

AI Data Centres Draft Position Statement

Tariq Ashraf and Joy Moir

29 September 2026

waikatoregion.govt.nz

Workshop purpose

1. To develop WRC's stance on the development of AI data centres in the Waikato region
2. A position statement:
 - States and explains the collective view of the council based on guiding principles and evidence
 - Guides organisational actions
 - Provides a clear record of the council's position for stakeholders, including the community, developers, investors.
 - Informed by international examples of policy, position statements and case studies.

What it is and what it is not

What it is

- A **strategic guidance document** that:
 - helps the council (and other stakeholders) communicate expectations and preferred outcomes for AI data centre development in the region
 - supports WRC's role in planning, consenting, infrastructure discussions, stakeholder engagement, and regional spatial planning.

What it is not

- **NOT a regulatory or statutory document.**
- Does not create legal obligations or planning rules.
- Cannot be used as an independent basis to grant, decline, or impose conditions on resource consents.

All statutory decisions must continue to be based on relevant legislation, policy statements, regional and district plans, and assessment of environmental effects.

AI data centres position statement

- Global artificial intelligence (AI) data centre industry is experiencing exponential growth
- Invest New Zealand campaign to attract offshore investment in AI data centres
- Two of six “advantaged zones for data centre deployment” are in the Waikato region



Principle 1:

Support the long-term interests of the Waikato region

1. AI data centre developments should provide clear, demonstrable and enduring net benefits to the Waikato region and host communities. Proponents must demonstrate how the benefits of a development outweigh its resource demands, environmental effects and opportunity costs, and how the community will be better off as a result. Assessment should consider:
 - a. Direct development benefits, including construction activity, local procurement, contracting opportunities and expenditure within the Waikato region.
 - b. Enduring benefits arising from operations, such as ongoing employment, exports, rates and tax revenue, where these can be evidenced and attributed to the development.
 - c. Broader economic and social benefits, including secondary employment, productivity gains, computing capacity, digital infrastructure, talent attraction and retention, AI capability and skills development, research, innovation and support for regional economic ecosystems.
 - d. Contributions to regional resilience and strategic interests, including business continuity during disruptive events, secure local infrastructure, and sovereign or locally hosted AI capability that reduces dependence on external providers, technologies or decision-making.
 - e. The opportunity costs associated with land, electricity, water, labour, materials, public funding and infrastructure capacity, including alternative uses and any displaced activities or employment.
 - f. Effects on housing affordability, workforce availability, local supply chains, and the scale, quality and location of employment created.
 - g. The distribution of benefits and costs, including who captures the economic value and who bears the associated resource, infrastructure and environmental impacts.
 - h. The extent to which the development supports national, regional and local strategic objectives.

Principle 2:

Locate in the right place

1. The suitability of a site is fundamental to the long-term success and acceptability of an AI data centre. AI data centres must be located where environmental, infrastructure and community impacts can be effectively managed, and where development aligns with broader regional planning objectives.
2. Site selection must consider: natural hazards (such as flood risk, seismic risk), climate risks; electricity infrastructure, telecommunications connectivity, water availability, transport access, landscape values, productive land, biodiversity, wetlands and future growth patterns; potential impacts such as noise, visual effects, traffic, environmental pressures and the cumulative effects.
3. Site selection and design must avoid conflicts wherever practicable and identify, assess and manage conflicts that cannot be avoided, including competition for finite resources, cumulative effects, reverse-sensitivity risks, and effects on the use and enjoyment of surrounding land. Residual costs and effects must be clearly disclosed and included in the assessment of net regional benefit.

Principle 3:

Design for a changing climate

1. All data centres must be resilient to future climate conditions and contribute to the region's long-term adaptation goals.
2. Projects must assess future climate and natural-hazard scenarios, including increasing temperatures, extreme rainfall, flooding, drought, seismic risk, infrastructure disruption and compound or cascading failures. Resilience must be evidenced through transparent, site-specific risk assessments; stated scenarios, time horizons and design assumptions; engineering and operational controls; independent review where proportionate; emergency and business-continuity arrangements; and funded adaptation triggers over the asset life.
3. Developments must identify, fund and manage foreseeable long-term liabilities, including infrastructure renewal, hazard protection, emergency water or power needs, contamination or hazardous-material risks, adaptation works, stranded or obsolete assets, site restoration and decommissioning. These costs and risks must not be transferred to public authorities, ratepayers or future landowners.

Principle 4: Grow the energy system

1. Developers and operators need to demonstrate that they are investing to provide sufficient generation (and transmission, if required) to at least meet their own demand for the expected operational life of the AI data centre.
2. Developers and operators need to demonstrate that additional electricity generation, storage, transmission or distribution capacity, and demand-response capability are funded and delivered in step with each stage of load growth, at a scale sufficient to meet the development's attributable demand without displacing existing users or planned regional electrification.
3. Any renewable electricity claim must show how the proposal adds physical generation, storage, network capability or flexible demand, rather than merely reallocating or contracting existing supply. The development must disclose the location, timing and additionality of new supply and how it supports wider system resilience and the transition to a lower-emissions electricity system.

Principle 5: Steward water responsibly

1. Water is a strategic regional resource that must be carefully managed. AI data centres must use best practicable cooling and water-efficiency solutions suited to the site and local climate, with a strong preference for low-consumption, closed-loop or hybrid systems. Proponents must demonstrate how water demand will be minimised; how potable, recycled, harvested, treated non-potable and, where geographically and environmentally appropriate, seawater options have been assessed; and how cumulative effects on catchments, aquifers, ecosystems and existing users will be managed. For proposals affecting the Waikato and Waipā rivers or their catchments, Te Ture Whaimana and its status in relevant decision-making must be appropriately recognised.
2. Transparency regarding water sources, annual demand, peak demand, and operational performance must form part of ongoing environmental accountability. Climate change, drought, and future water availability must be factored into all planning and design decisions.

Principle 6:

Deliver high environmental performance throughout the full lifecycle

1. Developments must minimise their whole-of-life environmental footprint through efficient design, low-carbon construction, responsible resource use, biodiversity protection, waste minimisation and circular economy principles.
2. Developments must seek opportunities to recover and beneficially use waste heat, reduce embodied emissions, minimise waste generation, and support broader environmental outcomes where appropriate.

Principle 7:

Respect mana whenua and support Māori aspirations

1. Mana whenua have a unique relationship with land, water, natural resources and taonga. AI data centre development must involve meaningful early engagement with iwi and hapū and recognise Māori rights, interests and aspirations. Consideration must include effects on land, water and cultural values; participation in decision-making; economic and capability opportunities; and Māori data sovereignty. Physical hosting in New Zealand must not, by itself, be treated as resolving Māori data-governance, access, control, ownership or sovereignty interests.

Principle 8:

Earn, agree and maintain community trust

1. Social licence is an important component of responsible infrastructure development. Proponents must engage openly from site-selection and concept stages; disclose the full intended build-out, resource demands, uncertainties and trade-offs; fund accessible participation where appropriate; and show how feedback has influenced location, design, construction and operation. Engagement must continue through expansion, material operational change and decommissioning.
2. AI data centres must demonstrate how affected communities will benefit and how noise, vibration, lighting, visual effects, traffic, construction disruption and environmental pressures will be assessed, mitigated, monitored and responded to over time. Proponents must establish an accessible complaints and resolution process and publish commitments, monitoring results and corrective actions.
3. Major AI data centre developments must establish formal, transparent and accountable agreements that provide enduring benefits to affected communities.
4. Community benefits must be agreed in partnership with communities, tangata whenua and local authorities and must address locally identified priorities.

Principle 9:

Pay the full cost of development

1. AI data centres must fund the monetary costs of infrastructure, mitigation, monitoring, compliance, environmental management, adaptation, restoration and decommissioning attributable to their development. Cost-allocation arrangements must be transparent and must not transfer project-attributable financial costs or risks to ratepayers, communities, existing infrastructure users or future generations. Wider environmental, social and opportunity costs are addressed through the net regional benefit assessment under Principle 1.
2. Development must not rely on hidden subsidies or transfer costs, risks or infrastructure burdens to ratepayers, communities, existing infrastructure users or future generations.

Principle 10:

Commit to long-term stewardship

1. AI data centres may involve long-lived buildings and infrastructure alongside rapidly changing computing equipment, ownership models and technology. From an early stage, proponents must disclose the intended operating life and full build-out, and demonstrate long-term planning for infrastructure, operational performance, technology replacement, adaptation, ownership change, repurposing and decommissioning.
2. Decisions must consider both immediate investment and construction outcomes and the facility's costs, benefits and performance over its full life cycle. This includes its relationship with cloud-based and distributed computing options, the degree to which the development supports or constrains local innovation and data control, and future electricity demand, water use, environmental performance and community expectations.

Principle 11:

Demonstrate and report performance transparently

1. Proponents and operators must publish sufficient facility- or campus-level information for communities and decision-makers to understand actual performance against forecasts and commitments over time.
2. Proponents and operators must adopt recognised environmental and energy management systems, establish forecast and commissioned baselines, set measurable targets, and publish results at least annually using consistent boundaries and methods. Reporting must include, where relevant: total and peak electricity demand; IT electricity use; Power Usage Effectiveness (PUE); water use by source and Water Usage Effectiveness (WUE); renewable electricity source and additionality; backup generation and fuel use; greenhouse gas emissions, including Carbon Usage Effectiveness (CUE) where used; cooling performance; waste and electronic equipment recovery; outages and incidents; community commitments; complaints and responses; and progress on corrective actions.
3. Where actual performance differs materially from forecasts, targets or commitments, the operator must publish the variance, corrective actions, responsible party and implementation date. Key metrics and claims must be independently assured at proportionate intervals. Commercial sensitivity must not be used as a blanket reason to withhold information needed to understand regional resource use, effects, costs, benefits or delivery of commitments.

Next Steps

- Finalise Principles based on Councillors feedback from today
- Share with stakeholders for feedback ahead of adoption by council

CONNECT
WITH
US



ourwaikato



/Waikatoregion



waikatoregion.govt.nz