



Notice of Meeting

An Extraordinary Meeting of the Tararua District Council will be held in the Council Chamber, 156 High Street, Dannevirke on **Wednesday 10 June 2026** commencing at **1:00pm**.

Corin Haines
Chief Executive

Agenda

1. Welcome and meeting opening
2. Apologies
3. Reports
- 3.1 Local Government Reform: Community Engagement Outcomes and Options for Tararua District 3
4. Closure



Report

Date : 4 June 2026

To : Mayor and Councillors
Tararua District Council

From : Corin Haines
Chief Executive

Subject : **Local Government Reform: Community Engagement Outcomes and Options for Tararua District**

Item No : **3.1**

1. Recommendation

- 1.1 *That the report from the Chief Executive dated 29 May 2026 concerning the Local Government Reform: Community Engagement Outcomes and Options for Tararua District be received.*
- 1.2 *That the Tararua District Council confirms amalgamation option two (go south to Wairarapa) and option four (go west to Manawatū Whanganui) for further investigation.*
- 1.3 *That the Tararua District Council authorises the Mayor and Chief Executive to continue discussions on behalf of Council with the relevant councils identified in recommendation 1.2.*
- 1.4 *That the Tararua District Council notes the community's support for option six (fight for a better option), including a desire to challenge the proposed reform timeframe and process.*

Executive Summary

On 5 May 2026, Government announced a new local government reform programme focused on the reorganisation of local authorities into larger unitary authorities. Councils have been invited to participate in a voluntary Head Start process to develop outline reorganisation proposals by 9 August 2026. Limited information is currently available regarding the proposed Backstop process for councils that do not participate.

Local government reform is a matter of significance for the Tararua District due to its potential implications for representation, local decision-making, community identity, service delivery, and future strategic priorities. While the head start process is Government-led, any decisions made by Council remain subject to the decision-making requirements of the Local Government Act 2002, including consideration of reasonably practicable options and community views.

To assist its decision-making, Council undertook targeted community engagement and a preliminary assessment of the options identified. This assessment considered community and stakeholder feedback, the purpose and role of local government under section 10 and 11 of the Local Government Act 2002.

Community feedback demonstrated strong interest in the issue and a clear desire for communities to retain influence over future local government arrangements. Option six (fight for a better option) received the highest level of support overall. Of the amalgamation options presented, option four (go west to the Manawatū Whanganui region) received the strongest community support.

Having considered the assessment undertaken and feedback received, it is recommended that Council continue to investigate options two and four. Retaining both options will enable further work to be undertaken, including engagement with neighbouring councils and high-level financial modelling.

No decision regarding amalgamation, participation in the Head Start process, or reliance on any future Backstop process is sought through this report. A further report will be presented to Council prior to 9 August 2026 to consider any additional information available at that time and seek any decisions required regarding Council's preferred pathway.

2. Reason for the Report

- 2.1 To provide Council with an update on the Central Government announcement and emerging policy direction regarding local government reform, including activities undertaken to date in response to this direction.
- 2.2 To report back to Council on the feedback received through recent community engagement activities regarding local government reform, including the key themes, opportunities, concerns, and preferences raised in relation to the identified options.
- 2.3 To seek Council direction on which options should continue to be investigated further, having regard to community feedback, and the assessment against the purpose and role of local government under section 10 and 11 of the Local Government Act 2002.
- 2.4 No decision regarding amalgamation, participation in a Head Start process, or participation in the Backstop process is being sought through this report.
- 2.5 A further report will be brought to Council prior to 9 August 2026 to update on any further information and modelling available at that time. That report will

provide a recommendation for decision regarding the Head Start or Backstop process.

3. Background

- 3.1 On 5 May 2026, the Government announced a new proposed process for local government reform, which was developed as a direct response to feedback on the Government's earlier Simplifying Local Government proposals. The announced policy included a voluntary "Head Start" process under which councils may work with neighbouring councils to develop and submit reform proposals for consideration within a three-month window.
- 3.2 The Government has indicated that the reform programme is intended to consider potential reorganisation and amalgamation of local government structures, by providing an opportunity through the Head Start process for groups of local authorities (excluding regional councils) to prepare and submit outline proposals to reorganise into unitary authorities. For the purpose of this report, amalgamation is the process of combining two or more separate councils into one single new entity.
- 3.3 Once proposals have been submitted, Cabinet will decide which proposals to progress later in 2026. Final proposals will then be submitted in early 2027, with the introduction of enabling legislation later in 2027, to be enacted in early 2028.
- 3.4 A "Backstop" process, which will apply after the 2028 local elections, has also been announced with a view to the compulsory reorganisation of those councils not participating in the Head Start process. Further information regarding the Backstop process is expected during the second quarter of 2027.
- 3.5 Following the announcement, Council undertook community engagement activities between 15 and 27 May 2026 to seek early community views on the emerging reform direction and the practicable options for the Tararua District.

4. Description

- 4.1 The recent Government announcement represents a marked change from the original policy direction of the Simplifying Local Government proposals, in that the Government's focus appears to be solely on reorganisation of local authorities into larger unitary authorities, with other forms of reform now off the table in the Head Start process. Additionally, the three-month window provided to develop and submit reorganisation plans with neighbouring councils under the Head Start pathway is a significant departure from the earlier proposals which indicated a period of two years for regional reorganisation planning.
- 4.2 There is little information currently available regarding the compulsory Backstop process for those councils which do not submit Head Start proposals, but there is a risk that this may not be a fully collaborative process, and the choice may be removed from councils and communities. Further clarification has been sought

from the Minister for Local Government, and a copy of the letter sent to the Minister's office on 3 June 2026 is attached as Attachment 1.

- 4.3 Amalgamation poses a significant change to community representation, levels of service, and the way local and regional government functions are undertaken.
- 4.4 Given the potential scale and significance of these changes, the matter is likely to be of interest to the wider community. Particular interest may also exist amongst iwi and Māori, young people, community organisations, and communities in different parts of the district, as the implications of any future changes may vary depending on location, community identity, service use, and representation arrangements.

5. Decision making powers and requirements

- 5.1 At present, the operative statutory provisions applying to the reorganisation of local government are those in Part 3 and Schedule 3 of the Local Government Act 2002 ("the LGA"), which involve process steps, certain requirements, and to some extent, similar considerations when compared with the Head Start pathway. The existing reorganisation pathways also involve the Local Government Commission as the relevant decision-maker.
- 5.2 Because the Head Start pathway is not currently supported by any bespoke legislative provisions, including in relation to council decision-making, any decisions to develop and submit a proposal will need to be made in accordance with the existing requirements of the LGA. In particular, the requirement in s76 of the LGA for "every decision" to be made in accordance with sections 77, 78, 80, 81 and 82 as applicable.
- 5.3 Local authorities derive their powers, functions and responsibilities from statute. In addition to the particular functions, powers and responsibilities conferred on councils, section 12 of the LGA provides a "power of general competence" which enables the doing of any act and entry into any transaction subject to specific limitations in subsections (2) to (5).
- 5.4 Any council that submitted a proposal under the Head Start process would be relying on the power of general competence, as there is no current statutory basis for the Head Start pathway in the LGA or otherwise. Subsections (2) to (5) do not appear to create any particular risk for the making of any proposal, given the current broad expression of the purpose of local government under section 10.

6. Significance assessment

- 6.1 Significance is defined in section 5 of the LGA as follows:

Significance, in relation to any issue, proposal, decision or other matter that concerns or is before a local authority, means the degree of importance of the issue, proposal, decision, or matter, as assessed by the local authority, in terms of its likely impact on, and likely consequences for,

- (a) the current and future social, economic, environmental or cultural wellbeing of the district or region;
- (b) any persons who are likely to be particularly affected by, or interested in, the issue, proposal, decision, or matter;
- (c) the capacity of the local authority to perform its role, and the financial and other costs of doing so.
- 6.2 Council is required to form a view as to the significance of the issue and any decisions being made, including a decision to submit a proposal under the Head Start process, by reference to its Significance and Engagement Policy.
- 6.3 Having assessed the issue against Council’s policy, it is clear that the issue of amalgamation and local government reorganisation is of high significance, and a decision to submit a proposal under the Head Start process would be considered a significant decision. This is due to its district wide impact, large potential impacts on levels of service and rating levels of communities, fundamental change in strategic policy, and level of district interest in the decision. It is also a decision that, based on the current information available, would not be able to be reversed by future councils.
- 6.4 There is no general obligation to consult under Part 6 of the LGA where a decision is considered to be significant. However, the need to comply with sections 77 and 78 of the LGA – in a way that is largely in proportion to the significance of matters affected by a decision – generally means that consultation is more likely required for decisions of higher significance.
- 6.5 Council’s policy recognises that consultation is not always possible in circumstances involving urgency. It is noted that there is no statutory requirement to submit a proposal under the Head Start process, as it is voluntary, and arguably the urgency only arises if Council decides to submit a proposal. However, given the significance of the decision, and the uncertainty around whether the Backstop process will be a collaborative process where Council will be involved in co-design of reorganisation, understanding the community’s view of whether to submit a proposal was deemed important and Council elected to quickly run targeted engagement sessions with the community. This is discussed at more detail in paragraph 11.
- 6.6 The decisions sought by this report, while related to the issue of amalgamation, are preliminary decisions to refine options for further investigation and are not considered significant. The options recommended for further investigation have been informed by community feedback gathered through these engagement sessions. No final decisions on amalgamation or whether to use the Head Start or Backstop process are sought through this report.

7. Risk

7.1 The Government's local government reform programme introduces a number of risks for Council. At this stage, the most significant risks relate to uncertainty regarding the future structure of local government, the process by which decisions may be made, and the potential implications for the Tararua District.

7.2 Strategic alignment, local prioritisation and community representation

7.2.1 The Head Start process and potential amalgamation represent a fundamental change in how strategic priorities for the Tararua District would be set, funded, and delivered. Under an amalgamated structure, decision-making would shift from a district-based model to a regional governance model, with priorities determined across a larger and more diverse area.

7.2.2 While this may provide opportunities for improved coordination and capability in some areas, it also introduces a risk that Tararua-specific priorities, including levels of service, infrastructure investment, and community outcomes, may be reprioritised or deferred in favour of competing regional priorities. There is also a risk that local voice, representation, and community identity may be diluted within a larger organisation.

7.2.3 Under Council's consequence framework, any sustained inability to deliver on Council's strategic outcomes would represent a high to very high level of impact. This risk is therefore considered to be of strategic significance.

7.3 Legislative and policy uncertainty

7.3.1 The Government's reform proposals remain policy direction and have not yet been enacted through legislation. As a result, aspects of the proposed reform programme, including timeframes, assessment criteria, decision-making processes, and implementation arrangements, may change as policy development progresses.

7.3.2 While participation in the Head Start process is voluntary, the Government has signalled a preference for councils to engage with the process and has indicated that councils choosing not to participate will subsequently be considered through a Backstop process. This creates practical pressure for councils to consider reform options within a compressed timeframe.

7.3.3 Council remains subject to its existing statutory obligations under the LGA, including requirements relating to significance, consultation, identification of reasonably practicable options, and consideration of community views. There is a risk that decisions made in response to emerging policy direction may be challenged if Council is unable to demonstrate that appropriate statutory decision-making processes have been followed.

8. Options

- 8.1 In considering the options available to Council in response to the Government announcement regarding local government reform, Council is required under section 77 of the LGA to identify all reasonably practicable options.
- 8.2 It is also required under section 78 to consider the views and preferences of those who may be interested in or affected by the decision-making. Council has elected to give effect to this requirement by holding a series of public meetings between 15 and 27 May 2026 seeking the community's views on the issue and options identified, and analysing the feedback gathered from these sessions and through online engagement.
- 8.3 In identifying and refining options for consideration, Council has focussed on neighbouring Councils (in line with policy direction).
- 8.4 Council also has had regard to the purpose of local government as per sections 10 and 11 of LGA, considering:
- 8.4.1 The consequences of any proposal on the democratic representation of residents within any district or unitary area, and the extent to which a proposal enables "democratic local decision-making and action" (section 10(a) of the LGA), and
- 8.4.2 whether any proposal promotes "the social, economic, environmental and cultural well-being of communities in the present and for the future" (section 10(b) of the LGA).
- 8.5 These considerations closely reflect certain criteria announced as part of the Head Start process (outlined at paragraph 8.12).
- 8.6 Applying these considerations assisted Council in identifying the options considered reasonably practicable for further investigation at this time. While a range of theoretical amalgamation options could exist, not all are considered reasonably practicable when assessed against the matters identified above.
- 8.7 The options identified here were also the options presented through community engagement activities and are as follows:
- 8.7.1 **Option One - Prepare for the Backstop Process:** Council spends the next 3 months getting ready for what comes next.
- 8.7.2 **Option Two - Go South to Wairarapa:** Council forms an amalgamated council with Wairarapa councils, and potentially Wellington councils.
- 8.8 **Option Three - Go North to Hawke's Bay:** Council forms an amalgamated council with Hawke's Bay councils.
- 8.9 **Option Four - Go West to Horizons region:** Council forms an amalgamated council within the Manawatū Whanganui Region.

- 8.10 **Option Five - Split the District:** Council splits off different parts of the Tararua District to align with different neighbouring areas.
- 8.11 **Option Six - Fight for a better option:** Council pushes back on forced amalgamation and develops an effective shared services model instead.
- 8.12 The Government has indicated that reorganisation proposals submitted through the Head Start process will be assessed against a range of criteria, including:
- 8.12.1 supports the new planning system,
 - 8.12.2 simplifies local governance,
 - 8.12.3 economies of scale,
 - 8.12.4 maintains local voice, and
 - 8.12.5 deliverability
- 8.12.6 Also outlined outside of the criteria is the consideration of existing treaty settlement arrangements.
- 8.13 Further assessment against these criteria will be progressed with a preferred option should the Head Start process be pursued.

9. Assessment Methodology

- 9.1 Based on the purpose and role of local government as per sections 10 and 11 of the LGA and the related Government criteria we have identified two areas for assessment.
- 9.2 Democratic local decision-making and action (LGA S10(a))
- 9.2.1 One of the key considerations in assessing future local government arrangements is whether communities continue to have meaningful representation and influence over decisions that affect them. This aligns with the purpose of local government under section 10 of the LGA and the Government's criterion relating to the maintenance of effective local representation and local voice.
 - 9.2.2 Council has undertaken a preliminary assessment of this criterion. This has included consideration of Tararua's relative size within each option, indicative representation modelling, and the potential implications for elected representation and local influence within a larger organisation. Preliminary modelling indicates that all amalgamation options are likely to result in fewer elected representatives directly representing Tararua communities than under current arrangements, although the extent of any reduction varies between options.
 - 9.2.3 The representation modelling undertaken has been based on current representation arrangements and does not consider alternative governance or

representation mechanisms that may be available within a future amalgamation proposal.

9.3 Social, Economic, Environmental and Cultural Wellbeing (LGA S10(b))

9.3.1 The current purpose of local government under section 10 of the LGA includes promoting the social, economic, environmental, and cultural wellbeing of communities in the present and for the future. While the Government has signalled changes to this provision through the Local Government (System Improvements) Amendment Bill, it remains relevant to Council's current assessment.

9.3.2 Council has undertaken a preliminary assessment of factors that may influence community wellbeing under each option. This has included consideration of community identity and connection to place, existing social and economic connections, existing relationships between councils, existing iwi relationships, catchment alignment and associated environmental management considerations, and geographic alignment.

10. Assessment of Options

10.1 The options presented are broad directional options only, no specific amalgamation model or council configuration has been developed. Each option could involve a range of potential future arrangements, including the involvement of one or more councils.

10.2 Option One – Prepare for the Backstop process

10.2.1 During community engagement, community members were invited to provide feedback on the option of not actively pursuing an amalgamation proposal through the Head Start process and instead awaiting further information regarding the Government's proposed Backstop process.

10.2.2 Unlike the other options considered through engagement, the Backstop process is not an amalgamation option. Rather, it is a potential process pathway that may remain available regardless of which amalgamation options Council chooses to investigate further. The Backstop process may be a natural result of Council not being in a position to submit a Head Start proposal within the three-month timeframe.

10.2.3 No decision regarding participation in a Head Start process or reliance on any future Backstop process is being sought through this report. A separate report will be presented to Council prior to 9 August 2026 to consider any further information available at that time and seek any decisions required regarding Council's preferred pathway.

10.2.4 Community Feedback

10.2.4.. Community feedback on the Backstop process showed that overall support for preparing for the Backstop process was low, with approximately 9% of respondents identifying this as their preferred approach. Those who supported the option generally considered that additional time would allow for further investigation, community discussion, and more informed decision-making. Concerns raised through community engagement focused on the uncertainty surrounding the Backstop process, including the limited information currently available regarding how it may operate and the potential for reduced local influence over future outcomes. A recurring theme across submissions was a desire for communities to retain a meaningful role in shaping any future local government arrangements, regardless of the pathway ultimately pursued.

10.2.5 Community views on the backstop process have been recorded and are relevant to Council's future decision making rather than assisting in narrowing the amalgamation options as recommended in this report.

10.3 **Option Two - Go South to Wairarapa**

10.3.1 This option involves investigating potential amalgamation with the Masterton, Carterton, and South Wairarapa councils.

10.3.2 Community Feedback

10.3.2.. Overall support for the Wairarapa option was relatively low, with approximately 13% of respondents identifying this as their preferred option. Feedback indicated that support was stronger in some parts of the district, particularly in communities with existing connections to the Wairarapa.

10.3.2.. Concerns raised through community engagement focused on the long-term viability of a Wairarapa-based arrangement and the potential for any future structure to be incorporated into a wider Wellington-based local government arrangement. Submitters expressing these concerns noted the risk that Tararua's representation, influence, and local identity could be diminished within a significantly larger organisation.

10.3.2.. Council's iwi partners have indicated a preference for the Wairarapa based on existing connections across the wider Wairarapa region.

10.3.3 Assessment against the purpose and role of local government

10.3.3.. Democratic local decision-making and action

10.3.3... Preliminary representation modelling based on current arrangements indicates Tararua may have approximately two to three representatives within a Wairarapa arrangement. A future Wellington-based arrangement could result in lower representation. Alternative governance and representation arrangements have not been assessed.

10.3.3... This option benefits from existing governance and organisational connections between Tararua District Council and the Wairarapa councils (noted in paragraph 10.3.1.) based on previous collaboration through initiatives such as Waiti Waters Limited.

10.3.3... As echoed through the community feedback, this option is subject to uncertainty regarding future local government arrangements beyond any initial Wairarapa-based structure. A potential future outcome could involve a wider Wellington arrangement. If this occurred, Tararua's representation and influence could be reduced compared with a Wairarapa-only arrangement.

10.3.3.. Social, Economic, Environmental and Cultural Wellbeing

10.3.3... This option has the potential to support social and cultural wellbeing through existing relationships and connections between some communities, councils, and iwi. However, those relationships and connections are not consistent across the district.

10.3.3... This option does not naturally align with existing catchment boundaries and may create additional complexity for regional planning, environmental management, and associated funding arrangements.

10.3.4 While community preference for this option was relatively low, the preliminary assessment indicates there are factors that warrant further investigation. These include existing governance and organisational connections through Waiti Waters Limited, feedback received from iwi partners regarding existing relationships and connections, and the opportunity that this presents to compare financial implications against other options.

10.4 **Option Three - Go North to Hawke's Bay**

10.4.1 This option would involve investigating potential amalgamation with the Central Hawkes Bay, Hastings, Napier and Wairoa councils.

10.4.2 Community Feedback

10.4.2.. Preference for the Hawke's Bay option was relatively low, with approximately 9% of respondents identifying this as their preferred option. Support for this option was generally associated with existing social, economic, employment, and service connections between the northern parts of the district and the wider Hawke's Bay region.

10.4.2.. Through community engagement, submitters expressed concerns that Tararua's rural character and identity may be diminished within a larger organisation, and that decision making and services could feel more distant from local communities.

10.4.3 Assessment against the purpose of local government [S10 LGA]

10.4.3.. Democratic local decision-making and action

10.4.3... Preliminary representation modelling based on current arrangements indicates Tararua may have approximately zero to one representative within a Hawke's Bay arrangement. Alternative governance and representation arrangements have not been assessed.

10.4.3... Though this option benefits from some historical connections between Tararua and Hawke's Bay communities, Council does not currently have any formal governance relationships with the Hawke's Bay councils. This differs from some of the other options under consideration, where existing governance arrangements and collaborative structures provide a foundation for future amalgamation discussions.

10.4.3.. Social, Economic, Environmental and Cultural Wellbeing

10.4.3... This option benefits from some existing social, economic, and service connections between Tararua and Hawke's Bay, particularly within the northern parts of the district. Shared rural and east coast characteristics may also provide some commonality of interests. However, these connections are not consistent across the district.

10.4.3... This option does not naturally align with existing regional boundaries or catchment systems. This may create additional complexity for regional planning, environmental management, and associated funding arrangements.

10.4.4 While the preliminary assessment identifies some existing social, economic, employment, and service connections between parts of the district and the Hawke's Bay region, these factors are outweighed by low community support, the absence of current formal governance arrangements between the councils, and a lack of alignment with current regional boundaries and catchment arrangements. On balance, this option is not recommended for further investigation.

10.5 **Option Four - Go West to Horizons region**

10.5.1 This option would involve investigating potential amalgamation with Palmerston North, Manawatū, Horowhenua, Whanganui, Rangitīkei, and Ruapehu councils.

10.5.2 Community Feedback

10.5.2.. Preference for the Horizons Region option was higher than any other amalgamation option presented through community engagement, with approximately 46% of respondents identifying this as their preferred option. Support for this option was commonly associated with existing regional alignments, including catchment management arrangements, emergency management structures, shared services, and established relationships across the wider region.

10.5.2.. Concerns raised through community engagement focused on representation and local influence within a larger organisation.

10.5.3 Assessment against the purpose of local government [S10 LGA]

10.5.3.. Democratic local decision-making and action

10.5.3... Preliminary representation modelling based on current arrangements indicates Tararua may have approximately one representative within a western arrangement. Alternative governance and representation arrangements have not been assessed.

10.5.3... Existing governance and organisational relationships exist through Horizons Regional Council, Civil Defence Emergency Management arrangements, and the Manawatū-Whanganui Local Authority Shared Services (MWLASS) council-controlled organisation, which already provides shared services across a number of councils within the region. These relationships provide an existing foundation for future amalgamation discussions.

10.5.3.. Social, Economic, Environmental and Cultural Wellbeing

10.5.3... This option aligns with existing service and community connections for parts of the district, particularly Woodville, Pahiatua, and Dannevirke, where Palmerston North is a significant service centre. It also aligns more closely with existing regional boundaries and catchment arrangements, which may support environmental management outcomes.

10.5.4 The community preference for this option was higher than any other amalgamation option presented through community engagement, the preliminary assessment also identifies a number of factors that warrant further investigation. These include existing governance and organisational relationships, alignment with existing service and community connections for parts of the district, and alignment with current regional boundaries and catchment arrangements. On balance, these factors support the option remaining under consideration for further investigation.

10.6 **Option Five - Split the District**

10.6.1 This option would involve different parts of Tararua aligning with different neighbouring areas, rather than the district remaining together as a single entity.

10.6.2 Community feedback

10.6.2.. Preference for the split district option was relatively low, with approximately 16% of respondents identifying this as their preferred option. Through community engagement, submitters expressed concern that dividing the district between multiple regions would result in the loss of Tararua's identity and create additional complexity for communities. Some submitters also questioned whether the option would be supported through the Government's reform process.

10.6.3 Preliminary consideration against the Government's assessment criteria indicates this option may face challenges in relation to deliverability and implementation

practicality, particularly given the complexity associated with dividing the district and subsequently incorporating different parts into multiple local authority structures. Had there been strong community support for this option, further assessment may have been warranted. However, this was not reflected through the community engagement undertaken and, as a result, the option is not recommended for further investigation.

10.7 **Option Six – Fight for a better option**

10.7.1 This option was presented to the community as an opportunity to express support for greater flexibility within the reform process, including alternatives to compulsory amalgamation. Participants supporting this option were also encouraged to identify any amalgamation options they considered worthy of further investigation.

10.7.2 Community feedback

10.7.2.. Support received for this option through community engagement, had approximately 46% of respondents identifying it as their preferred option. Feedback reflected concerns regarding the proposed timeframe for decision-making, the limited range of options available for consideration, and a desire for communities to have a greater role in shaping future local government arrangements.

10.7.3 While this option does not identify a preferred amalgamation arrangement, the feedback received is relevant to Council's ongoing engagement with Government and other stakeholders regarding the reform process. This does not preclude Council from continuing to investigate amalgamation options concurrently.

11. **Consultation**

11.1 In assessing the options available to Council in response to the Government announcement regarding local government reform, Council is required under sections 78 of the Local Government Act 2002 to consider the views and preferences of affected and interested persons.

11.2 At present, there is no statutory basis for the Head Start pathway, with any legislation to enable the implementation of approved proposals to reorganise the structure of local government not likely to be introduced until 2027. This means that there is no current exemption from the existing decision-making requirements under the LGA, including those in Part 6.

11.3 Appropriate compliance with part 6 of the LGA may involve consultation, although there is no strict obligation to consult, and the Head Start pathway material does not expressly contemplate extensive consultation. Without consultation it is challenging to have confidence that there is an understanding of community views on this matter, requiring a balancing between the significance of this decision and wish to have the community's views and the practical ability to consult, given the time that has been allowed to develop and submit a proposal.

- 11.4 Under the Council’s policy a decision to submit a proposal under the Head Start process would be considered significant.
- 11.5 For that reason, Council determined it must undertake engagement with the community to understand community views and preferences before making a decision about whether to submit a proposal under the Head Start process.
- 11.6 The 9 August 2026 deadline imposed significant limitations on the ability for Council to undertake comprehensive consultation (including the usual 4-6 weeks that Council would allow for the community to provide feedback on a matter of such significance), let alone the ability to prepare the information that would be required for such consultation.
- 11.7 However, Council considered that the importance of quickly understanding the community’s view on this matter in the compressed timeframe, given the political uncertainty that councils that do not submit proposals may be reorganised in any case through the Backstop process, meant that any form of feedback captured, based on the information to hand at the time, would be better than none.
- 11.8 Council implemented targeted, time-limited forms of community engagement to seek the community’s views on the matter, recognising the compressed timeframe. In particular it:
- 11.8.1 Held a series of public “town hall” meetings across the district between 18 and 25 May, in Pahiatua, Woodville, Dannevirke, Eketāhuna, Herbertville, Akitio and Pongaroa, and Norsewood.
- 11.8.2 Held an additional meeting at Pahiatua marae on 27 May at the request of the community.
- 11.8.3 Held meetings with both iwi, Rangitāne o Tamaki nui-ā-Rua and Ngāti Kahungunu ki Tāmaki-nui-a-Rua.
- 11.8.4 Met with Federated Farmers to understand its perspective.
- 11.8.5 Published messaging explaining the Government’s proposal regarding amalgamation on Council Facebook, Instagram and Website pages, at service centres and in the Bush Telegraph newspaper, advertising the public meetings and online and in-person feedback channels.
- 11.8.6 Collected feedback from in-person and online forms, the results and analysis of which are included in the assessment of options at paragraph 10 and as outlined in the Community Feedback Dashboard at Attachment 2.
- 11.9 Council’s engagement acknowledged that all information was not yet known, including the potential rating impacts and governance structures of any option. Council sought the views of community to enable it to narrow down the options so that targeted financial modelling could be undertaken for those options which the community viewed as the “least bad” or most likely to work for the community.

- 11.10 In total, Council received 409 responses. More than 550 people attended meetings across the district. Council captured feedback from northern, central, coastal and southern communities, iwi and Māori.
- 11.11 Further engagement with the community is anticipated as Council progresses through this process and further information becomes available. A communications plan is in development and will be included in the next report to Council on this matter.

12. Information Required to Progress Remaining Options

- 12.1 Should Council determine that one or more options warrant further investigation, additional work would be required before any decision is made regarding participation in the Head Start process. This will include:
- 12.1.1 engagement with neighbouring councils regarding their willingness to participate and preferred future arrangements,
- 12.1.2 financial modelling, and
- 12.1.3 further engagement with iwi and communities.
- 12.2 Once this work has been completed, Council will be in a position to consider whether a preferred option should be identified for further consideration against the government criteria for the Head Start process.
- 12.2.1 Council would also need to complete an assessment of any potential inconsistencies with Council policies and plans under section 80 of the LGA.

13. Conclusion

- 13.1 Having considered the community feedback received, the purpose and role of local government under section 10 and 11 of the Local Government Act 2002, it is recommended that Council continue to investigate Options Two (Go South to Wairarapa) and Four (Go West to the Manawatū Whanganui Region).
- 13.2 The recommended options were identified as the strongest candidates for further investigation based on a combination of existing governance and organisational relationships and support expressed through either community or stakeholder engagement. Retaining both options also provides Council with the opportunity to compare the potential financial, governance, representation, service delivery, and implementation implications of each option before any future decisions are required.
- 13.3 On balance, officers do not recommend options three (go north to Hawke's Bay) and five (split the district) for further investigation. Neither option received strong support through community and stakeholder engagement. Option three lacked existing governance relationships and alignment with current regional arrangements, while option five presented significant deliverability and

implementation challenges. As a result, officers consider there is limited justification for allocating further resources to investigating these options.

- 13.4 Community engagement undertaken through this process demonstrated a high level of public interest in local government reform. The feedback received highlighted the importance the community places on local representation, community identity, and maintaining influence over future local government arrangements.
- 13.5 The community also expressed strong support for option six (fight for a better option), signalling a desire for greater flexibility within the reform process and concern regarding the proposed timeframe for decision making. While it is recommended that Council continues to investigate amalgamation options concurrently, this feedback should continue to inform Council's engagement with Government and other stakeholders as the reform process progresses.
- 13.6 No decision regarding amalgamation, participation in a head start process, or reliance on any future backstop process is being sought through this report. A further report will be presented to Council prior to 9 August 2026 to provide updated information, any additional analysis undertaken, and any recommendations regarding Council's participation in the Head Start process.

Attachments

- 1 [↓](#). Letter to Hon Simon Watts re Local Government Reforms - 3 June 2026
- 2 [↓](#). Community Feedback Dashboard - LG Reform - June 2026



3 June 2026

Hon Simon Watts Minister of Local Government
By email: S.Watts@ministers.govt.nz

Dear Minister Watts

Thank you for taking the time to speak with me again regarding the Government's local government reform programme. I appreciated the opportunity to discuss the concerns being raised in our communities and your willingness to continue that dialogue.

The Tararua District Council wants to play a constructive role in improving local government. We recognise the challenges facing the sector and support efforts to create a system that is more efficient, affordable, and capable of delivering for communities over the long term.

Since the Government's announcement, we have held nine well attended community meetings across the Tararua District. Several concerns have been consistently raised.

The most significant is the proposed three-month timeframe for developing Head Start proposals. Many people question whether decisions of this magnitude can be properly considered within such a short period. There is also considerable uncertainty about the Back Stop process and what it may mean in practice for communities.

A recurring theme throughout these discussions has been the importance people place on localism. There is support for reforms that improve efficiency and outcomes, but equally strong concern about any changes that could weaken local voice, local representation, and local decision-making. Our communities want assurance that these principles will remain central to any future arrangements.

Tararua District Council · Dannevirke · Woodville · Pahiatua · Eketāhuna

26 Gordon Street PO Box 115 Dannevirke 4942 Tararua Tel: 06 374 4080 email: scott.gilmore@tararuadc.govt.nz



We support councils and regions that have already undertaken substantial work on reorganisation being given the opportunity to move more quickly through the Head Start process. However, others may require more time to develop solutions that are durable, address the challenges reform is intended to solve, and retain strong local governance and accountability.

During our conversation, you indicated that the Back Stop process is intended to operate more closely to the original Simplifying Local Government proposal than has been perceived following some recent commentary. You also offered to provide clarification in writing that may help alleviate some of the concerns being expressed by communities. I welcome that offer and would appreciate clarification on the following matters:

1. Is the Back Stop process intended to operate broadly in line with the original Simplifying Local Government proposal consulted on earlier this year, including the use of Combined Territory Boards and up to two years to develop regional reorganisation plans?
2. Is the Back Stop process intended to be collaborative in nature, allowing councils and communities to genuinely shape future arrangements, or does the Government envisage particular outcomes that regions will be expected to adopt and may have imposed on them rather than through community consultation?
3. Will the Government remain open to different models and solutions emerging from councils, provided they can demonstrate that they meet the Government's assessment criteria of deliverability, support for the new planning system, simplified local governance and economies of scale?
4. Can the Government provide assurance that future arrangements developed through either the Head Start or Back Stop processes will continue to prioritise maintaining local voice, including fair and effective representation and decision-making at the local level?




Thank you again for your willingness to engage on these matters. I look forward to your response.

Yours sincerely



Scott Gilmore
Mayor of the Tararua District

REFORM OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT
Results of Community Conversations
Last updated 4 Jun 2026







 409 Total responses	 240 With comments	 Go west / Fight for better Leading options
---	---	--

COMMUNITY VIEWS

Note: From 19 May onwards following feedback, respondents could select more than one option, so the number of total responses number and chart totals may differ.



EMERGING THEMES

 <p>Fear of losing our local voice People worry Tararua will be drowned out at a bigger council table, with rural roads, small-town services, and local identity getting left behind.</p>	 <p>The timeline feels rushed and unfair Three months is seen as far too short to make a decision of this size, with key details about rates, seats, and services still unanswered.</p>
 <p>The district doesn't fit neatly in one direction Tararua is too geographically spread to move as one block, with Pahiatua leaning west, Dannevirke north, and Eketahuna south..</p>	 <p>Worry about paying for other councils' problems Many fear being dragged into the debt and infrastructure backlogs of larger neighbours, particularly Wellington's water pipes, and Hawke's Bay's cyclone recovery costs.</p>
 <p>Palmy is our city People point to geography, shared catchments, emergency response, and everyday connections as reasons Palmerston North is the natural fit.</p>	 <p>Iwi and catchments matter Respondents raised the importance of aligning with councils that already have strong Iwi relationships and shared river catchment responsibilities.</p>