only. The number of wards, ward boundaries, and the number of councillors would be determined through the formal representation review required under the Local Electoral Act 2001, in the detailed design phase.

Indicative ward area	Communities covered
Ōtorohanga and northern rural	Ōtorohanga township, Kiokio, and rural northern Ōtorohanga district
Te Kūiti and central	Te Kūiti, Waitomo Caves and Hangatiki, and surrounding rural areas
Coastal and west	Kāwhia, Aotea, Tahāroa, Awakino, and Mōkau
Rural south and east	Piopio, Maniaiti/Benneydale, and the eastern rural areas of both districts

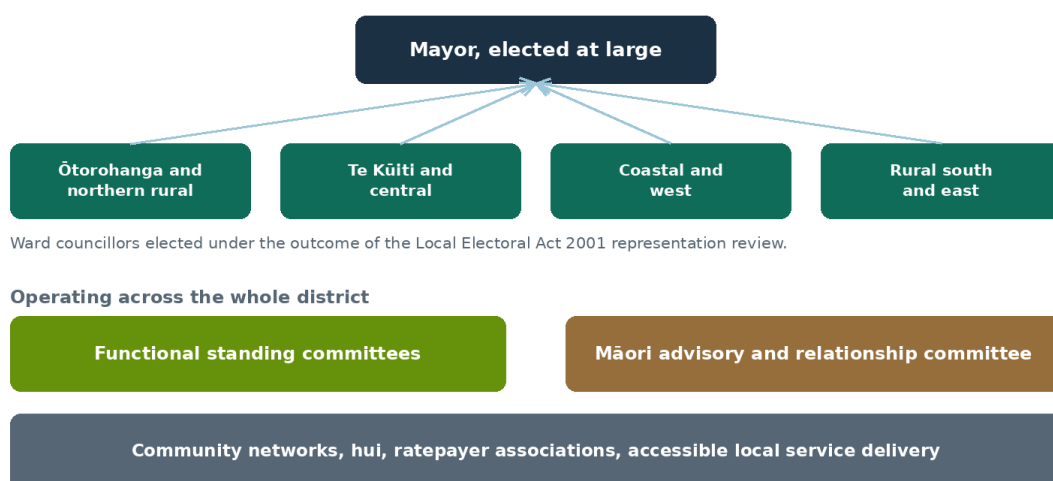
Balancing urban and rural interests

The proposed model is designed to balance urban and rural interests. A ward structure provides representation for communities that could be unlikely to return a councillor in a district-wide contest, particularly the coastal and southern rural communities. The Mayor at large provides a unifying voice across all wards. Functional standing committees, organised around responsibilities rather than geography, would bring rural and urban councillors together around shared work and support integrated decision-making rather than ward-by-ward advocacy. Public engagement identified rates equity and fair distribution of spending as key concerns, particularly from rural and coastal communities. The rating and service delivery model would be required to address equitable service levels across a dispersed district, and this would be a specific focus in the detailed design phase.

How communities will be represented

Beyond ward-based elected representation, the proposal addresses community representation through the governance structure of the new council and through community networks and accessible service delivery.

Proposed representation and participation model



Community Boards

The future of Community Boards is subject to ongoing discussion. The two Community Boards currently operating in the Ōtorohanga district, for Ōtorohanga and Kāwhia, and the options for local representation across the combined district, would be considered through the representation review, with alternative options for local representation being considered. Ward-based representation would be the primary mechanism for maintaining local voice, supported by the committee structure and the community networks described below.

Community networks and accessible service delivery

Strong community networks already exist across the King Country. The new council would work alongside community groups and organisations to keep community voice accessible and connected to council decision-making. This includes maintaining accessible local service delivery and a customer-facing presence across the district, including in smaller communities, supporting community organisations and networks to engage with council planning and decision-making, and ensuring council meetings and public engagement are accessible across a geographically dispersed district. Existing relationships with individual communities, for example through ratepayer associations and hui, would be built on so that each community retains a means of engaging with the new council.

Shared community facilities, including the Les Munro Centre, Gallagher Recreation Centre, and two aquatic centres, would continue to serve as valued community hubs under the new council, reflecting the importance of retaining local access to well-used community assets.

What community engagement has told us

Public engagement in June and July 2026, including community hui and a public questionnaire, identified the following highest priority matters for communities.

Community priority	How the proposal responds
Keeping rates and fees affordable, with fair distribution of spending	Rates equity framework to be developed in the detailed design phase, informed by a combined financial model and harmonisation analysis.
Improving long-term financial sustainability	A combined ratepayer base, reduced overhead and shared services are expected to deliver improved financial resilience over time. Further modelling to be completed.
Making better use of staff, systems, assets and resources	Addressed through a single governance and leadership structure eliminating duplicated management tiers; consolidation of corporate, back-office and regulatory functions; Co-Lab (shared services CCO); Inframax Construction for infrastructure delivery; and increased procurement scale.
Protecting the identity of local towns, rural communities, marae and settlements	Addressed through ward design, place-based service delivery, and local bespoke community groups.
Maintaining or improving council services	Pooled capability and resources are expected to maintain and, over time, improve service delivery. Transition planning will prioritise service continuity.
Having stronger capability to manage infrastructure, growth, climate and resilience challenges	A single unitary authority consolidates district and regional functions, enabling more integrated infrastructure planning, investment and climate response across the King Country.

89%

of respondents rated **maintaining local voice and representation** as important or very important



Source: Head start public questionnaire. 182 responses to 19 July 2026 (181 answered Q5a)

How iwi and Māori will participate in decision-making

The Māori population of both districts is well above the national average of 17.5 percent - 43.6 percent in Waitomo District and 31.6 percent in Ōtorohanga District.

Both councils hold existing relationship arrangements with iwi whose rohe covers the combined district. Both councils hold a shared Joint Management Agreement with Te Nehenehenui (Ngāti Maniapoto), and Ōtorohanga District Council holds a Joint Management Agreement with Raukawa Settlement Trust. These agreements, and other existing relationship arrangements, would transfer to the new authority with equivalent effect, as required under the Head Start pathway. Waitomo District Council currently operates a council committee, Te Raangai Whakakaupapa Koorero, through which Whare (part of Te Nehenehenui's structure) represent the concerns of their whānau and engage with the council on matters important to them. The identification and transfer of Treaty settlement arrangements is addressed in the Treaty Settlements section.

Māori ward representation

On current legislation, the position on Māori wards differs between the two districts. Following the poll held at the 2025 local elections, the outcome of the Ōtorohanga District Council referendum to remove Māori wards is binding for the next two local elections, meaning the earliest a Māori ward could be reintroduced in that district would be the 2034 election. Waitomo District Council does not currently have Māori wards and introducing one would require a binding poll under the current provisions. These differing starting positions will need to be worked through as part of the representation review for the new council.

Māori advisory and relationship committee

Māori participation in council decision-making is proposed to be provided through a dedicated standing committee. Its name, terms of reference, and membership would be developed in direct engagement with iwi and hapū in the detailed design phase, so that the model reflects the preferences and priorities of tangata whenua. The intent is a clear and accountable pathway for iwi and hapū perspectives to be heard, advisor on council matters and enables a clear path for their voices to reach the council table, with a mandate to bring issues and solutions to the council rather than a purely relationship-focused function. While the committee would be designed with mana whenua and iwi in mind, the councils would also recognise the interests of Māori living in the district who are not mana whenua of Te Rohe Pōtae.

Ongoing engagement commitment

Both councils acknowledge that full iwi and Māori engagement has not been completed before this outline proposal, which is consistent with the guidance that this is not required at outline stage. A plan for continued engagement is set out in the Treaty Settlements section. Key elements include:

- Direct engagement with PSGEs to confirm how existing Treaty settlement arrangements would be carried forward into the new authority.
- Engagement with Ngāti Te Wehi on their specific relationship arrangements, noting their active High Court matters relating to the Aotea Harbour and tribal boundaries.

- Engagement through the Whare Rōpū Forum process and with whare chairs across Te Rohe Pōtae.
- Further hui with Te Raangai Whakakaupapa Koorero (Waitomo Māori Relationship Council Committee).
- Formal design of the Māori representation and participation model in the detailed design phase, developed in direct partnership with iwi, hapū, and PSGEs.

Trade-offs and risks

The following trade-offs and risks are acknowledged in relation to this criterion, with the proposed mitigations.

Trade-off or risk	Description	Mitigation
Reduction in total elected members	The new structure would have fewer elected representatives than the combined total across the two councils today. This is a deliberate simplification but means fewer elected voices.	Ward-based representation ensures geographic coverage. A functional committee structure provides integration across the whole council.
Potential removal of ŌDC Community Boards	Subject to a representation review process, the two existing Community Boards may not carry over.	A coastal ward may provide local representation for isolated areas. Local voice would also be maintained through the committee structure and community networks.
Geographic scale and accessibility	The combined district of approximately 5,534 km ² is large for a single council, and communities at the margins may feel more distant from decision-making.	The ward structure guarantees local representation, and the new council would be smaller and more locally focused than any wider Waikato structure.
Ward focus versus whole-of-council perspective	Ward-based representation carries a risk of councillors advocating primarily for their ward rather than the whole district.	The Mayor elected at large provides a whole-of-council perspective. Functional committees require cross-ward collaboration, and governance induction would emphasise the dual role of councillors.
Rates equity	Engagement identified concerns about fair distribution of rates spending, particularly from rural communities funding services they cannot readily access.	A rating policy and rates framework would be addressed in the detailed design phase.

Matters to be resolved in the detailed design phase

If the outline proposal is approved, the following matters would be resolved in the detailed design phase:

- Ward boundaries and councillor numbers, through the formal representation review required under the Local Electoral Act 2001.
- The design of the Māori representation and governance model, developed in partnership with iwi and mana whenua across both districts, to ensure meaningful Māori representation in governance and decision-making.
- A rating policy and service delivery equity framework, to ensure fair distribution of council investment across the combined district.

8. Treaty Settlements

This section responds to the Treaty settlements requirement set out on page 15 of the Guidance for Head Start Outline Proposals, which sits alongside the five assessment criteria as a distinct required element of an outline proposal. It identifies the Treaty settlement arrangements that apply within the scope of this proposal and explains how those arrangements would transfer to the King Country Council with equivalent effect. Ōtorohanga District Council and Waitomo District Council acknowledge that the Crown is responsible for upholding Treaty settlements, and that this section is intended to inform the Crown's engagement with PSGEs on any changes needed throughout Treaty settlement redress.

Identified Treaty settlement arrangements

Post-settlement Governance Entities

The proposal covers the districts of Ōtorohanga and Waitomo and would absorb WRC functions within that area in a staged process. Treaty settlement arrangements apply within this area, including those held with the PSGEs Te Nehenehenui Trust and Raukawa Settlement Trust. Other PSGEs with interests relevant to the area include Waikato-Tainui and Te Rūnanga o Ngāti Tama o Taranaki.

Joint Management Agreements

JMAs provide the most significant Treaty settlement arrangements within the proposal area. The two operative JMAs are set out below.

Arrangement	Description and effect
JMA, Te Nehenehenui Trust with ŌDC, WDC and WRC	Operative JMA reflecting Treaty settlement obligations arising from both the Ngā Wai o Maniapoto (Waipā River) Act 2012 and the Maniapoto Claims Settlement Act 2022. The JMA provides for co-management of natural resources and ongoing relationship obligations.
JMA, Raukawa Settlement Trust with ŌDC and WRC	Operative JMA reflecting Treaty settlement obligations arising from the Ngāti Tūwharetoa, Raukawa, and Te Arawa River Iwi Waikato River Act 2010. The JMA provides for co-management of natural resources and ongoing relationship obligations.

Other Treaty settlement obligations and arrangements

WRC holds a range of further Treaty settlement obligations, statutory acknowledgements, co-managed land agreements and iwi environmental and heritage management plans that apply within the Ōtorohanga and Waitomo districts. These would be carried forward and would transfer to the King Country Council with the relevant regional functions, each with equivalent effect. The full identification of which region-wide obligations apply within the two district boundaries, and the transfer mechanism for each, is work for the detailed design phase, undertaken with WRC.

Mana Whakahono ā Rohe

Ōtorohanga District Council, Waitomo District Council and Waikato Regional Council have received formal letters from iwi authorities initiating the process to form a Mana Whakahono ā Rohe under the Resource Management Act 1991. These processes have been initiated by Apakura Rūnanga Trust and Te Rūnanga o Ngāti Tama o Taranaki and carry statutory timeframes. The King Country Council would inherit this obligation and would be expected to progress the discussions in accordance with those statutory timeframes.

Other relationship arrangements

In addition to Treaty settlements and JMAs, ŌDC, WDC and WRC hold relationship-based arrangements with other iwi and hapū whose rohe falls within or crosses the proposal area, including Ngāti Te Wehi, Te Rūnanganui o Ngāti Hikairo, Apakura Rūnanga Trust, Te Patupō Iwi Trust and Te Rūnanga o Ngāti Mahuta ki te Hauāuru. These relationships will endure with the new authority.

Engagement with iwi, hapū and PSGEs

Consistent with the guidance, which does not expect a completed engagement process at outline stage, initial engagement with PSGEs during proposal development has focused on ensuring that PSGEs, iwi and hapū are aware of the proposal, and that the protection of existing Treaty settlement arrangements is a shared commitment of both councils. Substantive engagement on the detail of transfer is planned for the detailed design phase.

Both councils undertook initial engagement with PSGEs during proposal development, including a Hui Māori hosted by Ōtorohanga District Council on 15 June 2026, a hui hosted by Waitomo District Council on 19 June 2026, and meetings between the Chief Executives of both councils and Te Nehenehenui on 5 June and 3 July 2026. The Mayor of Ōtorohanga District Council met the Chair and Chief Executive of Raukawa Settlement Trust on 1 July 2026. Across this engagement, Te Nehenehenui, Raukawa and other iwi consistently emphasised the importance of Treaty settlements and JMAs continuing with equivalent effect, an enduring partnership relationship with the King Country Council, and continued involvement in the development and implementation of the proposal. Iwi at the Hui Māori also raised the strength and continuation of the Ngāti Te Wehi relationship with Ōtorohanga District Council, active High Court proceedings relating to the Aotea harbour and tribal lands, outstanding Treaty claims relating to the West Coast harbours, and the importance of WRC environmental functions, particularly freshwater and coastal management, remaining effective in a future unitary structure.

How Treaty settlement arrangements would transfer with equivalent effect

The proposal takes the approach set out in option 1 of the DIA guidance, that existing Treaty settlement arrangements or agreements transfer to the new unitary authority with equivalent effect. This is accompanied by a commitment to continued engagement with affected PSGEs, iwi and hapū during the detailed design phase.

JMA transfer approach

The JMAs held by ŌDC, WDC and WRC with Te Nehenehenui Trust and Raukawa Settlement Trust would transfer to the King Country Council and continue to operate with equivalent effect. Where two councils currently hold separate arrangements with the same PSGE, as is the case with Te Nehenehenui, the detailed design phase would determine whether these consolidate into a single agreement or are otherwise structured to maintain full equivalent effect, noting that the Te Nehenehenui JMA already combines two pieces of legislation and the individual JMAs with Waitomo and Ōtorohanga are virtually identical.

The transfer of WRC functions would carry with it the associated Treaty settlement obligations, statutory acknowledgements and co-managed lands agreements that apply within the King Country area, each with equivalent effect.

Mana Whakahono ā Rohe

The Mana Whakahono ā Rohe statutory processes initiated by iwi authorities, being Apakura Rūnanga Trust and Te Rūnanga o Ngāti Tama o Taranaki, would be inherited by the King Country Council. The new council is committed to progressing these in accordance with the statutory timeframes under the Resource Management Act 1991 or its successor legislation, and this would be included in transition planning.

Future planned engagement with PSGEs

Both councils acknowledge that engagement to date has focused on awareness of the proposal and protection of existing arrangements. Substantive engagement on how each arrangement would transfer is planned for the detailed design phase, and would include at a minimum:

- Direct engagement on the consolidation and transfer of JMAs and related arrangements
- Progression of the Mana Whakahono ā Rohe processes with Apakura Rūnanga Trust and Te Rūnanga o Ngāti Tama o Taranaki
- Working with WRC to identify and document all Treaty settlement obligations applicable within the King Country area, and agreeing transfer arrangements
- Continued engagement with the seven Whare of Te Nehenehenui, being collections of marae, within the Ōtorohanga and Waitomo territorial boundaries

Both councils note the guidance that engagement with PSGEs will continue after outline proposals are submitted, and that the Crown will work with councils to ensure alignment with Crown processes. The detail of how equivalent effect is given to each arrangement, and any changes to Treaty settlement redress, will be worked through between the Crown and PSGEs and is not resolved within this outline proposal.

Both councils also note that future legislative change under the wider reform programme may affect how Treaty settlement arrangements are given effect. The councils are committed to maintaining their Treaty settlement obligations, and to honouring existing arrangement with iwi and hapū.

9. Other Considerations

In developing this proposal, Ōtorohanga District Council and Waitomo District Council considered alternative boundary and structural options beyond the King Country Council model presented in this proposal. These options are not part of the proposal. No analysis of these options has been undertaken as part of this outline proposal, and further work would be required before any alternatives could be progressed.

Future expansion - boundaries aligned to Te Rohe Pōtae

The proposal is deliberately structured to remain open to future expansion. Waitomo and Ōtorohanga districts represent the core of Te Rohe Pōtae, the King Country. The full King Country rohe extends beyond these two districts, with communities in neighbouring districts also falling within Te Rohe Pōtae. A number of these communities share the rural character, primary industry base, and economic profile of the King Country, with similar population trends, growth patterns, and service needs.

This option would extend the King Country Council boundary to align with the wider rohe of Te Rohe Pōtae, reflecting the historical and cultural extent of Ngāti Maniapoto and other iwi with interests in the area. It would involve a larger geographic footprint than the current Ōtorohanga and Waitomo district boundaries and may provide for enhanced integration of catchments within King Country Council.

This option was raised in recognition of the deep and continuing relationship between Te Rohe Pōtae iwi and this whenua. It was not included in the proposal, as it would require further engagement with iwi and neighbouring councils, and consideration of how existing Treaty settlement arrangements and JMAs would apply across a different boundary. It is identified as an area for further discussion beyond the Head Start timeframe. Both councils are open to those discussions as the wider reform progresses.



10. Summary

The name says it plainly. Te Rohe Pōtae, the land beneath the brim of the hat, has always meant one place, held together by its own people. A King Country Council would give that identity a contemporary form, one council, one voice, answerable to the people of the rohe, and grounded in rich history, kotahitanga, manaakitanga and our connection to the whenua.

The King Country Council is a locally led response to the Government's reform of local government. Two councils that already work together, serving one community of interest, propose the simplest structure available: one council for the King Country.

The case rests on evidence the councils already hold. The area shares its geography, economy and identity. The new authority would be accountable to its communities for every local and regional service they receive, and it would be in place for the October 2028 local elections. The matters still to be worked through are identified in this proposal, and each has a clear home in the detailed design phase.

Both councils stand behind this proposal and are ready to begin. We invite the Government to accept the King Country Council proposal into the detailed design phase.

MEMORANDUM

To	Waitomo District Council and Ōtorohanga District Council
From	Co-Lab
Cc	
Date	30 June 2026
Memo Title	Co-Lab support for a proposed King Country Unitary Authority

1. PURPOSE

This memo supports the Head Start proposal being prepared by Waitomo and Ōtorohanga District Councils for a proposed King Country Unitary Authority (KCUA). It outlines Co-Lab's role and current services and identifies Waikato Regional Council activities that are adjacent to Co-Lab's existing capability. These areas may provide immediate practical opportunities for Co-Lab to support a future KCUA if the proposal is progressed.

2. WHAT CO-LAB CURRENTLY DOES

Co-Lab is a council-controlled organisation owned by 12 councils across Waikato and Bay of Plenty. Its purpose is to help councils identify and realise shared opportunities, through joint investigation into new ways of working, shared service delivery and joint procurement.

Co-Lab's current services include:

- Procurement and contract arrangements
- Asset management & infrastructure standards
- Building consent processing and building control consistency & capability
- Water services (sampling and analysis, trade waste management and water conservation & education)
- Geospatial services
- Transport modelling
- Shared valuation data
- Energy and carbon management
- Other regional coordination activity

The model is designed to deliver better value to communities by reducing duplication, optimising spend, building specialist capability and giving councils access to services that are more efficient or resilient when delivered collectively.

3. SUPPORTING A KING COUNTRY UA

Co-Lab is not a substitute for the statutory role of a council or regional council. Functions involving democratic accountability, statutory decision-making, rating, enforcement, public policy choices or public safety should sit with the relevant local authority or statutory body. Co-Lab's strength is being part of the delivery mechanism that sits alongside councils: shared capability, common systems, procurement, data, project delivery, technical coordination and operational support.

Waikato councils face significant change with central government's recent announcement to simplify local government, and requests for proposals under its Head Start programme. Co-Lab similarly faces significant change, particularly if only one or two Unitary Authorities remain in the Waikato following the reform. There are other potential uses for a CCO, however this paper sets out our role to support a KCUA.

Where three or more UAs exist - whether within the Waikato or involving councils elsewhere in New Zealand - the case for ongoing shared services remains compelling. Co-Lab's vehicle and capability are not necessarily limited to the Waikato region. If reform results in smaller or newly established councils elsewhere that need transition support, shared capability or access to established service arrangements, Co-Lab could provide a tested platform to assist. Central to the value of shared services are the questions of **whether there is material financial advantage from economies of scale and whether a shared arrangement improves resilience.**

Co-Lab has recent experience supporting councils through structural change, including through the Waikato Water Done Well process. A similar role could support KCUA establishment by providing practical coordination, reporting, procurement and financial administration while the enduring operating model is developed.

Functions adjacent to Co-Lab capability

Co-Lab could provide the proposed KCUA with access to established regional capability where it may not be efficient or realistic to build every specialist function internally from day one. Co-Lab's support would be targeted to areas where shared delivery, technical capability, common systems, procurement, data, project management or transition coordination would improve deliverability, reduce duplication or lower establishment risk.

If reform results in a King Country Unitary Authority, former Waikato Regional Council (WRC) functions would need to be considered carefully against the final legislation and the new authority's operating model. Several WRC functions are adjacent to work Co-Lab already undertakes or could sensibly support. The table below identifies WRC functions that appear adjacent to existing Co-Lab capability and could be tested further if the KCUA proposal progresses.

WRC function	Adjacent Co-Lab capability
Transport modelling, data and analytics	Co-Lab supports councils through the Waikato Regional Transport Model and related shared transport analysis.
GIS, spatial data, aerial photography, open data and reporting	Co-Lab currently coordinates shared geospatial procurement, platform and service arrangements, including activity that supports regional access to spatial data and open data. If Co-Lab were supporting several UAs, it may be worth testing whether some in-house geospatial capability should be developed to strengthen service resilience and reduce reliance on external arrangements.
Environmental monitoring, sampling and reporting support	Co-Lab already undertakes water sampling and analysis, which could extend to similar regional council activity. Statutory reporting would remain with the authority.
Environmental planning and policy development support	Co-Lab could provide or coordinate access to specialist advisory, analytical, research and drafting capability to

	support the KCUA in developing environmental, transport, resource management and other regional policy. Statutory policy decisions, including formal adoption of regional policy statements and plans, would remain with the Unitary Authority.
Resource consent and regulatory support	Co-Lab already processes building consents for councils. This aligns with WRC's dam consenting role and could extend to regional resource consenting if legislation allows and statutory decisions remain with the authority.
Biosecurity, biodiversity, catchment and restoration programme support	Co-Lab's coordination, procurement, contractor management, and project delivery capability could support programme delivery.

Beyond the specific regional council functions identified above, there are also broader areas where shared-service arrangements between smaller UAs may make sense. These are not unique to regional council activity, but they may still offer opportunities to reduce duplication, strengthen capability and improve resilience.

- **Procurement, contract management and programme management:** Co-Lab already supports councils through joint procurement and contract arrangements. Similar shared approaches could help smaller UAs access stronger commercial capability, reduce duplicated effort and support more disciplined purchasing and contract management.
- **Corporate, digital and specialist support functions:** Smaller UAs may also benefit from shared access to specialist corporate or digital capability where it would be inefficient to build separate in-house teams. This could include common systems, advisory support, project coordination or other specialist functions where shared delivery provides better value or resilience.

For clarity, this memo does not propose that Co-Lab assume statutory decision-making, regulatory enforcement, rating authority, flood protection ownership, civil defence governance, public transport operations, statutory regional policy-making decisions, including formal plan adoption, or other functions where statutory mandate, risk, liability or public accountability should remain directly with the Unitary Authority or another mandated entity.

For a smaller UA, holding statutory accountability and building all specialist capability internally are not the same thing. Co-Lab could provide a way to access regional-scale capability while the new authority retains accountability for priorities, funding decisions and statutory responsibilities. This could be particularly useful during establishment and transition, and in enduring areas where shared delivery provides better value than duplicated local capability.

4. NEXT STEPS

Co-Lab welcomes the opportunity to further discuss how it could support a future KCUA if the Head Start proposal is accepted and progressed. That support would need to be tested against the final legislative settings, the KCUA's preferred operating model, and the future make-up of local government across the Waikato and beyond. Co-Lab would approach those discussions on the basis of partnership and practical value, including whether its existing vehicle and capability could support other councils nationally where shared services, transition support or specialist capability would improve value and resilience.

WAIKATO FEDERATED FARMERS

Federated Farmers Waikato has over 2000 members over an area that encompasses Raglan, Te Kauwhata, Te Aroha, Tokoroa and Awakino. Its western coastal boundary is between Taranaki and Auckland provinces, with the Kaimai Range being the natural eastern boundary.

Federated Farmers Waikato deals with six district councils, as well as the Waikato Regional Council and various rural industry organisations. The province questions and lobbies all aspects relating to what affects its farming communities. Rural Women and Young Farmers delegates regularly attend regional executive meetings.

Waikato branches serve the areas of Cambridge, Hamilton, Matamata, Morrinsville, North Waikato, Otorohanga, Te Aroha, Te Awamutu, Tokoroa and Waitomo.

POSITION ON LOCAL GOVERNMENT REFORM (UNITARY COUNCILS)

Waikato Federated Farmers supports reform of local government structures, including moving towards unitary councils, but does not support the creation of a single “Hamilton Super City” model. We are strongly opposed to concentration power in a single super-mayor or urban-dominated governance model.

Our core principle is a strong, protected rural representation and decision-making within any future governance framework.

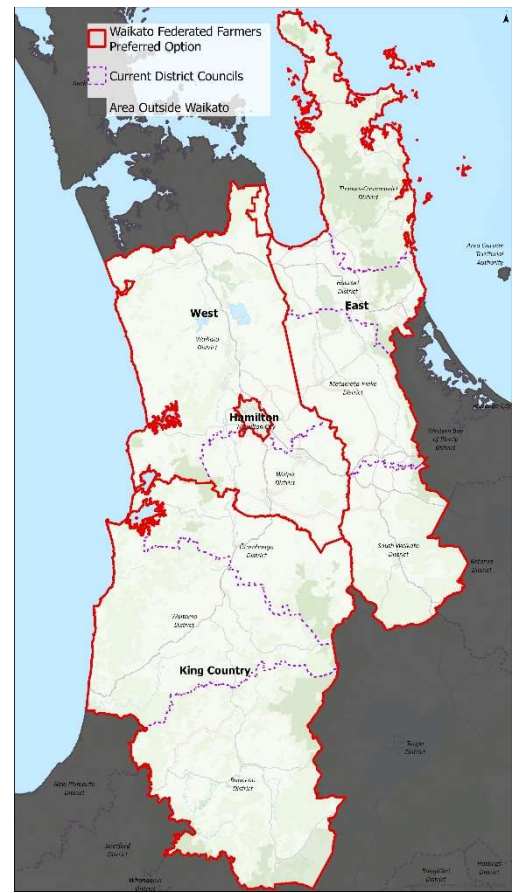
After much consultation with members, rural communities including a “local government reform” focus at our Fieldays stand, we have formulated the following two options for unitary councils within the Waikato.

From all consultation, there is a unanimous voice to have Hamilton as its own unitary.

PREFERRED OPTION:**East Waikato, West Waikato, Hamilton, King Country**

Estimated Populations:

Hamilton	192,100
West	Total: 153,200
	Waipa - 62,200
	Waikato - 91,000
East	Total: 119,500
	Thames-Coromandel - 32,200
	Hauraki - 22,100
	South Waikato - 26,000
	Matamata-Piako - 39,200
King Country	Total: 29,400
	Otorohanga - 10,700
	Waitomo - 10,000
	Ruapehu (northern district) – 8,700

**ALTERNATE OPTION:****Northern Waikato, Hamilton, King Country**

Estimated Populations:

Hamilton	192,100
Northern Waikato	Total: 272,700
	Waikato - 91,000
	Thames-Coromandel - 32,200
	Hauraki - 22,100
	Waipa - 62,200
	Matamata-Piako - 39,200
	South Waikato - 26,000
King Country	Total: 29,400
	Otorohanga - 10,700
	Waitomo - 10,000
	Ruapehu (northern district) – 8,700



Governance Structure

Governance of any future unitary council is critical. Rural representation must be structurally protected, not left to chance.

We support:

- A governance model of democratically elected representatives,
- Clear separation between government and management,
- Strong accountability mechanism to prevent bureaucratic drift and staff-led policy capture (an issues we see today in some regional and district councils).

Rural Voice and Local Committees:

Rural communities cannot compete with urban lobbying power and corporate influence without protected representation.

We support:

- Local committees / community boards with real delegated authority,
- Local people governing local infrastructure and services,
- Formal mechanisms to ensure remote and rural communities (e.g. King Country, Hauraki, South Waikato) retain meaningful decision-making power.

Track Record of Rural Governance:

History shows that rural district councils have generally performed well:

- Lower debt levels
- Strong asset management
- Practical, business minded governance
- High Accountability to ratepayers.

This reflects governance by people with real-world business and asset-management experience. Any reform model must preserve this strength, not dilute it.

Council-Controlled Organisation (CCO's) for key rural infrastructure, with strong local governance input, including:

We support the use of separate CCO's for key rural infrastructure, with strong local governance input, including:

Flood Protection and drainage schemes:

Waikato and Hauraki flood and drainage schemes must remain locally governed.

- Waikato and Hauraki flood and drainage schemes must remain locally governed.
- These assets are critical to farm viability, food production and regional resilience.
- Local scheme committee should retain decision-making authority over priorities, maintenance and investment.

Rural Roading:

Rural roading must not be deprioritized in a unitary or urban- dominated structure.

We support either:

- A dedicated rural roading CCO or
- Roading remains with NZTA, but with strong local input and influence from rural communities.

Urban Water Services:

Urban Water services are already underway and largely appropriate for urban centers. This should remain distinct from rural infrastructure needs and funding pressures.

Pest and Biosecurity Control:

We support centralized pest control with a model similar to the former Pest Control Boards:

- Clear accountability
- Regional coordination
- Practical operational delivery
- Strong farmer involvement

Pest management works best when it is coordinated at scale but delivered with local operational knowledge.

Regional Transport and Public Transport:

We consider the public and regional transport (buses, rail) should be;

- Removed from any future super-unitary council structure and
- Managed by a dedicated transport committee or authority
- With rural and provincial representation built into governance.

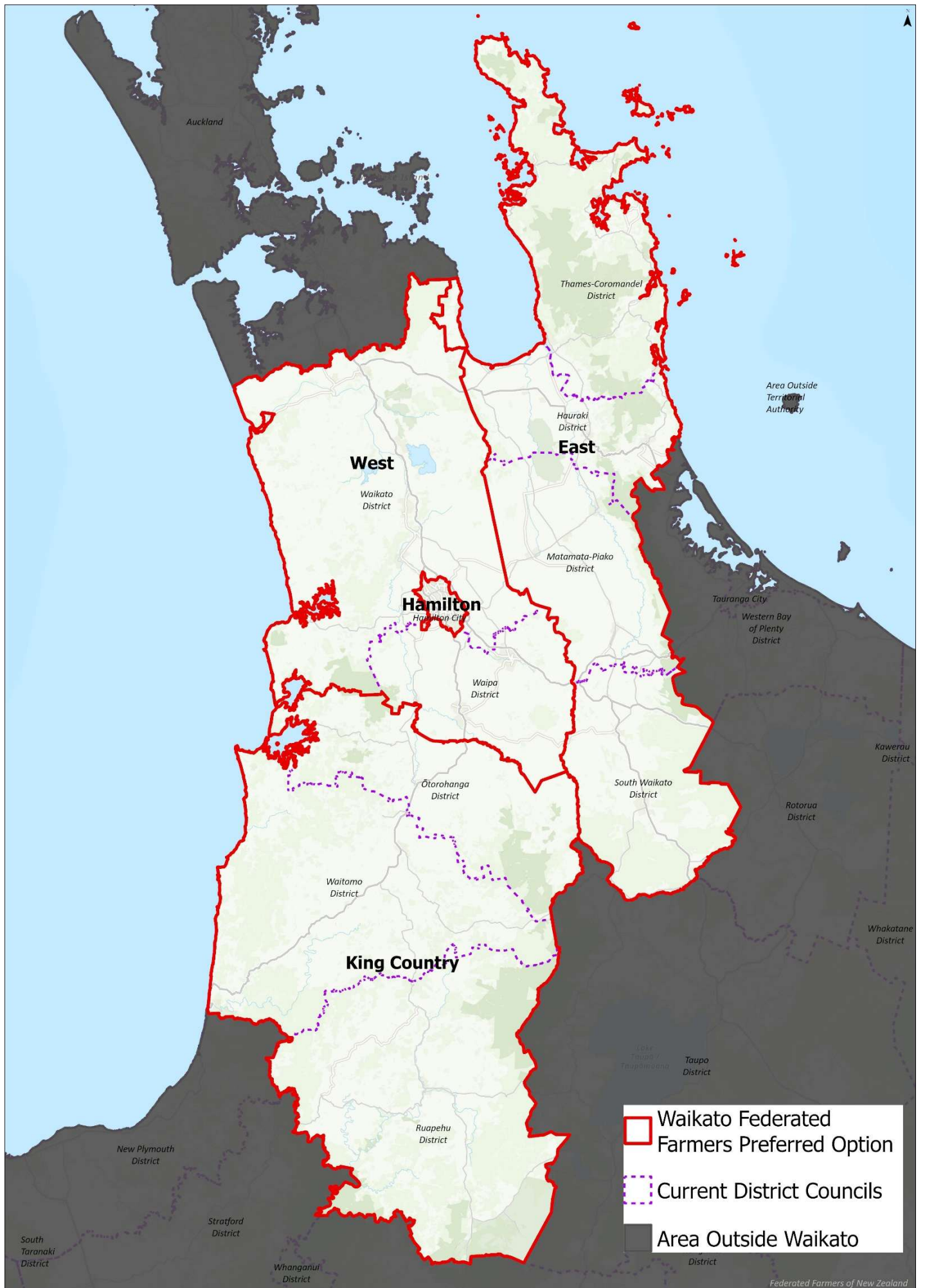
Transport planning must reflect both rural access needs and regional economic connectivity, not just urban commuter priorities.

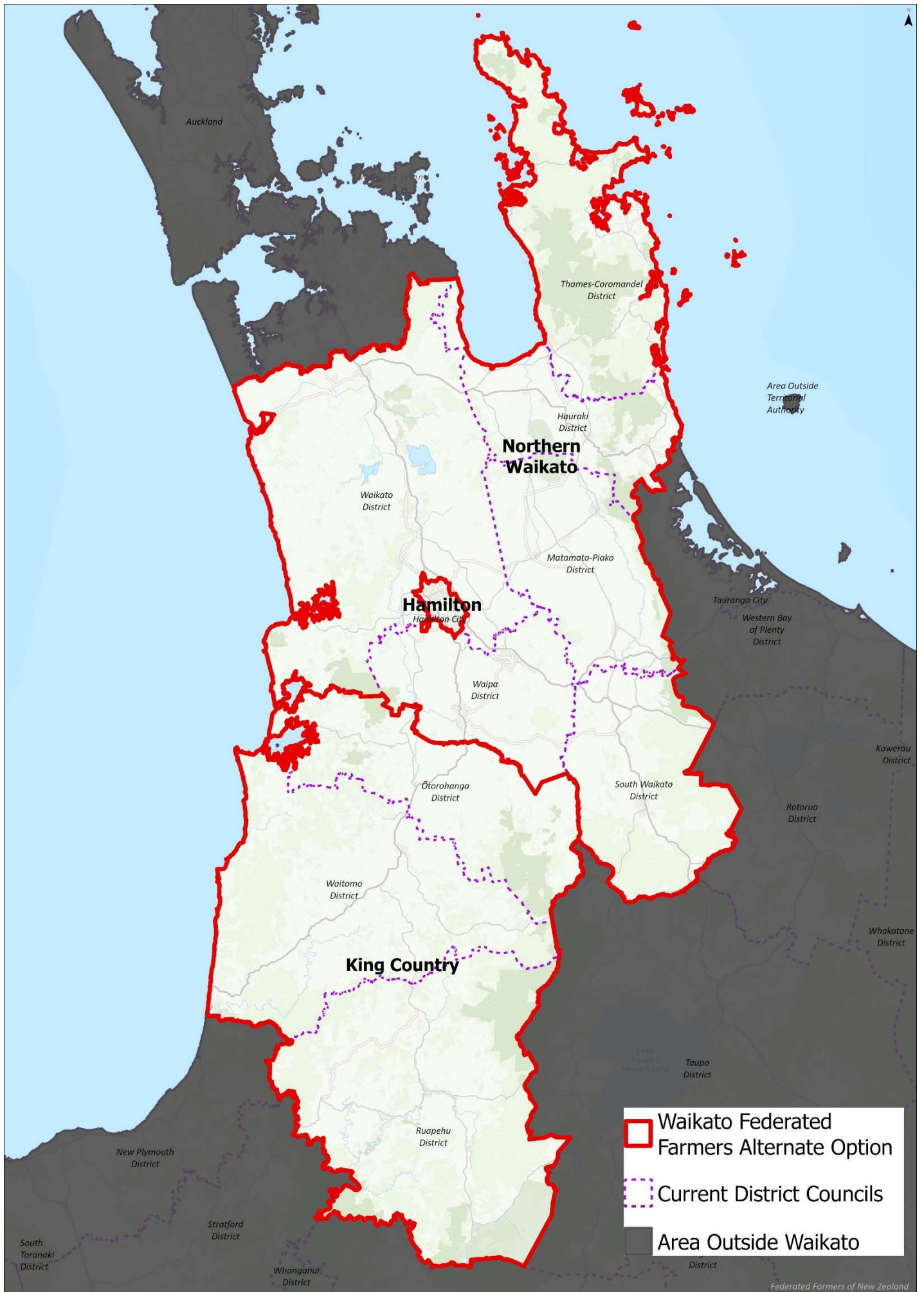
Debt, Balance Sheets and Fairness Between Districts:

The debt position and financial performance of existing district councils is a material risk in amalgamation.

Our position:

- Districts that have been well-managed financially should not subsidise poorly managed councils.
- Any retained surpluses, assets or “profits” generated by rural districts should remain for the benefit of those communities.
- Amalgamation should not become a vehicle for redistributing historical financial mismanagement onto rural ratepayers.

PREFERRED OPTION:

ALTERNATE OPTION:

27th July 2026

Waitomo District Council
15 Queen Street
Te Kūiti 3910

RE: Letter of Support – Simplifying Local Government Reform: Head Start Process

Tēnā koe Ben Smit,

Te Nehenehenui welcomes the opportunity to acknowledge and support councils participating in the Head Start process under the Government's Simplifying Local Government Reform programme.

Local government plays a critical role in the social, economic, cultural and environmental wellbeing of our communities. We recognise the significant work, commitment and leadership required of councils as they consider future governance arrangements and respond to the opportunities and challenges presented through this reform process.

We support the intent of exploring governance models that strengthen collaboration, improve service delivery, achieve greater efficiencies through shared services where appropriate, and deliver better long-term outcomes for communities. We recognise that there may be a range of proposals and differing perspectives across the region, and we respect the role of each council in determining the approach they consider best reflects the aspirations of their communities.

From a Te Nehenehenui perspective, our primary interest is ensuring that any future governance arrangements continue to recognise and give full effect to our Treaty settlement commitments, statutory arrangements and enduring relationships with local government. This includes ensuring that the vision and objectives of Ngā Wai o Maniapoto, Te Ture Whaimana o Te Awa o Waikato, and all other relevant settlement arrangements and statutory obligations remain recognised, respected and appropriately implemented, regardless of the governance model ultimately adopted.

We also see value in governance arrangements that provide opportunities for stronger strategic partnerships with iwi, integrated planning across natural resources and infrastructure, and coordinated service delivery that better meets the needs and aspirations of our people and communities whilst maintaining localised voice and perspectives.

We acknowledge the considerable pressure placed on councils as they navigate this period of reform.

We look forward to continuing our partnership with councils to achieve enduring outcomes that reflect our collective responsibilities, protect and enhance te taiao, uphold the integrity of our settlement arrangements, and create enduring benefits for our people and future generations.

Nāku iti nei, nā



Sam Mikaere
Group CE

Te Nehenehenui