

# Workshop and Briefings Material - 23 July 2026

Council Chambers  
Waipā District Council  
101 Bank Street  
Te Awamutu



Chairperson  
Mayor MJ Pettit

## Members

LV Bennett, AA Camson, JM Davies-Colley, RDB Gordon, ML Gower, PA Kempthorne, MG Montgomerie, DM Morgan, CS St Pierre, DH Taylor, SL Walsh

## Purpose of a Workshop

Workshops are informal sessions where elected members can discuss issues outside formal council meetings. They're often used to explain complex topics and give members the background they need to make good decisions. Workshops allow open discussion with staff, but they cannot be used to make decisions or pass resolutions—those must happen in official meetings under the Local Government Official Information and Meetings Act 1987 (LGOIMA).

23 July 2026 02:00 PM

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| 1. <a href="#">Headstart Workshop</a>                                               | 02:00 PM-03:30 PM | 3    |
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# HE KARAKIA TIMATANGA

Tākina te mārama ki a tātou.

*Let the light be called forth to shine upon us.*

Tākina te aroha ki a tātou.

*Let love be called forth to rest among us.*

Tākina te rangimārie ki a tātou.

*May peace be called forth to dwell between us.*

Ko Pirongia me Te Kawa,

*Our mountains Pirongia and Te Kawa,*

Ko Maungatautari,

*Maungatautari, and Kakepuku.*

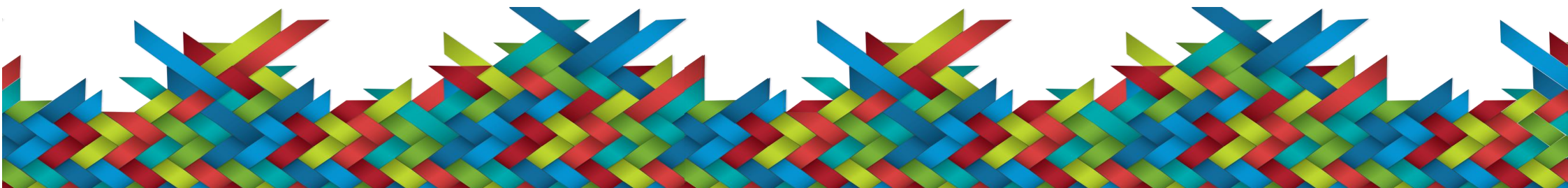
Ko Kakepuku ngā maunga.

*Our rivers Waikato and Waipā.*

Ko Waikato, ko Waipā ngā awa.

Tihei **mauri ora!**

*Behold, the breath of life!*



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**To:** Elected Members

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**From:** Katie Mayes, Growth, Strategy & Planning Director

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**Date:** 23 July 2026

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**Subject:** Elected Member Workshop – Head Start

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## 1. PURPOSE

The purpose of this memo is to provide supporting information for the Elected Member workshop on 23 July 2026. The workshop is designed to give Elected Members an opportunity to consider the emerging draft Head Start outline proposal, provide feedback and comment, and identify any matters that should be addressed before the proposal is finalised for Council decision on 5 August 2026. The proposal is still being worked on collaboratively by staff from the relevant councils and will continue to be refined, strengthened and sharpened over the coming weeks. Accordingly, the version Elected Members are seeing should be treated as a working draft rather than a final position.

The workshop will not seek a formal Council decision. Its intent is to test the direction of the draft proposal, ensure Elected Members have visibility of the key assumptions and trade-offs, and provide guidance to the Mayor, Chief Executive and staff as final drafting is completed with collaborating councils and officials.

## 2. COMMENTARY

### 2.1 Background and current status

On 5 May 2026, the Government announced the Head Start pathway for Simplifying Local Government. The pathway provides a streamlined, voluntary process for councils that are ready and willing to progress reorganisation ahead of the wider local government reform programme. Outline proposals for new unitary authorities are due by 9 August 2026, with Government decisions on which proposals proceed to detailed design expected to follow. The proposal remains high-level and strategic at this stage, with detailed design matters to be worked through with central government, iwi, councils and communities if the proposal is accepted into the next phase.

At the 2 July workshop, Elected Members considered public engagement feedback, decision-making principles, representation matters, and an emerging multi-criteria assessment of options. The workshop confirmed the importance of a principles-led approach that recognises future readiness, regional integration, strong local voice, rural-urban balance, place-making, and respect for Treaty settlement arrangements and Te Ture Whaimana.

## 2.2 Purpose of the 23 July workshop

The 23 July workshop is intended to put the emerging draft proposal in front of Elected Members for feedback. The focus is not to reopen all previous discussion, but to test whether the draft proposal fairly reflects Council's direction to date and whether any changes are required before the final proposal is brought to Council on 5 August.

Feedback from the workshop will be used to refine the final draft. It will also help ensure Waipā's position is clearly reflected in the ongoing regional drafting process, particularly in relation to local voice, governance design, iwi partnership, rural and urban representation, financial sustainability, deliverability, and the transition pathway.

Members are also asked to test whether the proposal should more explicitly acknowledge that other proposals may be developed across the region, while making clear that Waipā's position is not based on a view that existing councils are failing. Rather, the proposal should be framed around future readiness: whether current governance arrangements provide the scale, capability, coordination and resilience needed to support not just the Waikato's next fifty years of growth, but also that of New Zealand. This may require a staged approach that allows more time to engage with communities, iwi, councils and partners, to acknowledge other regional proposals, and to work through the necessary political conversations before detailed design decisions are settled.

## 2.3 Updates to be provided verbally

The Mayor will provide a verbal update from the 20 July Waikato Mayoral and Iwi Chairs Forum. This update will assist Elected Members to understand the latest regional discussions, including areas of emerging alignment, matters requiring further work, and any issues raised through the forum.

Staff will also provide a verbal update on engagement with MCERT officials. This will include any further clarification received on the Government's expectations for outline proposals, assessment criteria, process requirements, and matters likely to be worked through during any detailed design phase.

## 2.4 Draft proposal for feedback

The draft proposal is expected to continue to make a positive, evidence-based case for a Waikato unitary authority. The case for change is not based on current failure. It is based on the proposition that the region's future challenges and opportunities may be better addressed through governance arrangements that provide greater integration, capability, resilience, accountability and local responsiveness.

The draft proposal recognises that Waikato's communities, economy, environment and infrastructure systems are increasingly interconnected and regional in nature. It also recognises that effective regional decision-making and strong local representation can

## MEMO

coexist through well-designed governance arrangements, appropriate delegation and strong local governance mechanisms.

Elected Members are asked to consider whether the draft proposal appropriately reflects Waipā's priorities, including maintaining meaningful local voice, protecting rural and urban representation, enabling strong place-making, respecting Treaty settlement arrangements, and ensuring the proposal remains realistic and deliverable within the Government's timeframes.

### 2.5 Feedback sought from Elected Members

Feedback is sought on the following matters:

- whether the draft proposal accurately reflects the direction provided by Council to date;
- whether the narrative is balanced, future-focused and sufficiently clear for central government, councils, iwi and communities;
- whether the proposal gives enough confidence that strong local voice can be maintained within a regional unitary model;
- whether any additional matters should be strengthened before final consideration on 5 August;
- whether any risks, trade-offs or matters for detailed design require clearer acknowledgement; and
- whether any further information is required to support Council's decision.
- As part of final drafting, test whether and how the proposal should acknowledge other regional proposals, while reinforcing Waipā's commitment to working with others and the need for a staged approach that provides more time for community engagement and political conversations.

## 2.6 Steps to 5 August Council decision

The following steps are currently anticipated:

| Date                  | Step                                                                                                                        |
|-----------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>20 July 2026</b>   | Mayoral and Iwi Chairs meeting                                                                                              |
| <b>23 July 2026</b>   | Elected Member workshop to consider draft proposal and provide feedback                                                     |
| <b>Late July 2026</b> | Staff and collaborating councils refine the draft proposal, informed by workshop feedback and further advice from officials |
| <b>5 August 2026</b>  | Council meeting to decide whether to approve submission of a Head Start outline proposal                                    |
| <b>9 August 2026</b>  | Deadline for submitting Head Start outline proposals to Government                                                          |

Throughout this period, the Mayor, Chief Executive and staff will continue to engage with key parties, including central government, the Waikato Mayoral Forum, chief executives, staff working groups, iwi and partner councils. This engagement is intended to maintain relationships, test assumptions, seek clarification where needed and ensure the final proposal is as robust as possible within the available timeframe.

## ATTACHED DOCUMENTATION

| Title                        | Author |
|------------------------------|--------|
| Head Start proposal template |        |



Katie Mayes  
**GROWTH, STRATEGY & PLANNING DIRECTOR**

# DRAFT HEADSTART PROPOSAL

*The proposal is still being worked on collaboratively by staff from the relevant councils and will continue to be refined, strengthened and sharpened over the coming weeks. Accordingly, the version Elected Members are seeing should be treated as a working draft rather than a final position.*

## ONE WAIKATO APPROACH

One Unitary Authority established, taking on the roles and responsibilities of all eleven territorial authorities and the regional council within the existing Waikato regional boundary.



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## 1 Executive summary

**[To be developed later]**

## 2 Proposal overview

Councils across the Waikato region have been developing a range of proposals through the Head Start process. While those proposals differ in their geographic scope and governance arrangements, many are informed by similar principles and seek to address common challenges. This proposal reflects one regional-wide option and recognises that the Government's reform process may involve staged implementation or other transitional arrangements.

This proposal seeks to establish a single Waikato Unitary Authority covering the existing Waikato Regional Council area. The new authority would assume the statutory roles, responsibilities, assets, liabilities and functions currently undertaken by the Waikato Regional Council and the eleven territorial authorities within the region.

The proposal has been developed collaboratively by councils across the Waikato region. It reflects a shared commitment to consider whether a single regional governance model could better support the long-term needs of Waikato communities while maintaining meaningful local representation and decision-making. While councils remain responsible for determining their own formal positions, this proposal has been prepared as a regional option for consideration and discussion. The councils directly affected by this proposal are:

- Hamilton City Council
- Hauraki District Council
- Matamata-Piako District Council
- Ōtorohanga District Council
- Rotorua District Council (in part)
- South Waikato District Council
- Taupō District Council
- Thames-Coromandel District Council
- Waikato District Council
- Waikato Regional Council
- Waipā District Council
- Waitomo District Council

Collectively, these councils comprise the existing Waikato local government system and represent the full population of the Waikato region.

The proposal recognises that many detailed matters, including governance arrangements, representation, transition planning, Treaty settlement implementation, financial arrangements and organisational design, will require further development during the detailed design phase. Accordingly, this proposal establishes the strategic direction and preferred high-level governance model while recognising that the detailed implementation arrangements will be developed collaboratively with councils, iwi and hapū partners, and central government.

### 3 Waikato – stronger together

**[infographic of Waikato region including social, economic statistics – full page facing text?]**

This proposal is not simply about changing local government structures. It is about creating the institutional capability needed to deliver the outcomes the Waikato has already identified for itself: higher productivity, better jobs, improved infrastructure, stronger partnerships with iwi, sustainable management of natural resources, and greater prosperity for future generations. By aligning governance with the functional reality of the Waikato's economy, environment and communities, a regional unitary authority would provide a stronger platform for turning shared regional aspirations into sustained regional outcomes.

The opportunity presented through the Head Start process is therefore to consider whether local government arrangements should better reflect the way the Waikato already functions - as one interconnected economic, environmental and cultural region with many distinct communities. A Waikato-wide unitary authority provides an opportunity to strengthen regional coordination while maintaining meaningful local representation and creating a governance model better equipped to support the Waikato's future and maximise its contribution to New Zealand's prosperity

- Waikato produces more than one quarter of New Zealand's milk, underpinning the country's largest export industry.
- One of New Zealand's most important vegetable growing regions, with highly productive soils supporting national food security.
- Generates around 37 per cent of New Zealand's electricity through nationally significant hydroelectric and geothermal resources.
- Supports around 40 per cent of New Zealand's freight movements through nationally significant transport corridors.
- Home to major advanced manufacturing, agritech, aviation and food processing industries.
- Contains New Zealand's largest Māori economic asset base.
- Plays a critical role as part of the country's Golden Triangle economy.

Figure 1 below: Waikato's nationally significant strengths<sup>[1]</sup>.

| National strength                     | Waikato's position                                                                          | Selected evidence                                                                                                                                                |
|---------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Freight and logistics</b>          | <b>1st in New Zealand</b> for share of freight movements                                    | Around <b>40% of New Zealand's freight movements</b> pass through or originate within the Waikato, reflecting its strategic location in the Upper North Island.  |
| <b>Bioeconomy</b>                     | <b>1st in New Zealand</b> for share of the bioeconomy                                       | Approximately <b>18% of New Zealand's bioeconomy</b> , including farming, horticulture, forestry, fishing and aquaculture.                                       |
| <b>Renewable energy</b>               | <b>1st in New Zealand</b> for electricity generation capacity                               | Approximately <b>37% of New Zealand's electricity generation capacity</b> , including nationally significant hydroelectric and geothermal generation.            |
| <b>Food manufacturing</b>             | <b>2nd equal in New Zealand</b>                                                             | Approximately <b>16% of New Zealand's food manufacturing</b> , equal with Canterbury.                                                                            |
| <b>Population and economic growth</b> | <b>Among New Zealand's fastest-growing urban regions</b> (or insert ranking once confirmed) | The Hamilton–Waikato metropolitan area is one of the country's fastest-growing urban areas, driving demand for housing, infrastructure and transport investment. |
| <b>Māori economy</b>                  | <b>1st equal in New Zealand</b> for Māori asset base                                        | Approximately <b>\$21.5 billion Māori asset base (2023)</b> , equal with Tāmaki Makaurau.                                                                        |
| <b>Economic contribution</b>          | <b>4th largest regional economy in New Zealand</b>                                          | Contributes approximately <b>9% of New Zealand's GDP</b> , making Waikato one of the country's largest regional economies.                                       |

<sup>[1]</sup> Waikato Regional Economic Development Strategy June 2026

Decisions made in the Waikato have implications well beyond the region itself. The region's nationally significant strengths contribute approximately 9 per cent of New Zealand's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and play a critical role in supporting national prosperity, resilience and export performance.

The region functions as an interconnected economic system rather than a collection of separate districts. Hamilton is the principal metropolitan centre, supported by a network of rural, provincial, coastal and lakes communities that each make distinct contributions to the regional economy. Freight movements, labour markets, infrastructure networks, housing, environmental systems and economic activity routinely cross local authority boundaries, reinforcing the Waikato's role within the wider Auckland-Hamilton-Tauranga economic corridor.

The Waikato's natural environment has shaped this pattern of development for generations. Its river systems, fertile plains, geothermal resources, coastlines and transport corridors continue to underpin economic growth, environmental stewardship and community wellbeing. The region is also unique in being home to

Te Kīngitanga, nationally significant Treaty settlement arrangements, and enduring partnerships between iwi, local government and the Crown. These relationships are fundamental to the stewardship of the region's natural resources, the management of its waterways, and the long-term prosperity of the Waikato.

## 4 The case for change

### **Future readiness**

The case for change is not based on current failure. Existing councils continue to serve their communities well.

Rather, the question is whether the current governance model provides the scale, capability and coordination required to support the Waikato's next fifty years of growth. A Waikato-wide unitary authority provides an opportunity to simplify governance, improve accountability, strengthen organisational capability and create a more resilient platform for long-term investment, while maintaining meaningful local representation and strengthening partnerships with iwi, communities and central government.

### **A changing operating environment**

The Waikato region is experiencing increasing pressure from rapid population growth, significant infrastructure investment needs, climate adaptation, affordability challenges, planning reform and rising community expectations. As one of New Zealand's fastest-growing regions, Waikato must respond to these pressures while supporting nationally significant industries, protecting highly productive land, strengthening environmental stewardship, and enabling sustainable economic growth. Many of these challenges increasingly require coordinated decision-making across council boundaries.

These pressures are not unique to Waikato. Councils across New Zealand are operating in an increasingly complex environment and are expected to deliver better value for money while maintaining ageing infrastructure, responding to new regulatory requirements, and supporting the long-term wellbeing of their communities.

### **Regional challenges increasingly extend beyond council boundaries**

Many of the opportunities and challenges shaping the Waikato no longer align with existing administrative boundaries. Housing markets, transport networks, freight movements, labour markets, infrastructure investment, freshwater management, environmental restoration and climate resilience increasingly operate as interconnected regional systems.

Councils in the Waikato region have responded through collaborative initiatives such as Future Proof, regional transport planning, catchment-based management and shared service arrangements. These initiatives demonstrate both the

willingness of councils to work together and the increasing effort required to coordinate decisions across multiple organisations. While collaboration has delivered significant benefits, it also introduces complexity, duplication and additional governance effort.

### **Natural systems reinforce the need for integration**

The Waikato is defined by interconnected natural systems that extend across multiple districts. The Waikato–Waipā and Waihou–Piako catchments underpin much of the region's economy, environment and communities while supporting nationally significant Treaty settlement arrangements and long-standing partnerships with iwi.

Managing these systems requires integrated planning across land use, freshwater, biodiversity, flood protection, infrastructure and climate adaptation. As the Parliamentary Commissioner for the Environment has observed, fragmenting catchment governance risks poorer environmental and economic outcomes. Governance arrangements that better align with natural systems provide greater opportunity for coordinated planning, long-term stewardship and more effective investment.

## **5 Strategic alignment with a whole of Government approach**

Many of New Zealand's most significant opportunities and challenges require coordinated action between local government, central government and iwi. Delivering housing, transport, infrastructure, environmental restoration, economic growth and climate resilience increasingly depends on institutions working together across organisational and jurisdictional boundaries.

The Waikato is central to many of these national priorities. As outlined in the sections above, the region contains nationally critical transport corridors, some of the most highly productive land in the country, the largest renewable energy resources, major growth and development areas, internationally competitive industries and important environmental assets. Decisions made within the Waikato therefore have implications well beyond the region itself, strongly influencing New Zealand's national productivity, economic and energy resilience and overall economic performance.

A Waikato-wide unitary authority would provide a stronger platform for partnership with central government by bringing regional and territorial responsibilities together within a single organisation. Its scale, capability and regional mandate would create a more meaningful strategic partner for central government, with the ability to align planning, investment and service delivery across the Waikato.

A larger, integrated organisation would be better positioned to support planning reform, secure co-investment, coordinate major infrastructure programmes and respond to future challenges affecting both the Waikato and New Zealand more broadly. The proposal therefore aligns with the Government's objectives of

improving public sector performance, reducing unnecessary complexity, supporting economic growth development, and delivering infrastructure more effectively.

Importantly, strengthening regional coordination does not need to diminish local decision-making. Rather, it can provide an opportunity to enable local communities, iwi and central government to work together within a governance framework that better reflects how the Waikato already practically functions - as one interconnected economic, environmental and cultural area. By strengthening that alignment, the proposal seeks to provide a stronger foundation for sustained regional prosperity and improved outcomes for both Waikato communities and New Zealand as a whole.

## 6 Summary of options considered

Three broad options were considered:

- A single Waikato-wide Unitary Authority encompassing the existing Waikato Regional Council and all eleven territorial authorities within the Waikato region.
- A two Unitary Authority model, generally based around western and eastern parts of the region and the two major water catchment areas.
- A sub-regional Unitary Authority, centred on Hamilton City, Waikato District and Waipā District, without making strong assumptions on what would happen to the remaining territorial authorities in the Waikato region.

*(note - the options above will be redrafted to reflect the specific engagement options presented by Waipā District Council and Waikato District Council.)*

These options have been informed by a range of inputs, including multi-criteria assessments, governance analysis undertaken by individual Councils, sector experts/technical advice, and discussions between councils, iwi and central government. Community views and local priorities have also informed councils' thinking where engagement has occurred.

On balance, the single Waikato-wide unitary authority emerged as the preferred option because it provides the simplest region-wide governance structure, the greatest opportunity to achieve economies of scale, and a single organisation accountable for regional decisions and outcomes. It better aligns governance with the Waikato's principal natural, economic and community systems, supports integrated catchment management, strengthens the integration of land use, water, infrastructure and natural hazard management, and provides the strongest platform for partnership with central government.

The region-wide model also provides the greatest opportunity to strengthen organisational capability by bringing together the full population, rating base,



workforce, assets, systems and specialist expertise currently distributed across councils.

It also presents the greatest transition and local representation challenges, which would need to be addressed through careful governance design, meaningful local decision-making arrangements and a well-managed implementation programme.

## 7 Proposed structure and governance arrangements

The detailed governance model would be developed during the next phase of work. Although councils across the Waikato region have developed a range of governance options, there is considerable consistency in the principles that have informed those proposals. These shared principles provide a strong foundation for developing a detailed governance model during the next phase of work.

The detailed governance model would therefore be developed during the next phase of work, guided by the following principles *(note – the list below is to be updated to represent Waikato District Council and Waipā District Council principles specifically)*:

- *Stronger local voice and representation*
- *Better value for ratepayers*
- *Long term economic, social and environmental wellbeing*
- *Regional coordination across boundaries*
- *Effective clear and democratic decision-making*
- *Balancing the interest of both rural and urban communities*
- *Treaty iwi and statutory alignment*
- *Acknowledges and enables different sub-regional views*

*(Aim to include diagram/s to provide a high-level illustration of how governance within a Waikato Unitary Authority could be structured. It will be critical to note, that they show only one possible direction of many, rather than a final governance design.)*

At the regional level, a single governing body (authority wide governance) would be responsible for regionally relevant functions, e.g. significant strategy, planning, funding, infrastructure and environmental functions. Its representation would need to reflect population, geography, communities of interest and Māori representation.

This would be supported by strong local governance arrangements, potentially through local boards, enhanced community boards or a combination of both. These bodies would have clearly defined responsibilities, delegated decision-making authority and appropriate funding for place-based matters.

Detailed representation, committee, partnership and delegation arrangements would be developed during the next phase with councils, iwi partners, central government and communities.

## 8 Assessment against government criteria

### 8.1 Supports the new planning

A Waikato Unitary Authority would provide a stronger platform for implementing New Zealand's emerging planning system by bringing regional and territorial planning responsibilities together within a single organisation. This would improve integration across planning, infrastructure, transport and environmental management while better aligning governance with the way Waikato's communities, infrastructure and natural systems function.

At the time of preparing this proposal, the Government's planning reforms remain under development. Accordingly, this assessment focuses on the broad objectives and direction of reform rather than the detailed legislative provisions, recognising that the governance model will continue to evolve alongside the national framework.

#### **Supports implementation of planning reform.**

The proposed Waikato Unitary Authority would provide a strong institutional platform for implementing New Zealand's emerging planning system.

Successful implementation of planning legislation will depend on local government institutions having the scale, capability and governance arrangements needed to deliver integrated outcomes. The reforms seek stronger alignment between spatial planning, land-use regulation, infrastructure, transport and environmental management. As described in sections above, many of the issues shaping the Waikato's future already operate beyond existing territorial authority boundaries, including population growth, housing, freight, water management, climate adaptation, biodiversity and major infrastructure investment.

A unitary authority would bring regional and territorial planning responsibilities together within a single organisation. This would reduce the need for multiple councils to align separate planning processes, investment decisions and regulatory approaches through additional collaborative arrangements.

Existing initiatives such as Future Proof demonstrate both the willingness and ability of Waikato councils to work together. They also demonstrate the time, effort and governance arrangements required to coordinate decisions across organisational boundaries. A unitary authority would embed this integrated approach within the structure of local government itself.

#### **Enables integrated spatial planning, infrastructure and environmental management**



The proposed governance model would provide a stronger platform for considering land use, housing, transport, water infrastructure, environmental limits and major investment decisions together.

A more integrated approach would improve the coordination and sequencing of infrastructure required for population and economic growth. This could provide greater certainty for communities, developers, infrastructure providers and central government by ensuring that infrastructure decisions are considered alongside funding, servicing capacity, transport connections, environmental constraints and natural hazard risks.

The benefits are particularly relevant in the Waikato, where several significant planning systems and relationships already extend across existing council boundaries, including:

- the Future Proof growth area;
- the Auckland-Waikato growth corridor;
- the Waikato River and connected catchments;
- nationally significant freight and transport networks;
- nationally significant hydro electricity generation;
- biodiversity, biosecurity and natural hazard systems.

Bringing responsibility for these matters into a single governance framework would strengthen the region's ability to plan, prioritise investment and implement decisions over the long term.

### **Plans around natural systems and catchments**

A Waikato-wide unitary authority would retain region-wide responsibility for integrated catchment management while connecting it more directly with land-use planning, infrastructure and local service delivery.

The Waikato-Waipā and Waihou-Piako catchments underpin the region's communities, economy and environment. They also support significant Treaty settlement, co-governance and co-management arrangements. Their effective management requires coordinated decisions across freshwater, flood protection, biodiversity, land use, infrastructure, climate adaptation and environmental monitoring.

The proposed regional boundary would not align perfectly with every environmental, cultural or economic relationship. Some systems extend beyond the Waikato region and would continue to require cross-boundary collaboration. However, the proposal would avoid fragmenting the principal catchments currently managed through the Waikato regional framework and would provide a stronger basis for whole-of-catchment stewardship alongside iwi partners, communities and the Crown.

## **Maintains continuity during transition**

Maintaining planning continuity would be a central requirement of implementation. Existing statutory plans, consenting and compliance functions, infrastructure programmes and planning partnerships would need to continue while the new authority was established. Clear transitional governance, delegations and accountabilities would ensure that current responsibilities remain visible and effective until replacement arrangements are confirmed.

The transition would also need to be coordinated with the timing of national planning reforms. This would help avoid unnecessary duplication and rework and reduce the risk of disrupting statutory deadlines, development activity or infrastructure investment.

Particular attention would be required to retaining specialist staff, technical capability and institutional knowledge during a period when councils will also be expected to progress regional spatial planning and other significant reforms.

**Note - detailed implementation considerations, trade-offs and matters for further design are provided in Appendix A.**

## **8.2 Simplifies local governance**

### **Provides simpler governance and clearer accountability**

The objective of reform is not simply to reduce the number of councils. It is to create governance arrangements that are easier to understand, more accountable and better aligned with the way the Waikato operates.

The current local government landscape includes territorial authorities, the regional council, council-controlled organisations, statutory bodies, joint committees and a range of cross-council partnerships. These arrangements have enabled councils to work together, but they also require significant coordination and can make it difficult for communities, businesses, iwi and central government to understand where responsibility sits for interconnected decisions and outcomes.

A Waikato Unitary Authority would bring regional and territorial responsibilities together within a single democratically accountable organisation. This would provide a clearer line of responsibility for regional strategy, planning, infrastructure, environmental management and service delivery.

Rather than several councils making related decisions through separate processes, one organisation would be accountable for coordinating priorities and delivering outcomes across the region.

### **Reduces duplication and governance interfaces**

The proposed model would reduce the number of formal organisational boundaries across which decisions must currently be negotiated. Potential areas of simplification include:

- a single regional strategic direction;
- one long-term planning and budgeting framework;
- integrated regional and local planning functions;
- fewer duplicated governance, reporting and corporate processes;
- clearer accountability for infrastructure and environmental outcomes; and
- a more coherent interface for communities, businesses, iwi and central government.

A single organisation would not remove the need for collaboration with iwi, central government, neighbouring councils, service providers or communities. It would, however, reduce the need for multiple Waikato councils to negotiate with one another before a regional position or decision could be reached.

#### **Provides simplification without unnecessary centralisation**

Simplification should not be confused with centralisation. The proposal does not assume that every decision would be made by the regional governing body. Instead, the governance model would distinguish between matters requiring regional leadership and those best decided locally.

Regionally significant matters would be managed through the governing body, while clearly defined place-based responsibilities would be delegated to statutory local governance bodies. The detailed local representation and delegation model is addressed further under the Maintains Local Voice criterion.

This approach would enable organisational simplification while retaining local decision-making where it adds the greatest value.

#### **Provides clear accountability for regional functions**

The proposed Waikato Unitary Authority would be responsible for regionally significant functions that are best planned, managed and delivered at a regional scale, including:

- catchment management;
- flood protection and river management;
- biosecurity;
- environmental monitoring and regulation;
- regional transport planning;
- natural hazard management;
- civil defence and emergency management; and

- regional spatial and strategic planning.

Having these functions managed within a single organisation would provide clearer accountability for decisions that affect communities across the Waikato. It would also improve coordination with related responsibilities, including land-use planning, infrastructure investment and local service delivery, enabling decisions to be made within a single governance framework.

Detailed governance arrangements would ensure that these regionally significant functions remain appropriately governed, resourced and visible, while local governance bodies exercise decision-making responsibility for clearly defined place-based matters.

### **Improves on current governance arrangements**

The proposed model would provide communities and partners with greater clarity about who is responsible for decisions and outcomes.

For example, an issue involving consideration of population growth, transport, required infrastructure and environmental limits would no longer require several councils to align separate mandates before a coordinated response could be developed. The authority responsible for planning growth would also be responsible for considering the associated regional transport, infrastructure, catchment and environmental implications.

This would provide a clearer basis for considering competing objectives and trade-offs and for holding decision-makers accountable for the resulting outcomes.

**Note - Detailed implementation considerations, trade-offs and matters for further design are provided in Appendix A.**

## **8.3 Economies of scale**

A single Waikato Unitary Authority would create the greatest opportunity to realise the benefits of organisational scale. Greater scale would strengthen capability, improve access to specialist expertise, support more efficient service delivery, enable more coordinated infrastructure and asset management, and provide a stronger platform for long-term financial resilience. The primary benefit is not immediate cost savings or lower rates, but a stronger organisation that can deliver better value, capability and resilience over time.

### **Improves operational efficiency and service delivery**

Bringing existing councils into one organisation would create opportunities to consolidate duplicated corporate and support functions, rationalise systems and standardise processes where this improves outcomes.

Potential areas of efficiency include:

- finance, human resources, legal and governance support;
- information technology and digital platforms;
- procurement and contract management;
- customer contact and service channels;
- planning and regulatory systems;
- data, geographic information and reporting;
- policy development and statutory reporting; and
- shared professional and technical services.

A common operating model could reduce process variation, improve data quality and support more consistent customer and regulatory experiences across the region. Residents and businesses operating across current council boundaries could benefit from clearer and more consistent processes, while local service variations could remain where justified by geography, community priorities or affordability.

### **Strengthens infrastructure and asset management**

A single authority would provide a more integrated view of regional infrastructure needs, asset condition, population led growth pressures and renewal priorities. This could improve:

- coordination of investment programmes;
- infrastructure sequencing alongside development and land-use planning;
- procurement of major works and services;
- asset-management standards and data;
- prioritisation across networks and geographic areas;
- engagement with central government and infrastructure providers; and
- capacity to respond to natural hazards and economic shocks.

A larger organisation may also be better able to deliver complex or long-term infrastructure programmes that are difficult for smaller councils to manage independently.

Amalgamation would not remove existing infrastructure delivery deficits, renewal requirements or affordability constraints. These issues would transfer into the new organisation and would need to be addressed transparently.

### **Strengthens financial resilience and long-term affordability**

A larger and more diverse revenue base may improve financial resilience by spreading some economic, geographic and infrastructure risks across a broader region. Consolidated financial management could support:

- more coordinated capital investment;

- region-wide debt and treasury management;
- a stronger platform for engaging with lenders and central government;
- greater flexibility in responding to shocks; and
- longer-term management of major infrastructure needs.

The proposal does not assume that amalgamation would result in immediate rates reductions. In the short term, transition costs, rating harmonisation, different debt positions and varying service levels could create uneven impacts across communities.

Some ratepayers may face increases while others experience reductions as funding arrangements and service levels are aligned. Any transition would therefore require careful consideration of affordability, equity and the pace at which harmonisation occurs. Efficiencies from systems, procurement and corporate consolidation are likely to be realised progressively rather than immediately.

**Note - Detailed implementation considerations, trade-offs and matters for further design are provided in Appendix A.**

#### 8.4 Maintains local voice

##### **Balances regional governance and local voice**

Maintaining meaningful local voice is fundamental to the success of any future Waikato Unitary Authority. The proposal recognises that effective regional leadership and strong local democracy are complementary rather than competing objectives.

The Waikato is not a single homogeneous community. It includes metropolitan, provincial, rural, coastal and lakes communities with distinct identities, priorities and relationships. A successful governance model must therefore provide the capability to make integrated regional decisions while ensuring communities continue to influence the decisions that affect their local places.

Accordingly, the proposed governance model seeks to balance strong regional coordination with meaningful local representation and decision-making.

##### **Supports Māori participation and local relationships**

Māori participation should be embedded throughout the regional and local governance model. This includes elected Māori representation, enduring partnership arrangements and place-based mechanisms reflecting the distinct relationships of iwi and hapū across the Waikato.

The proposal recognises that there is not a single Māori community or view across the region. Iwi and hapū have distinct rohe, histories, settlement arrangements, aspirations and relationships with particular places and natural systems. The local

governance framework should therefore retain space for locally appropriate relationships and participation alongside regional representation.

Treaty settlement continuity and wider partnership arrangements are addressed further in Section 9.

### **Provides for representation that reflects Waikato's diversity**

Representation arrangements would need to reflect both population and communities of interest. Population would remain an important basis for democratic representation, but it would not be the only consideration. Geography, rurality, economic relationships, iwi interests, local identity and access to decision-makers would also need to inform the final model.

This would help ensure that metropolitan, rural, provincial, coastal and lakes communities are all effectively represented. It would provide for population growth and metropolitan issues to be appropriately reflected, while ensuring that rural, provincial, coastal and more geographically dispersed communities continue to have a strong and effective voice. At a high level, the model is expected to include:

- a directly elected regional governing body;
- geographic and Māori wards or constituencies;
- representation that balances population and communities of interest; and
- separately elected statutory local governance bodies.

The final number of representatives, boundaries and electoral arrangements would be determined during detailed design and the subsequent representation process.

### **Strengthens local representation with real authority**

Meaningful local voice depends on more than representation alone. Local governance is most effective where local bodies have clearly defined responsibilities, genuine delegated authority and appropriate resources. Advisory bodies without the ability to make decisions or prioritise local investment may provide representation but limited practical influence.

The proposed model anticipates strengthened local governance arrangements, potentially including local boards, community boards or a combination of both. Subject to the detailed design phase, these local governance bodies could have responsibility for matters such as:

- local parks and community facilities;
- placemaking and town-centre priorities;
- local community grants and initiatives;
- local service priorities;
- community events and wellbeing programmes;

- input into local infrastructure and transport priorities; and
- local advocacy and engagement.

Regional strategy, major infrastructure, environmental regulation, regional transport and other matters requiring region-wide consistency would remain with the Unitary/Authority wide governing body.

The principle of subsidiarity would guide this allocation of responsibilities between local vs Unitary/Authority wide decisions, noting decisions should be made at the lowest practical level, provided there is clear accountability and sufficient capability and funding.

### **Provides local presence and access**

Meaningful local voice also depends on practical access to representatives, staff and services. A region-wide authority would need to retain a strong local presence through measures such as:

- locally based elected representatives;
- local governance offices and service centres;
- regular meetings within communities;
- accessible digital and in-person engagement;
- locally based operational and relationship staff; and
- clear processes for communities to influence priorities and decisions.

The objective would be to improve regional coordination without making local government feel more distant.

### **Balance equity of access with local flexibility**

Maintaining local voice also requires recognising that equitable treatment does not always mean identical services. Communities should have fair access to core services, but some service levels and local priorities may appropriately vary according to geography, population, affordability, risk and community preference. The governance model would therefore need to balance regional consistency with deliberate and transparent local flexibility.

**Note - Detailed implementation considerations, trade-offs and matters for further design are provided in Appendix A.**

## **8.5 Deliverability**

### **A practical and achievable implementation pathway**

The proposed Waikato Unitary Authority is considered deliverable within the Government's proposed implementation timeframe, subject to enabling legislation, appropriate transition support, and a structured implementation



programme. While detailed implementation planning would follow any Government decision to proceed, there is a clear pathway from legislative establishment through to commencement of the new authority.

### **A staged transition**

Implementation would occur in a series of deliberate stages that balance early preparation with democratic oversight.

Initially, legislation would establish the new Waikato Unitary Authority and provide for the appointment of an Establishment Chief Executive to lead the transition programme. Working alongside councils, iwi, central government and other key stakeholders, the Establishment Chief Executive would develop the future operating model and prepare a draft Transition Plan.

Following the 2028 local elections, the inaugural Council would consider and adopt the Transition Plan before overseeing implementation of the new organisation. This would include organisational design, transfer of staff, assets and liabilities, integration of systems and services, and establishment of the governance, financial and operational arrangements required for commencement.

### **Maintaining service continuity**

A fundamental objective throughout implementation would be maintaining uninterrupted service delivery and public confidence. Existing councils would continue operating until the formal commencement date, ensuring continuity of essential services, regulatory responsibilities and statutory obligations while transition activities are undertaken.

The proposal recognises that successful implementation requires more than organisational change. It also depends on strong programme governance, effective engagement with communities, ongoing partnership with iwi and central government, and clear communication throughout the transition period.

### **Democratic legitimacy**

The proposed approach deliberately separates establishment from implementation. Significant preparatory work can occur before the 2028 local elections, while key decisions about the future organisation remain the responsibility of the newly elected Council. This provides sufficient time to prepare for transition while ensuring the future organisation is shaped by a democratically elected governing body.

### **Indicative implementation milestones**

Subject to Government decisions, the implementation pathway is expected to include:

- legislative establishment of the Waikato Unitary Authority;

- appointment of an Establishment Chief Executive and establishment of the transition programme;
- development of the future operating model and draft Transition Plan;
- election of the inaugural governing body in 2028;
- adoption of the Transition Plan by the new Council;
- progressive implementation of organisational, financial, technology and service integration;
- completion of transition and readiness assurance activities; and
- commencement of the Waikato Unitary Authority.

### **Overall assessment**

While significant detailed work would be required, the proposal is considered realistic and achievable within the proposed timeframe. By combining early legislative establishment, structured programme management, democratic oversight and a staged transition, the implementation approach provides a practical pathway to establish a Waikato-wide Unitary Authority while maintaining service continuity and public confidence.

**Note - Detailed implementation considerations, trade-offs and matters for further design are provided in Appendix A.**

## **9 Treaty settlement arrangements**

### **Te Tiriti o Waitangi as a foundation for future governance**

The Waikato occupies a unique place within Aotearoa New Zealand as the home of Te Kīngitanga, nationally significant Treaty settlement arrangements, a major Māori economy and enduring relationships between iwi, hapū, local government and the Crown. These relationships are fundamental to the governance, identity and long-term wellbeing of the region.

The proposal is founded on the principle that local government reorganisation should strengthen - not diminish - the relationships that have shaped the Waikato for generations. It therefore seeks both to protect existing statutory commitments and to provide a platform for enduring partnership through future governance.

### **Protecting existing Treaty settlement arrangements**

The Waikato contains one of New Zealand's most significant concentrations of Treaty settlement legislation and relationship arrangements. These include Treaty settlement obligations, statutory acknowledgements, Joint Management Agreements, Mana Whakahono ā Rohe agreements, co-governance and co-management arrangements, and a wide range of formal and informal partnership mechanisms developed over many years.

These arrangements represent far more than statutory compliance requirements. They are enduring relationship mechanisms that support shared governance, environmental management, planning, cultural stewardship and collaborative decision-making across the region.

The proposal therefore adopts the principle that all existing Treaty settlement commitments, statutory obligations and partnership arrangements should continue with equivalent effect. Existing governance and relationship mechanisms should be maintained unless otherwise agreed by the affected parties, with any legislative or administrative transfer designed to preserve continuity, maintain confidence and provide certainty for iwi, councils and communities.

### **Strengthening partnership through future design**

The proposal recognises that meaningful partnership extends beyond Treaty settlement obligations alone.

The Waikato is home to many iwi and hapū, each with distinct histories, rohe, priorities and relationships with local places. Local government reform should recognise and support this diversity rather than seek to replace it with a single regional approach.

The detailed design phase should therefore be undertaken in partnership with iwi, affected Post Settlement Governance Entities (PSGEs), councils, communities and the Crown. This process should include the co-design of governance arrangements, Māori representation, local participation mechanisms and transition planning, while allowing sufficient time and support for iwi to consider proposals through their own governance processes.

Consistent with the broader principles underpinning this proposal, the future governance model should seek to strengthen Māori participation at both regional and local levels, recognising that enduring relationships are built through ongoing partnership, meaningful engagement and shared stewardship of the region's people, places and natural systems.

### **Matters for detailed design**

Consistent with the Government's Head Start guidance, this outline proposal does not seek to resolve every Treaty settlement or relationship matter at this stage. Should the proposal proceed, detailed design should be undertaken alongside iwi, PSGEs and the Crown and include:

- confirmation of all Treaty settlement obligations and statutory arrangements to ensure continuity;
- development of a comprehensive inventory of existing partnership, co-governance and relationship mechanisms across the region;
- confirmation of Māori representation arrangements within the future governance model;

- continuation and, where appropriate, strengthening of co-governance and co-management arrangements;
- transition planning to ensure continuity of relationships, institutional knowledge and organisational capability; and
- identification of opportunities to strengthen partnership and Māori participation within the future governance framework.

This approach recognises that successful transition is not simply an organisational exercise, but also one of maintaining trust, protecting relationships and carrying forward the shared foundations that already exist across the Waikato.

### **Overall assessment**

The proposed Waikato Unitary Authority is expected to provide a strong platform for by upholding Treaty settlement arrangements with equivalent effect and undertaking detailed design in partnership with iwi, PSGEs and the Crown. The proposal seeks to protect continuity while creating opportunities to strengthen Māori participation and enduring relationships within the future governance model.

## **10 Government support and implementation enablers**

### **Legislative framework**

Successful implementation would require legislation to establish the Waikato Unitary Authority, provide for the transition from existing councils, and transfer statutory responsibilities, assets, liabilities, staff and governance arrangements to the new organisation.

Legislation would also need to provide appropriate transitional powers, define the role of the Establishment Chief Executive, and establish the legal framework for implementation.

### **Transition support**

Given the scale and significance of the proposed reorganisation, Government support would assist in ensuring an orderly transition while maintaining service continuity.

Support needs to include:

- transition funding;
- establishment programme support;
- specialist legal and technical assistance where appropriate;
- coordination across central government agencies; and
- access to implementation guidance based on previous local government reorganisations.

### **Transitional compliance relief**

During implementation, councils would continue to meet existing statutory obligations while preparing for the new authority.

Government should consider targeted and time-limited flexibility where appropriate, for example in relation to:

- planning and reporting requirements;
- alignment with planning reforms;
- statutory consultation processes;
- timing of planning documents; and
- other administrative requirements where compliance would duplicate work during transition.

Any relief should maintain accountability while reducing unnecessary duplication.

### **Partnership with central government**

Successful implementation would require an ongoing partnership between local government and central government throughout the transition.

This should include coordinated decision-making across relevant agencies, alignment with other reform programmes, and regular engagement to resolve implementation issues as they arise.

## **11 Conclusion**

Waikato already functions as one interconnected economic, environmental and social region. The proposal recognises that local government arrangements should evolve to better reflect that reality while preserving meaningful local democracy and strengthening partnerships with iwi.

A Waikato-wide unitary authority provides the strongest platform for supporting economic growth, improving infrastructure coordination, strengthening environmental stewardship and delivering better long-term outcomes for communities.

While detailed design remains to be undertaken, the proposal demonstrates that this option is credible, achievable and aligned with the Government's objectives for simpler, more capable and more effective local government.

We are committed to working with others. Recognise this will take more time to get to an agreed outcome, with a staged approach ...

## Appendices

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### Appendix A – Detailed implementation considerations, trade-offs and matters for further design

#### 8.1 Supports the new planning system

##### Trade-offs and risks

The principal risks are associated with undertaking planning reform and local government reorganisation at the same time.

These include:

- uncertainty while the final national legislative framework is being developed;
- pressure on specialist planning, environmental and regulatory staff;
- potential disruption to statutory planning and consenting processes;
- the complexity of integrating existing plans, data, systems and policies;
- the risk of unnecessary rework if transition and planning-reform timeframes are not aligned; and
- ensuring that stronger regional consistency does not diminish appropriate place-based input.

These risks would need to be managed through phased implementation, clear transitional accountabilities and close coordination with central government.

##### Matters for detailed design

Further work would be required to determine:

- governance arrangements for regional spatial and regulatory planning;
- statutory plan sequencing and transitional provisions;
- consenting, monitoring, compliance and enforcement arrangements;
- transitional delegations and decision-making responsibilities;
- integration of planning data, systems and ePlans;
- arrangements for retaining specialist capability and institutional knowledge;
- mechanisms for regional, iwi partner and local input into planning decisions; and
- alignment between reorganisation and the final national planning framework.

## 8.2 Simplifies local governance

### Trade-offs and risks

The principal trade-off is between reducing organisational complexity and avoiding the creation of an overly centralised or internally complicated governance model.

Potential risks include:

- unclear boundaries between regional and local decision-making;
- unnecessary centralisation;
- creating too many committees or local bodies and reproducing existing complexity internally;
- regional functions becoming less visible within a larger organisation;
- inconsistent delegations or accountability; and
- disruption during the transition from existing governance arrangements.

These risks would need to be addressed through a clear governance framework, disciplined committee design and transparent allocation of responsibilities.

### Matters for detailed design

Further work would be required to determine:

- the governing body and committee structure;
- the allocation of regional and local responsibilities;
- the roles of local boards and community boards;
- delegation and accountability frameworks;
- governance and resourcing of regional council functions;
- Māori representation and partnership arrangements;
- financial delegations;
- the future role of council-controlled organisations; and
- mechanisms for reviewing and adapting governance arrangements over time.

## 8.3 Economies of scale

### Trade-offs and risks

Key risks include:

- significant upfront transition and integration costs;
- benefits taking longer than expected to realise;
- overestimating potential savings;

- disruption from system and organisational change;
- loss of local knowledge or relationships;
- standardisation that does not reflect legitimate local circumstances;
- uneven impacts from rating and debt harmonisation;
- differing asset condition and renewal needs across the region; and
- increased borrowing capacity creating pressure for higher investment or debt.

These risks reinforce the need for detailed financial analysis and a transparent benefits-realisation framework.

### **Matters for detailed design**

Further work would be required to determine:

- projected transition costs and benefits;
- rating harmonisation options and transitional protections;
- debt and treasury arrangements;
- asset condition and renewal requirements;
- infrastructure investment priorities;
- workforce and specialist capability requirements;
- information technology and systems integration;
- procurement opportunities;
- water-services and council-controlled organisation arrangements;
- local service-level variations; and
- how anticipated benefits would be measured, reported and independently assured.

## **8.4 Maintains local voice**

### **Trade-offs and risks**

The principal challenge is achieving the right balance between regional integration and local responsiveness. Too little delegation could leave communities feeling disconnected from decisions. Too much fragmentation could recreate the governance complexity the proposal seeks to reduce. Other risks include:

- local bodies having representation but insufficient authority or funding;
- boundaries that do not reflect communities of interest;
- urban population growth dominating smaller communities;
- inconsistent local service expectations;
- unclear accountability between regional and local bodies; and



- local governance arrangements becoming overly complex.

### **Matters for detailed design**

Further work would be required to determine:

- governing body, ward and constituency arrangements;
- Māori representation;
- local board and community board boundaries;
- the responsibilities delegated to local governance bodies;
- local funding arrangements and budget authority;
- the relationship between regional and local decision-making;
- practical local access to representatives, services and staff;
- mechanisms for rural, provincial, coastal and lakes representation;
- relationships with iwi, hapū and existing community organisations; and
- mechanisms for reviewing and adapting the model over time.

## **8.5 Deliverability**

(TBD if developed)

## **Appendix B – Supporting information**

## **Appendix C**

# Waikato Region support for Head Start Proposals

Discussion paper prepared for the Waikato Mayoral Forum

by Waikato Chief Executives

## Executive Summary

The Waikato is a region of national significance, encompassing one of New Zealand's fastest-growing metropolitan areas alongside productive rural districts, provincial centres, nationally significant environmental assets, major transport corridors, and diverse communities with distinct identities and aspirations.

While the region is economically, socially and environmentally interconnected, the challenges facing its urban and rural communities in scale, complexity and focus. The Hamilton metropolitan area is managing rapid population growth, housing demand, transport pressures, infrastructure investment requirements and the need for coordinated urban development across council boundaries. At the same time, many parts of the wider Waikato are focused on issues such as environmental stewardship, productive land use, catchment management, rural service delivery, provincial resilience and supporting dispersed communities.

In designing the most appropriate system of governance for Waikato, the Mayoral Forum is committed to a structure capable of meeting not just immediate needs but those of the region as it evolves over the next 30–50 years.

## Purpose

The purpose of this discussion paper is to support a single Waikato story that can sit across all council proposals submitted through Head Start. It is intended to articulate the overall Waikato story, the region's importance to New Zealand's success, and the shared reasons why the Waikato must remain part of the Government's Head Start discussion after 9 August, even where individual councils advance more than one reform proposal.

The paper recognises that councils are working to compressed timeframes which may lead to sub-optimal outcomes and may need more time to align positions with Government, iwi, communities and each other. Its purpose is therefore not to force immediate agreement on a single end-state model, but to establish a common regional platform. Waikato councils can acknowledge different local proposals while still presenting a unified proposition that the Waikato is too important to New Zealand's economy, infrastructure system, river catchments, food production, energy networks, growth corridor and community wellbeing to be left outside the next phase of Head Start.

A shared proposition would make clear that multiple Waikato proposals should not be read as disunity or lack of ambition. Rather, they reflect the scale, diversity and complexity of the region. The common message to Government should be that Waikato councils are committed to reform, want to

work constructively with Ministers and officials, and seek a pathway that keeps all parts of the region moving together instead of allowing one sub-regional proposal to proceed while the rest of the Waikato is left.

## Unified Position

The Government's Head Start pathway creates a voluntary, accelerated route for councils to put forward proposals for new unitary authorities. The pathway rewards councils that can demonstrate deliverability, support for the new planning system, simpler governance, economies of scale and maintained local voice.

The Waikato is a region of national significance. It includes fast-growing metropolitan pressures around Hamilton and surrounding areas, productive rural districts, coastal communities, river and lake catchments, smaller towns, tourism and visitor economies, and communities with distinct local identities. These interdependencies do not fit neatly inside existing council boundaries.

For New Zealand, the Waikato matters because it is not simply a collection of councils. It is a nationally significant system, the country's key upper North Island growth and freight corridor; a productive food, energy and water region; the home of nationally important river, lake and catchment systems; and a place where metropolitan growth, rural production, environmental stewardship, Māori partnership and infrastructure investment intersect. Decisions about Waikato local government therefore have consequences well beyond the region's boundaries.

It is recognised that there may be decisions by councils across the region to submit an alternative proposal to a full unitary. These decisions should be respected noting that the proposals are driven by their community. While these proposals may differ, these should be acknowledged allowing opportunities for future partnering. This not only demonstrates leadership but shows commitment to participate in a joined-up approach.

The shared proposition should therefore ask Government to treat the Waikato as a region that must remain in scope for active Head Start engagement after 9 August. It should signal that Waikato councils may need more time to test options, align local positions, undertake iwi and community engagement, and agree transition settings, and that this should be understood as responsible design rather than delay. The alternative risk is that Government concludes Waikato is too hard or selects a smaller unitary proposal while leaving unresolved issues for the balance of the region.

A staged transition pathway could be included as part of this unified position. Rather than requiring immediate agreement on a single end-state model, Waikato councils could propose a deliberate two-stage journey. First, keeping all Waikato proposals connected through shared principles, common transition settings and agreed arrangements for whole-of-region functions; and second, testing whether and when a single Waikato unitary model, or another aligned structure, should be progressed once detailed design, iwi and community engagement, and implementation planning are more mature.

Framed this way, staging is a strength rather than a compromise. It gives Government confidence that the Waikato is serious about reform, while managing risks around local voice, iwi partnership, catchment stewardship, service continuity, rating and debt alignment, and implementation capacity.

It also reduces the risk that Waikato is considered too hard, or that one smaller sub-regional proposal advances while the rest of the region is left unresolved.

Our narrative as a region should avoid setting rural, urban and metro interests against each other. The Waikato's strength is that these places are mutually dependent. Metro growth relies on rural production, water, transport and workforce connections; rural communities rely on strong towns, markets, infrastructure and services; and smaller urban centres rely on both local identity and regional opportunity.

Iwi partnership and Treaty settlement obligations are critical considerations for the Waikato. We have heard strongly from iwi and hapū the importance of maintaining the Waikato River, we have also heard strongly the need to retain the ability for fair, equitable and transparent decision making under any model that is proposed. The proposals and options being discussed by councils across the Waikato demonstrate this, with key considerations being that the Waikato River and its connected catchments continue to be managed as an integrated system.

## Principles-based Thinking

Each council has developed their own principles that align with the uniqueness of the areas that they serve. Although there are some nuances, there is common alignment across all councils. These are shared principles that don't follow boundary lines and demonstrate that the region is aligned with its thinking.

| Principle                                                          | What it means for a full Waikato proposal                                                                                                                                                                                           |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Local voice with regional strength                                 | Preserve strong local representation and ensure that communities have an ability to influence decisions that will affect them.                                                                                                      |
| Decision making                                                    | Ensuring that decision making occurs at and considers local voice and that it reflects that our communities have different needs but a shared future.                                                                               |
| Affordability and value for money – better outcomes for ratepayers | Scale is used to reduce duplication, improve procurement, strengthen asset planning and smooth long-term investment pressures showing demonstrable value over the long-term and improving long-term resilience of councils.         |
| Integrated catchment and infrastructure planning                   | Land use, water, transport, growth, hazards and environmental management are planned together rather than across fragmented boundaries, with the Waikato River and connected catchments treated as one.                             |
| Equity of access, not sameness of service                          | Communities should have fair access to core services, while service standards can reflect local circumstances, geography, risk and affordability.                                                                                   |
| Partnership and te ao Māori                                        | Iwi and hapū relationships are embedded in governance design, planning, environmental stewardship and place-based decision-making, with a strong voice in matters affecting the Waikato River, its connected catchments and taonga. |
| Resilience and long-term stewardship                               | The model strengthens preparedness for flooding, drought, climate change, biosecurity, growth pressures and infrastructure shocks.                                                                                                  |
| Deliverability and transition discipline                           | The proposal must be credible, staged, costed and capable of maintaining services while the new organisation is established.                                                                                                        |

|                                 |                                                                                                                      |
|---------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Growth-ready and future-focused | The proposal supports population growth, economic developing, housing and infrastructure demands across the Waikato. |
|---------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|

## Conclusion

The Waikato should present a shared proposition that explains its national significance and why it must remain in the Head Start discussion after 9 August. Multiple Waikato proposals should be framed not as fragmentation, but as a practical response to the region's scale, diversity and complexity, with councils committed to a pathway that keeps the whole region in scope.

Councils have not had the ability through the proposal process to fully understand the breadth of scale and complexity, having a pathway post Government decision enables Councils to do this thoroughly.

## Recommendation

That the Mayoral Forum agrees that a supplementary document is attached to each proposal that outlines our commitment to continuing to work together as a Waikato region for the overall benefit of the Waikato. The supplementary document will also outline the requirements that the Waikato region has from Government to make any change successful.

# Head Start Workshop

23 July 2026



# PURPOSE

- Provide an update on Council positions around the region.
- Get direction on actions between now and August 5.

# RECAP – FROM PREVIOUS WORKSHOP

- Developed shared set of principles.
- Agreed preferred approach of single regional unitary and 'back up' option of western catchment based unitary.



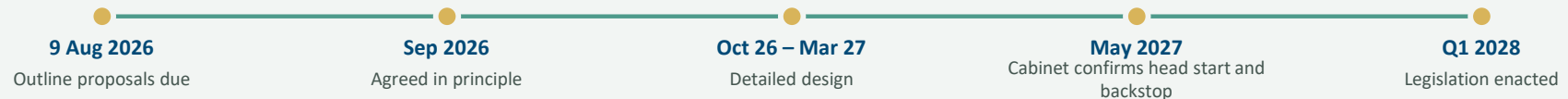
## HEAD START · WHAT OFFICIALS WILL ASSESS

## What the Government Wants to See

Five criteria, weighed as a whole. Officials expect a light-touch, strategic case — and are prepared to trade off strengths across them. What's eligible



## THE PATHWAY — KEY MILESTONES



# Reorganisation proposal eligibility — worked examples

How the eligibility tests apply: a proposal must be supported by a majority of the directly affected territorial authorities, or councils representing a majority of the affected population.

## Example 1: Majority of directly affected councils

A region contains three territorial authorities: Council A, Council B and Council C. Council A and Council B jointly submit a proposal that affects Council C.

✓ Eligible for consideration because Councils A and B form a majority of the directly affected territorial authorities, regardless of population size.

## Example 2: Majority of population

A region contains four territorial authorities: Councils A to D. Councils A and B jointly submit a proposal that also impacts Councils C and D. Councils A and B together represent more than 50% of the population of the directly affected area, even though Council C and Council D are larger in land area.

✓ Eligible for consideration because the proposing councils represent a majority of the population, even if they do not represent all councils.

## Example 3: Minority of directly affected councils

A region contains five territorial authorities: Councils A to E. Council A and Council B jointly submit a proposal that also affects Councils C, D and E. Councils A and B together do not represent more than 50% of the population or the majority of affected councils of the directly affected area.

✗ Not eligible for consideration because, while it involves two councils, it does not represent a majority of councils or population.

## Example 4: Subregional unitary authorities

A region contains five territorial authorities: Councils A to E. Council A, Council B, Council C and Council D jointly submit a proposal for two unitaries for the region affecting Council E.

✓ Eligible for consideration because the proposing councils are a majority of the directly affected territorial authorities, regardless of population of the directly affected areas.

## Example 5: Subregional proposal — part of region

A region contains seven territorial authorities: Councils A to F. Council A, Council B and Council C jointly submit a proposal for a unitary for the three councils within their part of the region. The other four councils are unaffected.

✓ Eligible for consideration because there are more than two territorial authorities proposing amalgamation and the majority of territorial authorities and population affected by the proposal are in favour. Reorganisation plans for the remainder of the region (Councils D to F) will be required after the 2028 local body elections.

## THE ALTERNATIVE

# If we don't decide, the backstop decides for us

## 1 Reduced local control

Key decisions made outside local governance processes; less ability to reflect local priorities and community aspirations.

## 2 Accountability without authority

Elected members stay accountable to the community while their decision-making influence shrinks.

## 3 Financial and resource risk

Additional costs, reporting requirements and staff effort; uncertainty around future funding and liabilities.

## 4 Reputational impact

Signals a lack of confidence in local delivery capability; risks community and stakeholder trust.

## 5 Reduced flexibility

Fewer options tailored to local circumstances; limited ability to adapt or innovate as conditions change.

Doing nothing is still a decision — one the government makes for us. A credible Head Start proposal is our strongest protection.

*A backstop process would see reorganisation arrangements determined for the region rather than by it.*

# WHAT WE HEARD - RECAP

## Summary of themes

- Broad support for reform in general, but need to maintain local representation.
- A clear desire to improve affordability through greater scale and more efficient service delivery.
- Recognition that regional issues are best addressed through stronger collaboration and whole of catchment thinking.
- Strong support for future-focused decision-making that helps communities thrive through economic, social and environmental change.

**Community feedback reinforced the principles and informed three more**

# OUR PRINCIPLES – SHAPED BY COMMUNITY FEEDBACK



Maintaining  
strong local  
representation



Improving affordability  
for ratepayers  
through benefits  
of scale



Building on  
strong regional  
relationships



Improving regional  
coordination where  
it delivers better  
outcomes



Positioning our  
communities to thrive  
in the face of economic,  
social and environmental  
change



Maintaining a  
rural-urban  
representation  
balance



Enabling  
strong  
place-making



Respecting Treaty  
settlements and  
Te Ture Whaimana –  
The Vision & Strategy  
for the Waikato &  
Waipa Rivers

Together, these principles provide a mandate for the  
proposal we develop

# ENGAGEMENT - MĀORI FEEDBACK

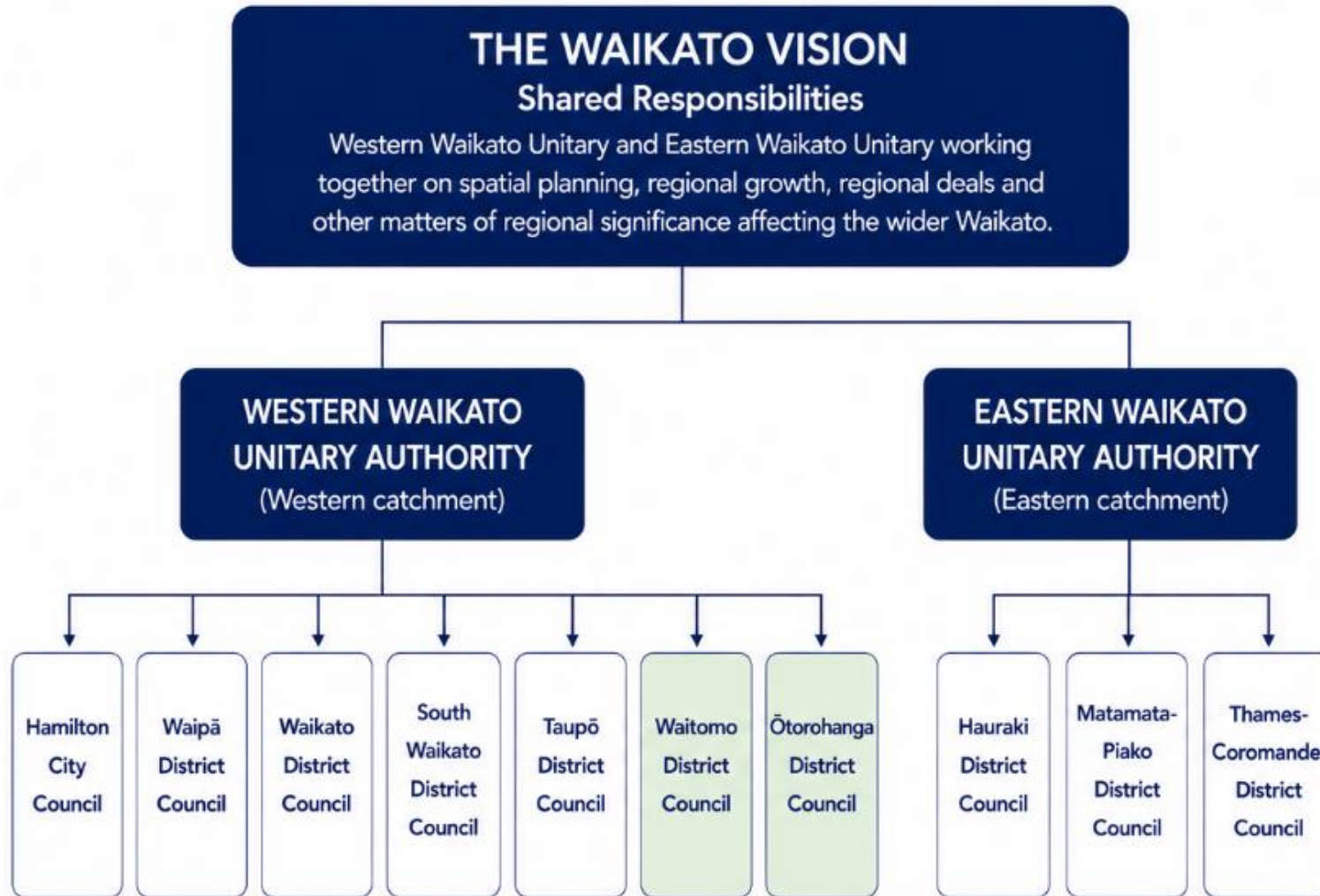
- A whole-of-catchment approach is preferred - with one clear expectation: any future council model must be river-centric, keeping the Waikato Awa and its tributaries together, while respecting the five River Settlements including *Te Ture Whaimana*.
- The voices of all communities - including Māori - must be protected within any future governance arrangements.
- Current partnership arrangements must be protected.
- Open to different ways of working together

# MAYORAL UPDATE



# Get the foundations right

One shared vision. Two catchment-based unitaries. Strong local representation.



## FIRST PRINCIPLES

- 1** Agree the vision and non-negotiables before structural decisions are made.
- 2** Co-design a representation model and operating model by March 2027.
- 3** Assets, debt and community investment will be managed.
- 4** Urban, rural and Māori voices all have a role in shaping the Waikato's future.
- 5** No single council can dominate decision-making. Hamilton holds no majority position.



## Western Waikato Unitary

In selection  
 Not selected

**434,750**  
 Population ⓘ

**19,671 km<sup>2</sup>**  
 Land area ⓘ

**\$31,175m**  
 GDP



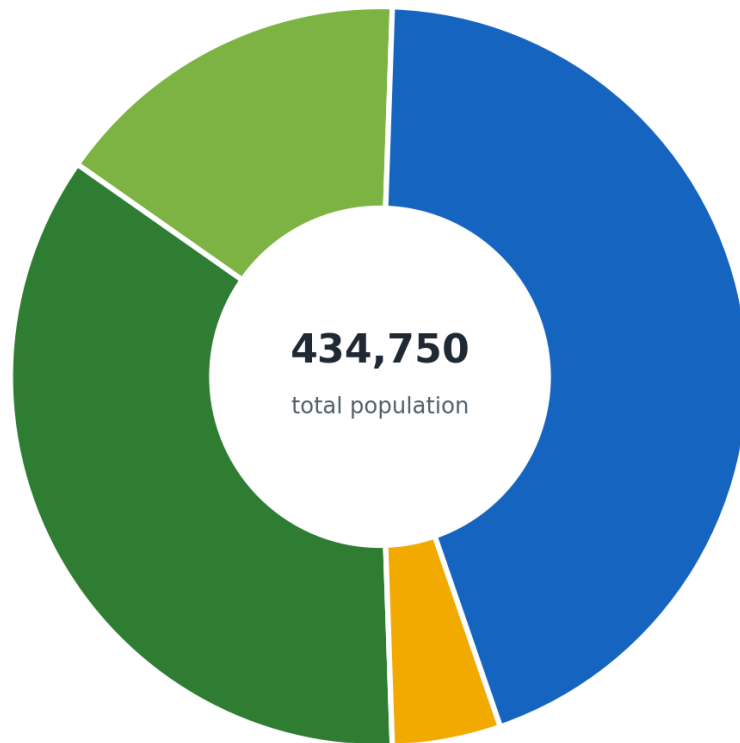
### Districts

All

Clear

- ☐ Thames-Coromandel
- ☐ Hauraki
- ☒ Waikato District
- ☐ Matamata-Piako
- ☒ Hamilton City
- ☒ Waipā
- ☒ Ōtorohanga
- ☒ South Waikato
- ☒ Waitomo
- ☒ Taupō
- ☐ Rotorua

## Western Waikato Unitary



| Council grouping                                                                    | Population / share |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------|
| <div><div></div><div>Waikato &amp; Waipā</div></div> <div>153,300 people</div>      | 35.3%              |
| <div><div></div><div>South Waikato &amp; Taupō</div></div> <div>68,700 people</div> | 15.8%              |
| <div><div></div><div>Hamilton</div></div> <div>192,100 people</div>                 | 44.2%              |
| <div><div></div><div>Ōtorohanga &amp; Waitomo</div></div> <div>20,650 people</div>  | 4.7%               |

# NEXT STEPS

- Continue regional cross-council engagement
- Council approval of draft proposal - August 5
- Submit proposal by 9 August

# HE KARAKIA WHAKAMUTUNGA

Puritia te rangimārie.

Puritia te aroha.

Puritia te ngākau pai.

Puritia ngā wawata.

Kia kore e ngaro.

Haumi e, hui e, **tāiki e!**

*Hold fast to peace,*

*Hold fast to love*

*Hold fast to sincerity,*

*Hold fast to our hopes,*

*May these things never be lost.*

*Joined in unity – it is done!*

