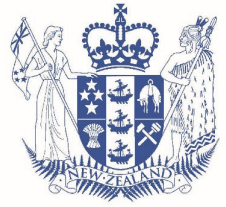


Hon Simon Watts

Minister of Climate Change
Minister of Local Government
Minister of Revenue
Minister for Auckland



5 May 2026

Dear Mayors

ANNOUNCEMENT OF HEAD START PATHWAY FOR SIMPLIFYING LOCAL GOVERNMENT

We are writing to provide you with early notice of the Government's decision to introduce a Head Start pathway to enable fast progress on proposals for Simplifying Local Government.

We appreciate that your council may wish to be involved in submitting an outline proposal for the Head Start. We wanted to give your organisation an indication of what will be announced and where further information can be found, to support swift proposal development.

Head Start pathway

Submissions on the Simplifying Local Government proposal highlighted a desire from councils for greater flexibility, including the opportunity to move quickly where ready. We have listened to your feedback, and today we are announcing the new Head Start pathway for Simplifying Local Government.

The Head Start pathway is a voluntary, streamlined option for councils that are ready to progress regional reorganisation now. The pathway will be open to territorial and/or unitary authorities that want to come together to form new unitary authorities. The Head Start is designed for those local authorities that are ready and willing to move immediately, rather than waiting for wider, compulsory reform after the 2028 local elections.

Whether councils apply to use the Head Start pathway or not, delivering the new planning system will remain core business. This pathway is about removing uncertainty and giving your council the confidence to plan and deliver now.

Instead of developing a regional reorganisation plan, councils will submit an outline proposal focused on structural change. Proposals can cover all or part of a region, and may include the formation of one, or a small number of, unitary authorities. Successful proposals will be implemented ahead of the 2028 local elections.

Proposals will be due by 9 August 2026. The Government will decide by September 2026 which proposals will proceed to detailed design before making final decisions in 2027. Detailed information on the Head Start pathway—including proposal requirements and assessment criteria—will be available on the Department of Internal Affairs website: dia.govt.nz/simplifying-local-government.

Backstop and broader reform

Councils that do not progress through Head Start will continue to focus on delivering the new planning system, including developing the first generation of plans. Reform for those councils will not occur until after the 2028 local elections, through the compulsory backstop process. Regional councillors will remain in their roles until the 2028 local elections.

This gives councils more time to concentrate on planning system implementation before any mandatory changes take effect, while still providing a strong indication of when and where future reform will occur. The Government will make final decisions on the detail of the backstop approach in 2027.

Get in touch

Local government partnership directors at the Department of Internal Affairs are your primary points of contact on the Head Start pathway. Alternatively, you can email simplifyinglocalgovernment@dia.govt.nz.

Thank you for your engagement so far on Simplifying Local Government. We look forward to receiving outline proposals and working with your council to ensure local government is simpler and more effective in delivering for communities and ratepayers.

Yours sincerely,



Hon Chris Bishop
Minister Responsible for RMA Reform



Hon Simon Watts
Minister of Local Government