

# Zone Three Meeting Report

**Dates:** 26–27 March 2026

**Host:** Stratford District Council

**Location:** Stratford, Taranaki

## 1. Overview of Stratford District

Stratford Township has a population of approximately 6,000 people, supported by around 5,000 rateable properties.

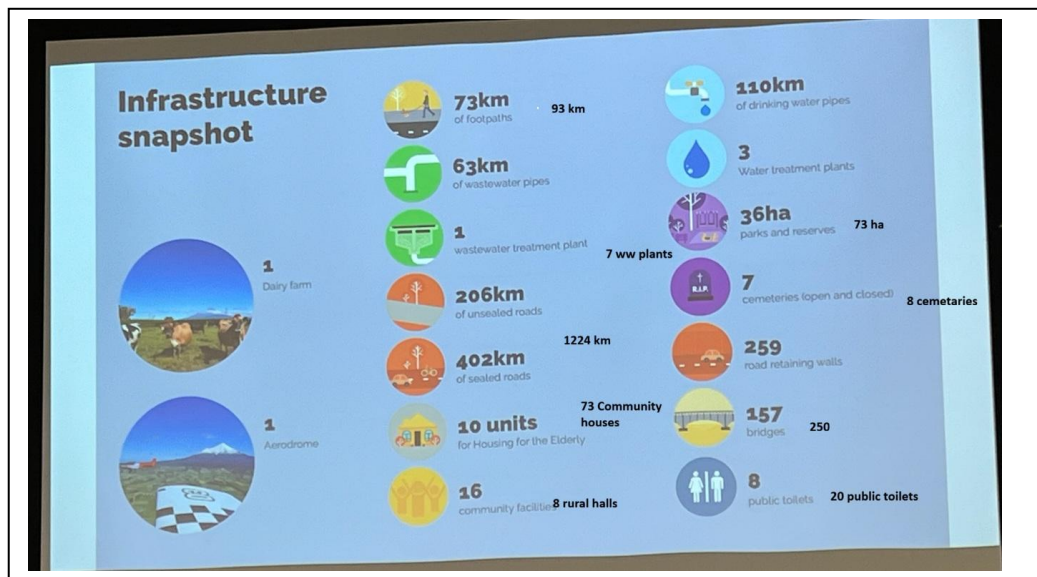
Population across the District is 10,500 (approx. 8000 rateable properties)

Key features of the district include:

- Victoria Stratford Bike Park
- Kings Theatre
- Percy Thomson Gallery
- Taranaki Electricity Trust (TET) / Aurora-related facilities
- Stratford Aquatic Centre



Approximately 50% of the population is employed by several major local industries, including Mainland.



I have added Rangitikei details for comparison.

## 2. Infrastructure and Local Government Challenges

### 2.1 Roading and Transport

- Total of approximately 206 km of unsealed roads, largely forestry-related
- High maintenance costs, often serving very low populations (e.g., single households)
- Around 1,300 km of low-use roads (regionally), with two-thirds unsealed
- 14 km of special roads within the National Park

### 2.2 Bridges

- Ageing bridge infrastructure
- High replacement and maintenance costs
- Many structures serve minimal populations

### 2.3 Water and Environmental Pressures

- Ongoing issues with discharge into local rivers
- Need for improved environmental management and infrastructure investment

## 3. Economic Context

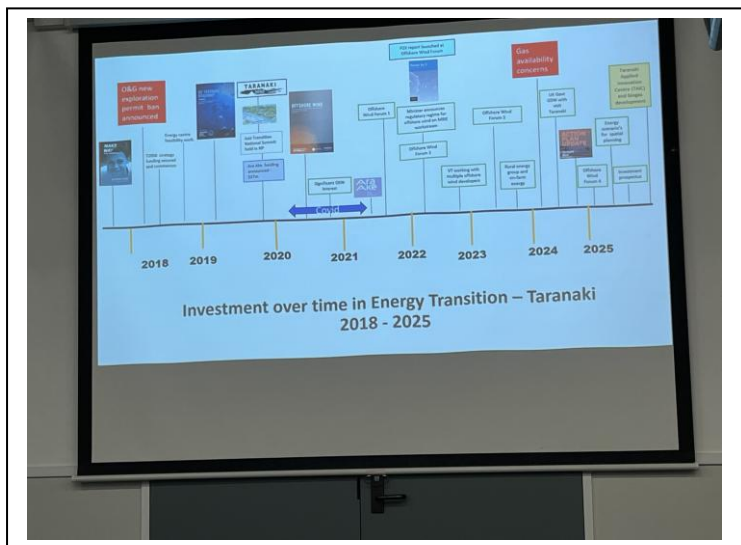
- Taranaki has historically had the highest GDP per capita in New Zealand
- Recent loss of approximately 5,500 jobs due to national policy decisions made without regional consultation

- Resulting impacts include:
  - Population decline pressures/ talent leaving
  - Empty retail premises
- District is considered relatively climate-resilient
- Importance of innovation in solving energy problems – vital for region

## 4. Energy and Innovation

### 4.1 Energy Sector Challenges

- High cost of energy infrastructure:
  - ~\$8 billion to establish a well
  - ~\$8 billion to operate over its lifetime
- Strong emphasis on the need for **policy stability** to support:
  - Oil and gas



- Wind energy development

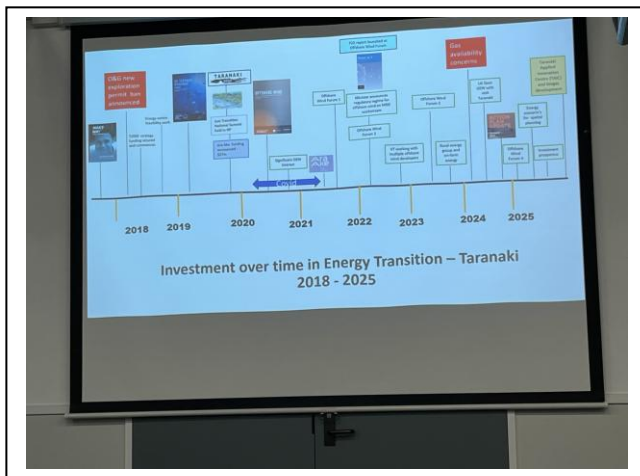
### 4.2 Renewable Energy Opportunities

- Offshore wind potential identified
- Importance of battery storage technology

### 4.3 Decommissioning Issues

- Significant costs associated with decommissioning assets (e.g., Maui gas field)
- Challenges include:
  - Requirement for heavy-lift crane ships
  - Disposal or reuse of large volumes of steel

## 5. Stratford Energy Transition



The district is positioning itself as a renewable energy hub based on four pillars:

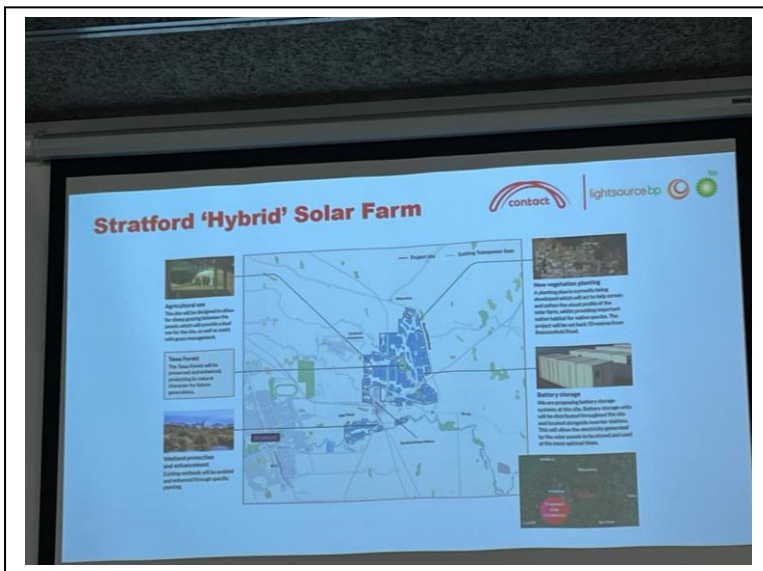
1. Geothermal
2. Battery storage
3. Wind
4. Solar

### 5.1 Solar Development Example

- Compare Large-scale solar development in Christchurch:
  - 250 hectares
  - Powers approximately 36,000 homes
  - Over \$300 million invested
- Enables dual land use (e.g., grazing, crops, honey production)
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### 5.2 Stratford Energy Hub





**Key advantages:**

- Access to grid connections
- Battery storage capability
- Solar generation potential (fixed and tracking panels)
- Battery systems (including containerised solutions)

**Asset lifespan:**

- Batteries: 20–25 years
- Solar panels: up to 40 years

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## **6. Tourism and Funding Pressures**

- Region attracts approximately 1 million visitors annually (cycling, Great Walks)
  - Small rating base (~8,000 ratepayers) limits funding capacity
  - Need for:
    - Dedicated and consistent tourism funding
    - Support for both capital and operational costs
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## **7. Regulatory and Community Issues**

- Dog control challenges:
    - Aggressive dogs
    - Poor ownership practices
  - Need for stronger enforcement and resources
  - Increasing compliance and regulatory burden
  - Rising infrastructure costs:
    - ~30% increase in piping costs (oil-based materials)
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## **8. Local Government Reform and Key Themes**

### **8.1 MANAWATU**

#### **Strong Support for Localism**

- Local decision-making
- Local ownership and accountability
- Representation aligned to communities

#### **8.2 Concerns Raised**

- Unfunded mandates from central government
- Lack of genuine consultation
- GST impacts on council costs
- Rural transport service funding gaps



# Localism

- Decisions should be made closest to communities
- Strong preference for local ownership and control
- 16 community + 9 marae committees
- Local government delivers better outcomes





# Rural Bus Services

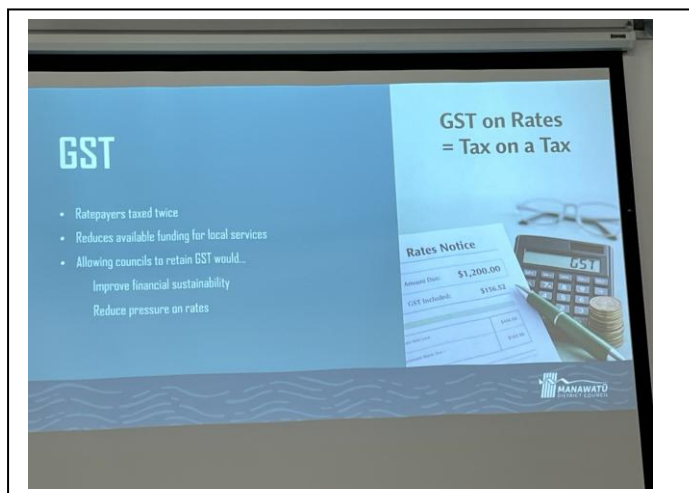
- Loss of school transport affecting families
- Disproportionate impact on rural and village communities
- Impacts...
  - Parents leaving jobs
  - Increased household costs
  - Reduced school attendance



# Unfunded Mandates

- Stop cost shifting to Councils
- Increasing legislation without funding support
- Creates pressure on rates and service levels
- Limits ability to invest in local priorities





## HOROWHENUA

Developing a post election wishlist

Need genuine co-design – currently operating in a vacuum

What is the Vision for next 5 years esp given Future for Local Government got ignored – little respect

Need Social Sector Trials:

Proper funding, proper partnership, test before mandate

## 9. Other Regional Perspectives

### 9.1 Taranaki

- Emphasis on simplicity and “breathing space” from reform pressures
- Need for stability during transition

### 9.2 Central Hawke’s Bay

- Opposition to “one-size-fits-all” solutions
- Strong preference for local implementation
- Support for shared services to improve efficiency

### 9.3 Gisborne

- Population approximately 50% Māori
- Need for long-term (10–30 year) planning
- Concerns about:
  - Short-term policy thinking
  - Population-based funding disadvantaging smaller regions
- Strong call for genuine partnerships with central government

### 9.4 Tararua

- I. Cost reduction for low population Districts

Eg Cost of Audit

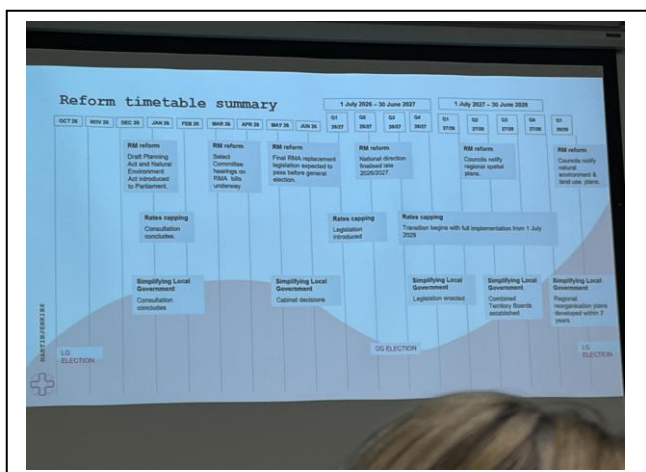
LTP cost \$500k (1.32% of rates), Annual plan \$250k (0.66% of rates)

- II. Need local solutions ie bigger is not necessary better
- III. Communities of interest is very important
- IV. Model needs to be 'fit for purpose'
- V. Need good partnerships

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## 10. Governance and Partnership Issues

- Need for co-design with central government
- Current perception of operating "in a vacuum"
- Limited recognition of local government input
- Importance of:
  - Social sector trials before mandates
  - Proper funding and partnership models



### 10.1 Representation and Engagement

- Low voter turnout (~30%)
- Need to improve democratic engagement
- Importance of understanding local context in decision-making

### 10.2 Reform Priorities

- Flexible rates capping
- Reduced compliance burden
- Simplified systems
- Greater efficiency through shared services (e.g., IT savings of ~\$6 million in one case)

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## 11. Future Planning and Strategic Direction

- Call for long-term, generational thinking (10–30 years)
  - Focus on:
    - Legacy outcomes
    - Sustainable funding
    - Integrated partnerships
  - Avoid:
    - Short-term political cycles
    - Reactive decision-making
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## **12. Three Waters / CTB Concerns**

- Significant workload expected
  - High risk of implementation failure
  - Concern about:
    - National policy inconsistency
    - “Flip-flop” direction from central government
  - Strong message:
    - Pause
    - Engage meaningfully with communities
    - Co-design solutions
- If we continue there are going to have negative implications
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## **13. Financial Pressures**

- Audit and compliance costs are high:
    - Long Term Plan (LTP) audit: ~\$500,000 (~1.32% of rates)
    - Annual plan audit: ~\$250,000 (~0.66% of rates)
  - Concerns that:
    - CPI is not an appropriate measure for councils
    - Producer Price Index (PPI) better reflects actual cost pressures
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## 14. Key Messages

- Local government requires:
  - Sustainable and predictable funding
  - Reduced compliance burden
  - Genuine partnership with central government
- Strong emphasis on:
  - Localism
  - Long-term thinking
  - Infrastructure resilience
  - Energy transition opportunities
- Urgent need to:
  - Stop deferring critical decisions
  - Align policy with on-the-ground realities

Please Karen Cowper for link to full set of slides.