



8 August 2026

Hon Simon Watts
Minister of Local Government

By email: S.Watts@ministers.govt.nz

Tēnā koe Minister Watts

Manawatū-Whanganui – Participating council response to the Simplifying Local Government process

We write collectively as the Mayors of the participating councils of the Manawatū-Whanganui region to outline our collective position and intended way forward in response to the Government's Simplifying Local Government process.

Our councils have heard clearly from our communities. They expect us to take the reform of local government seriously, but they also expect us to take the time to understand the problems being solved, test the benefits and trade-offs, protect local voice, and recognise the different circumstances of each district and city.

We also recognise that individual councils may choose to write separately to you to outline their own local context, community feedback, reform interests or formal position. Where that occurs, those letters should be read as that council's position, while this letter should be read as setting out the shared regional process and the areas of common ground between participating councils.

For that reason, five of the seven territorial authorities in the region have agreed to work together through a locally led regional process. This is not an application to enter the Head Start pathway. It is a practical response to the Government's broader reform challenge, recognising the difficulty of aligning eight councils at pace without a history of reorganisation thinking to draw from, and is intended to ensure that the wider region is organised, proactive and able to provide Government with a credible view of the options, risks and opportunities before more formal decisions are required.

The **attached** Memorandum of Understanding sets out the framework the councils intend to use. It provides for a Regional Working Party of mayors and appointed representatives, a Chief Executive Steering Group, a Technical Working Group, and an independent facilitator to support disciplined progress, constructive challenge and clear decision points. This has been adopted and signed by all participating councils.

To date, the councils have completed the initial work needed to establish a common direction. This includes confirming the need for a shared regional process, identifying the councils that wish to participate, agreeing the broad purpose and principles for collaboration, recognising the role of Horizons Regional Council in supporting regional knowledge and transition planning, and setting out an indicative work programme.

The work programme is designed to move at pace, but not at the expense of good process. It will develop a shared evidence base, identify district-specific interests and non-negotiables, test regional, sub-regional and relevant cross-boundary options, consider engagement and

consultation requirements, and enable each council to make an informed decision on whether to proceed to a more detailed proposal or conclude the process. Our approach also recognises that iwi, hapū, mana whenua and Treaty settlement responsibilities must be considered early and properly. These relationships and obligations are place-based, statutory and enduring, and they need to be understood as part of any credible discussion about future local government arrangements.

We also recognise that the participating councils do not all start from the same position. Each council has its own community of interest, neighbouring relationships, growth pressures, infrastructure challenges, financial context and appetite for change. Some councils may need to test local, sub-regional or cross-boundary options because those relationships are relevant to their communities. The MOU does not prevent that. Instead, it provides a way for those options to be surfaced, tested transparently against agreed criteria, and understood alongside regional options before any council makes a formal decision. It also provides the opportunity for other councils to sign up to the MOU and work with the initial five signatories in response to the Government's Simplifying Local Government process.

Our intention is to provide Government with a clear regional direction at the conclusion of the proposed work programme. That update will set out the evidence base, the options tested, the key benefits and trade-offs, the engagement and consultation considerations, and the next decisions required from individual councils. This will give Government visibility of our locally led approach as it considers its wider local government reform programme.

We would welcome ongoing engagement with officials as this work progresses, including early confirmation of Government contact points, any matters where central government guidance would assist, and any flexibility that may be needed to support a robust locally led process.

We are not waiting for decisions to be made for us. We are taking responsibility for working through the issues in a way that is organised, evidence-based and respectful of the communities we serve. We consider this a responsible approach for participating councils in the Manawatū-Whanganui region and a constructive contribution to the Government's reform objectives.

Yours sincerely



Andrew Tripe
Mayor
Whanganui District Council



Weston Kirton
Mayor
Ruapehu District Council



Michael Ford
Mayor
Manawatū District Council



Scott Gilmore
Mayor
Tararua District Council



Andy Watson
Mayor
Rangitikei District Council



Memorandum of Understanding

Regional collaboration on a locally led response to the Government's Simplifying Local Government process

Dated: 7 August 2026

Parties: This Memorandum of Understanding is between the councils of the Manawatū-Whanganui region listed below, together with any other council that is agreed by the parties to participate in the regional work programme:

- Manawatū District Council;
- Rangitikei District Council;
- Ruapehu District Council;
- Taranaki District Council; and
- Whanganui District Council.

1. Purpose

The purpose of this MOU is to provide a simple agreed framework for the participating councils of the Manawatū-Whanganui region to work together on a proactive, locally led response to the Government's Simplifying Local Government process.

The parties intend this MOU to demonstrate to Government that the participating councils of the region are organised, taking the reform challenge seriously, and moving proactively through a disciplined process rather than waiting for decisions to be made for it.

The parties intend to work constructively and at pace to further understand the reform context, develop a shared evidence base, test potential regional and sub-regional options, and identify whether there is a credible pathway that could be advanced in the interests of the region's communities.

This MOU does not commit any council to a preferred structural option, to submitting a proposal to Government, or to any future reorganisation decision. Formal decisions remain with each council.

While not included in the MOU it is understood and agreed that Horizons Regional Council will support the all councils in the Manawatū-Whanganui region including those working under this MoU because its regional functions, data and sector expertise will help councils test options, manage transition risks and retain regional knowledge as Government-signalled changes to regional councils progress toward 2028.

It is acknowledged that at the time of signing, not all councils in the Manawatū-Whanganui region have chosen to participate in this approach. This MOU does not however preclude councils who are not currently signatories from entering into the work at a later date.

2. Shared principles

The shared principles are intended to support a disciplined, constructive and locally led regional process that helps councils test options, understand trade-offs, maintain community confidence and decide whether there is a credible pathway for further work.

The key principles that support this work are:

- Locally led: the work will be led by councils, informed by local context, local identity and community priorities.
- Evidence-based: options will be tested against clear data and key information, including service delivery, financial, workforce, governance and transition implications.
- Iwi, mana whenua and settlement responsibilities: the process will recognise the relationships, statutory responsibilities, Treaty settlement commitments and place-based obligations that councils hold with iwi, hapū and mana whenua, and ensure these are considered early in any option development or transition planning.
- Clear problem definition: the process will identify the problems any option is intended to solve, the benefits sought, the trade-offs involved, and the evidence needed before councils move to any more developed proposal.
- Transparent: councils will keep their elected members and communities appropriately informed as the work develops.
- Respectful of difference: councils may have different starting points, risks, priorities and levels of appetite for change.
- Practical and timely: the process will focus on the information needed to make good decisions within the time available.
- No predetermined outcome: participation in this MOU does not imply support for any particular option.
- Recognition of local pathways: the process will recognise that individual councils may have different communities of interest, neighbouring relationships, growth pressures and reform options. Participation in this MOU does not prevent any council from exploring local, sub-regional or cross-boundary options where those are relevant to its community.

3. Scope of collaboration

The parties agree to continue to collaborate on a short regional work programme that may include:

- confirming the reform context, Government expectations and relevant timeframes;
- confirming a common evidence base for the region, including district profiles and existing regional arrangements;
- identifying a longlist and then shortlist of realistic regional or sub-regional options;
- testing options against agreed criteria, including local voice, service delivery, affordability, implementation risk and regional outcomes;
- engaging with mayors, elected members, iwi and hapū partners, and communities in a way agreed by each council;
- identifying district-specific interests, non-negotiables, communities of interest and potential cross-boundary relationships that need to be understood before any regional or sub-regional option is advanced;
- preparing advice for councils on whether to continue, pause, refine or withdraw from the process.

4. Governance and working arrangements

The parties agree to use a simple governance structure that provides political oversight, executive coordination, technical support and independent facilitation, while ensuring all formal decisions remain with individual councils.

Group / role	Membership	Role
Regional Working Party	Mayor/Chair of each participating council and one additional representative appointed by resolution of that council.	Provides political oversight, tests emerging direction, supports alignment between councils, and keeps the process grounded in local community interests. It does not make formal decisions unless specifically authorised by councils.
Independent Facilitator	Appointed by agreement of the parties.	Challenges thinking, holds parties to the agreed process and timeframes, drives progress toward clear outcomes, and supports constructive conversations where councils have different starting points, risks and levels of appetite for change.
Chief Executive Steering Group	Chief executive of each participating council or their nominee.	Provides executive oversight, guides scope, sequencing, resourcing and risk management, and supports advice to the Regional Working Party and reporting to councils.
Technical Working Group	Senior officers and technical staff from participating councils, as agreed.	Coordinates information, maintains the timeline, prepares common material, supports council workshops and provides technical input to the Chief Executive Steering Group.
Individual councils	Each participating council.	Remain responsible for their own governance advice, legal advice, engagement approach and formal decisions.

5. Draft timeline

Through this phased work programme, the parties intend to provide Government with a clear regional position and intended next steps at the conclusion of the process.

That will include the shared evidence base, the options tested, the key benefits and trade-offs, the engagement and consultation considerations, and the decisions required from individual councils. This will give Government visibility of the region's locally led approach as it considers its wider local government reform programme.

The parties intend to commence Phase 1 of the work programme promptly. The pace and urgency of subsequent phases will be reviewed following the Central Government elections.

Timing	Focus	Outputs
Phase 1	Confirm mandate and mobilise	Confirm participating councils, agree this MOU, establish the Regional Working Party, confirm the Chief Executive Steering Group, agree the process for appointing the independent facilitator, and provide Government with a concise regional statement confirming councils are working together on a locally led process. Confirm Government contact points, the approach for ongoing engagement with

Timing	Focus	Outputs
		officials, and any areas where central government guidance or flexibility may be required. Confirm that each council will identify its Significance and Engagement Policy requirements early in the process.
Phase 2	Set up, evidence base and engagement approach	Appoint the independent facilitator, settle the detailed workplan, confirm information requirements, prepare district and regional profiles, and identify existing shared arrangements, common pressures, opportunities and constraints. Develop a shared engagement approach, including how elected members, iwi and hapū partners, key stakeholders and communities will be kept informed while each council considers its own significance and engagement obligations. Each council also identifies its key local priorities, communities of interest, neighbouring relationships, non-negotiables and any alternative options it wants understood through the process.
Phase 3	Develop options	Develop a longlist of regional and sub-regional options, agree assessment criteria, identify information gaps, and test the first cut of options with the Working Party and Chief Executive Steering Group. Identify whether any options are likely to trigger higher levels of significance, consultation or community interest for individual councils, and whether any local, sub-regional or cross-boundary options need to be retained for further testing.
Phase 4	Test, refine and engage	Refine the longlist to a manageable shortlist, prepare high-level implications for each option, identify areas of alignment and disagreement, and hold elected member workshops in a format agreed by each council. Begin targeted engagement with iwi and hapū partners and key stakeholders where appropriate, and confirm what further consultation planning may be required if an option is developed further.
Phase 5	Interim direction	Prepare an interim regional report setting out the evidence base, shortlist, assessment criteria, key risks, implementation issues, engagement considerations and matters requiring further work. Each council considers whether the process remains useful, whether any option should continue to be developed, and whether further community engagement or formal consultation planning is likely to be required. Provide Government officials with an interim progress update and identify any matters requiring clarification, guidance or support.
Phase 6	Further analysis and consultation planning	Undertake further targeted analysis on any options that remain live, including governance, representation, local voice, financial implications, transition requirements, workforce impacts and service delivery implications. Prepare the outline of any engagement or consultation programme that may be needed, including regional material, local council material, timing, decision points and statutory requirements.

Timing	Focus	Outputs
Phase 7	Prepare advice and engagement material	Prepare draft advice for each council, including options, benefits, risks, estimated costs, implementation considerations, engagement requirements and recommended next steps. Prepare draft engagement or consultation material if a more developed option is to be advanced, with common regional messaging and locally tailored information for each council.
Phase 8	Council decisions on next steps	Each council considers whether to continue to a more detailed proposal, amend the scope, pause, withdraw, or conclude the collaborative process. Each council also determines, based on its own Significance and Engagement Policy and statutory obligations, whether formal consultation or further engagement is required before any next phase. If there is sufficient alignment, the parties agree the next phase, including governance, resourcing, engagement and any further advice required, and provide Government with the regional position and intended next steps.

6. Costs and resourcing

Each council will meet its own internal costs unless otherwise agreed. Any shared external costs, including specialist advice, programme support or engagement material, will only be incurred where agreed in writing by the participating councils. The basis for allocating those costs will be agreed separately before costs are committed.

7. Status of this MOU

This MOU records the parties' shared intentions. It is not legally binding and does not create legal obligations between the parties, except in relation to any shared costs that are expressly agreed separately in writing.

Nothing in this MOU limits the statutory responsibilities, decision-making powers or discretion of any council.

For the avoidance of doubt, this MOU is not exclusive. It does not prevent any council from considering, discussing or testing other reform pathways, including local, sub-regional or cross-boundary options, provided those discussions are managed in good faith and do not undermine the agreed regional work programme.

Where councils are considering local, sub-regional or cross-boundary options, those options should be identified through the agreed work programme so their implications can be understood alongside regional options.

8. Information, communications and confidentiality

The parties will share data and key information in good faith for the purposes of the work programme.

Information provided by one council will not be publicly released by another council without prior discussion, unless release is required by law.

The parties will seek to align key messages where possible, while recognising that each council is accountable to its own community and may need to communicate in a way that reflects local context.

9. Review, withdrawal and term

This MOU will commence on the date it is signed by the parties and will continue until 30 June 2027, unless extended, replaced or ended earlier by agreement.

Any council may withdraw from this MOU by giving written notice to the other parties.

Withdrawal does not affect any shared costs already agreed in writing before the date of withdrawal.

10. Signatures

Signed for and on behalf of each participating council by its authorised representative:



Andrew Tripe
Mayor
Whanganui District Council



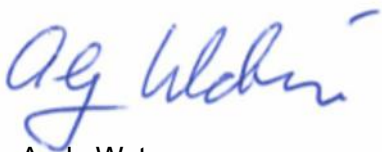
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