One Waikato

Head Start outline proposal

August 2026

Waikato

Waikato-Waipā river catchment

Waihou-Piako river catchment

Key roads

Railway

Major sea port

Airport

Marine farms

532,100
people in the Waikato

More than
200
iwi and hapū

Approximately **227,026** rateable properties	**10 districts** The population is mostly urban (around 74%)	The Waikato region is **25,000km²**	More than **16,000km** of rivers and streams
Flood infrastructure valued at **$1.1 billion** spread across the Waikato region protecting land that contributes **$2.5 billion** to regional GDP	Two coasts, **1200km** of coastline	**10,000km²** of coastal marine area extending 12 nautical miles out to sea	**450** marine farms
	431,278ha of marine mammal sanctuaries	**70%** of New Zealand's geothermal resources	More than **100 lakes**

GDP by industry

9% Waikato contribution to NZ's GDP

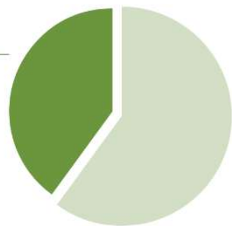
Leader in electricity production

Thermal **1,379MW**	Geothermal **1,074MW**
Wind **64MW**	Hydro **1,531.5MW**

More than any other single region

Critical national transport, freight and logistics corridor

40% of NZ's freight movements



Significant mineral producing area

~20% of NZ's mining GDP

Critical producer of aggregates

Supplying a large proportion of material that supports economic growth in both the Waikato and Auckland regions

Waikato **15.2** tonnes per person

NZ wide **7.2** tonnes per person

Māori asset base

$21.51b in the Waikato

88% from 2018 to 2023

1 Proposal overview

Decisions made in the Waikato have implications well beyond the region itself.

The region's nationally significant strengths contribute approximately 9 per cent of New Zealand's gross domestic product (GDP) and play a critical role in supporting national prosperity, resilience and export performance.

Councils across the Waikato region have been developing a range of proposals for the Head Start process. While those proposals differ in their geographic scope and governance arrangements, many are informed by similar principles and seek to address common challenges.

This proposal seeks to establish a single unitary authority.

It's proposed this authority covers the existing area of the Waikato region to support the long-term needs of its communities while maintaining meaningful local representation and decision-making. The new authority would assume the statutory roles, responsibilities, assets, liabilities and functions currently undertaken by the 11 territorial authorities within the region and Waikato Regional Council.

The proposal recognises that many detailed matters, including governance arrangements, representation, transition planning, Treaty settlement implementation, financial arrangements and organisational design, will require further development during the detailed design phase. Accordingly, this proposal establishes the strategic direction and preferred high-level governance model while recognising that the detailed implementation arrangements will be developed collaboratively with councils, iwi and hapū partners, and central government.

Affected councils and population

The districts affected by this proposal are:

- Hamilton City
- Hauraki
- Matamata-Piako
- Ōtorohanga
- Rotorua (in part)
- South Waikato
- Taupō (in part)
- Thames-Coromandel
- Waikato
- Waipā
- Waitomo (in part).

Collectively, these councils comprise the existing Waikato local government system and represent the full population of the Waikato region – 532,100 people.

Eligibility

Contributing councils

Observer councils

Submitting councils

Strengths of this proposal

- Simplest structure.
- Greatest opportunity to achieve economies of scale and equity of access to core services.
- Strengthens organisational capability by bringing together the full population, rating base, workforce, assets, systems and specialist expertise currently distributed across councils.
- Aligns to resource management reform.
- Accommodates overlapping iwi and hapū interests and reduces fragmentation, while recognising no boundary will align with all iwi and hapū interests.
- Provides the strongest platform for upholding Treaty settlement arrangements.
- Keeps local decisions where they matter most, and authority-wide decisions where they deliver the greatest benefit.
- Delivers a single organisation accountable for regional decisions and outcomes.
- Better aligns governance with the Waikato's principal natural, economic and community systems.
- Supports integrated catchment management, strengthens the integration of land use, water, infrastructure, natural hazard management and transport.
- Provides the strongest platform for partnership with central government.
- Enables uninterrupted service delivery and preserves public confidence during the transition.

2 Why a single unitary authority

In preparing for the Head Start pathway, three options were considered:

- A single unitary authority.
- Two unitary authorities (east/west).
- A sub-regional unitary authority (centred on Hamilton City, Waikato District and Waipā District).

Other options considered by councils in the region have included:

- A King Country unitary authority (Ōtorohanga and Waitomo districts).
- A Central North Island unitary authority (Taupō, Ruapehu, Waitomo, Ōtorohanga and South Waikato districts).

These options have been informed by multi-criteria assessments, governance analysis, sector experts/technical advice, and discussions between councils, iwi and central government. Community views and local priorities have also informed councils' thinking where engagement has occurred.

On balance, a single unitary authority has emerged as the preferred option for the submitters of this proposal and is supported by Waikato Regional Council.

The region functions as an interconnected economic system rather than a collection of separate districts. Hamilton is the principal metropolitan centre, supported by a network of rural, provincial, coastal and lakes communities that each make distinct contributions to the regional economy. Freight movements, labour markets, infrastructure networks, housing, environmental systems and economic activity routinely cross local authority boundaries, reinforcing the importance of regional connectivity for the North Island, of which an efficient and resilient transport system is the backbone.

The Waikato's natural environment has shaped this pattern of development for generations. Its river systems, fertile plains, geothermal resources, coastlines and transport corridors continue to underpin economic growth, environmental stewardship and community wellbeing.

Managing these systems requires integrated planning across land use, fresh water, biodiversity, flood protection, infrastructure and climate adaptation. With an asset base of $1.1 billion, flood infrastructure requires a long-term planning horizon and sustained investment.

Many consented activities are also connected to wider catchment dynamics that extend well beyond district boundaries.

As the Parliamentary Commissioner for the Environment has observed, fragmenting catchment governance risks poorer environmental and economic outcomes. Governance arrangements that better align with natural systems provide greater opportunity for coordinated planning, long-term stewardship and more effective investment. It also provides a simpler, more consistent customer experience that makes doing business easier and more seamless.

The region also has nationally significant Treaty settlement arrangements and enduring partnerships between iwi, local government and the Crown. These relationships are fundamental to the stewardship of the region's natural resources, the management of its waterways, and the long-term prosperity of the Waikato.

A single unitary authority provides an opportunity to strengthen regional coordination while maintaining meaningful local representation and creating a governance model better equipped to support the Waikato's future and maximise its contribution to New Zealand's prosperity.

It is about creating the institutional capability needed to deliver the outcomes the Waikato has already identified for itself: higher productivity, better jobs, improved infrastructure, stronger partnerships with iwi, sustainable management of natural resources, and greater prosperity for future generations.

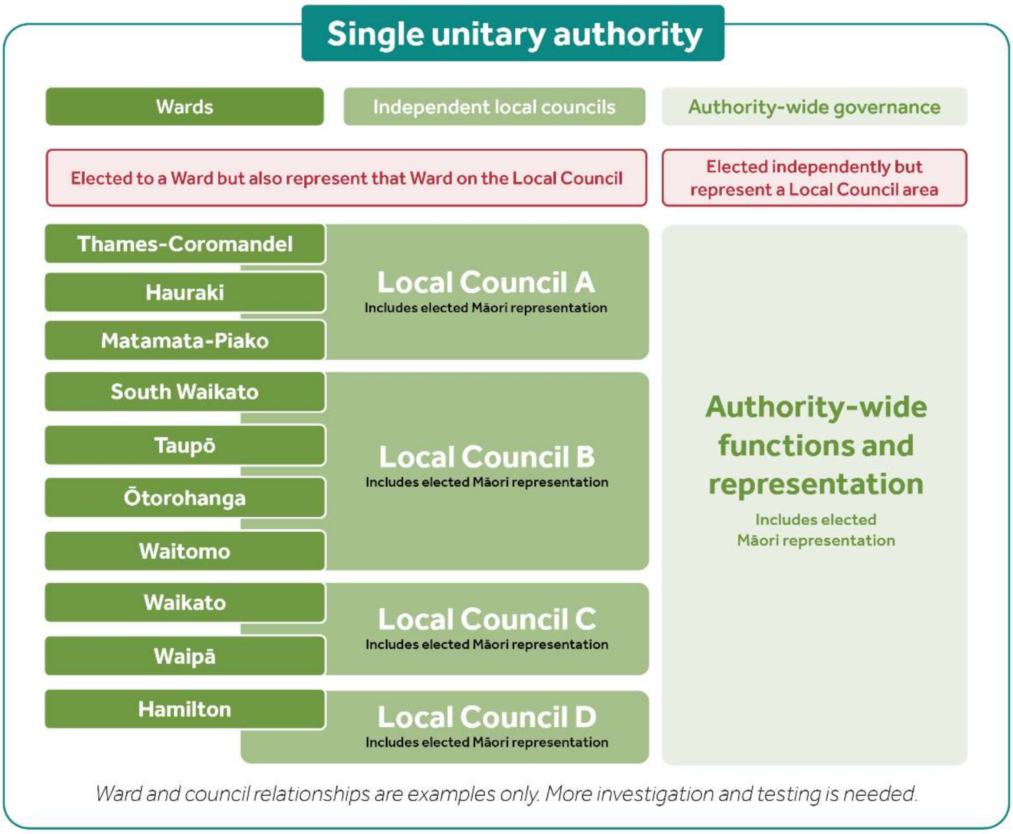
A single unitary authority would provide a stronger platform for turning shared regional aspirations into sustained regional outcomes.

3 What representation could look like

Our proposed governance and representation models for a single unitary authority are based on two core pillars – familiar local geographies and the principle of subsidiarity, ensuring decisions are made as close as possible to the communities they affect. Fair and effective representation is a core consideration, alongside the need to explore new deliberative approaches to foster greater community participation and address growing disengagement in traditional democratic processes.

- ✓ Territorial authority areas form the basis for local wards.
- ✓ Local wards provide the representation and electoral basis for local councils.
- ✓ Local council areas provide the electoral basis for the authority-wide governance layer.
- ✓ Elected Māori representation integrated from the outset as a permanent feature of the governance framework.

The model keeps local decisions where they matter most, and authority-wide decisions where they deliver the greatest benefit.



4 Assessment against Government's criteria

Summary

Table 1 summarises our assessment of the single unitary authority against the five Head Start criteria. More detailed explanations are provided in the sections that follow.

For this proposal, we also assessed whether the functions currently delivered at a regional level are indeed best undertaken regionally, or whether improvements to the system may be made by moving them to a higher (e.g. supra-regional or national) or lower (e.g. sub-regional) level. The analysis considered how those same functions would look if split into multiple unitary authorities in the Waikato region (see Table 2). More detail on this analysis can be provided in the next stage.

While significant detailed work would be required, the proposal for a single unitary authority is considered realistic and achievable within the proposed timeframe.

Table 1

Criteria	How a single unitary authority meets the criteria
Supports the new planning system	• Strongest platform for the planning system • Supports delivery of a stable regional spatial planning process • Enables integrated spatial planning, infrastructure and environmental management • Plans around natural systems and catchments • Maintains continuity during transition
Simpler local governance	• Provides simpler governance and clearer accountability • Reduces duplication and governance interfaces • Provides simplification without unnecessary centralisation • Provides clearer accountability for regional functions • Improves on current governance arrangements
Economies of scale	• A strong financial starting point and financial fairness • Improves operational efficiency and service delivery • Strengthens infrastructure and asset management • Strengthens financial resilience and long-term affordability
Maintains local voice	• Principles for representation • Balances regional governance and local voice • Supports Māori participation and local relationships • Provides for representation that reflects Waikato's diversity • Strengthens local representation with real authority • Provides local presence and access • Balances equity of access with local flexibility
Deliverability	• A practical and achievable implementation pathway • A staged transition • Maintains service continuity • Democratic legitimacy

Table 2: Analysis of regional functions

🟢 Generally workable 🟡 Workable with mitigation/shared services 🟠 Significant challenges 🔴 Poor fit/substantial risk

Function	Best fit	East/ West	Metro	King Country
Customer, community and services				
Iwi Māori partnerships	Regional	🟠	🔴	🔴
Community support	Sub-regional/Regional	🟡	🟡	🟠
Waikato CDEM Group				
Civil defence and emergency management	Regional	🟠	🟠	🟠
Flood protection and control works				
Flood protection	Regional	🟡	🔴	🔴
Land drainage	Regional	🟢	🟡	🟠
River management	Regional	🟢	🔴	🔴
Integrated catchment management				
Biodiversity	Regional/Supra-regional/National	🟠	🔴	🔴
Biosecurity	Regional/Supra-regional/National	🟡	🔴	🔴
Catchment planning & management	Sub-regional/Regional	🔴	🔴	🔴
Regional hazards & emergency response				
Resilient communities	Sub-regional	🟡	🟠	🟠
WRC emergency response	Regional	🟡	🟡	🟠
Regional transport connections				
Public transport	Regional/Supra-regional	🔴	🔴	🔴
Interregional passenger rail	Regional/Supra-regional	🟢	🟡	🟢
Transport policy and programme	Regional	🔴	🔴	🔴
Resource use				
Regional consents	Regional	🟠	🟠	🔴
Regional compliance	Regional/Supra-regional/National	🟠	🟠	🔴
Maritime services	Regional/Supra-regional	🟡	🟡	🟠
Community education	Regional	🟢	🟢	🟡
Primary industry engagement	Regional	🟡	🟡	🟠
Science, policy and information				
Environmental monitoring	Regional/Supra-regional/National	🟠	🔴	🔴
Environmental science and information	Regional/Supra-regional/National	🟠	🔴	🔴
Social and economic information	Regional/Supra-regional	🟠	🟠	🔴
Strategic policy information	Regional	🟠	🔴	🔴
Resource management policy	Regional/Supra-regional/National	🟠	🔴	🔴
Spatial information	Regional/Supra-regional/National	🟠	🟠	🔴
Other functions				
Economic development	Regional/Supra-regional/National	🟡	🟡	🟡

Detailed assessment

This detailed assessment shows how our single unitary authority model achieves each of the Government's Head Start proposal criteria.

Overall assessment
While significant detailed work would be required, this proposal is considered realistic and achievable within the proposed timeframe. By combining early legislative establishment, structured programme management, democratic oversight and a staged transition, the implementation approach provides a practical pathway to establish a single unitary authority while maintaining service continuity and public confidence.

Criteria: Supports the new planning system

✓ **Strongest platform for the planning system**

The overall direction of the planning reforms is clear: stronger integration of spatial planning, infrastructure, environmental management and service delivery. A single unitary authority is well aligned with these objectives and would provide the strongest platform for the emerging planning system.

Central government has signalled a strong preference for regional spatial planning as the primary mechanism for integrating infrastructure, land use, environmental management and investment decisions. This aligns closely with the Local Government Act reform agenda and the proposed standardisation of territorial authority land-use and natural environment plans.

Under the Planning Bill, a combined regional spatial plan must include both a natural environment and land-use plan. Critically, it will identify key infrastructure corridors, designations, housing and business growth allocations out to 30 years, environmental constraints, statutory acknowledgements, iwi management plan alignment, and cross-boundary issues. Based on the current reform programme, a Regional Spatial Plan for the Waikato will need to be prepared and publicly notified around mid-2028 using existing regional council boundaries, regardless of what is decided through the Head Start process in the next 18 months.

A single unitary authority would simplify the statutory processes required to develop and implement a regional spatial plan. For example, local authorities are currently required to establish an Independent Hearing Panel to consider submissions and recommend changes to the draft spatial plan. A single regional planning framework and governance structure would reduce the complexity, time and cost.

✓ **Supports delivery of a stable regional spatial planning process**

Successful implementation of planning legislation will depend on local government institutions having the scale, capability and governance arrangements needed to deliver integrated outcomes. As described in earlier sections of this proposal, many of the issues shaping the Waikato's future already operate beyond existing territorial authority boundaries, including population growth, housing, freight, water management, climate adaptation, biodiversity and major infrastructure investment.

A single unitary authority would bring regional and territorial planning responsibilities together within a single organisation, reducing the need for multiple councils to align separate planning processes, evidence bases, iwi liaison, investment decisions and regulatory approaches through additional collaborative arrangements. It would avoid multi -council/multi-unitary disputes over infrastructure funding alignment and regional versus local boundary delivery issues, and the need for multiple authorities to navigate a complex Spatial Planning Committee.

Existing initiatives such as the Future Proof sub-regional growth strategy demonstrate both the willingness and ability of Waikato councils to work together. They also demonstrate the time, effort, cost and governance arrangements required to coordinate decisions across organisational boundaries. A single unitary authority would embed this integrated approach within the structure of local government itself.

The new Planning Bill signals that a regional spatial plan must apply to the **entire** region but may focus in greater detail on certain parts of the region. It is therefore still possible to represent more bespoke communities of interest under this single unitary model.

✓ **Enables integrated spatial planning, infrastructure and environmental management**
The proposed governance model would provide a stronger platform for considering land use, housing, transport, water infrastructure, environmental limits and major investment decisions together.

A more integrated approach would improve the coordination and sequencing of infrastructure required for population and economic growth. This could provide greater certainty for communities, developers, infrastructure providers and central government by ensuring that infrastructure decisions are considered alongside funding, servicing capacity, transport connections, environmental constraints and natural hazard risks.

The benefits are particularly relevant in the Waikato, where several significant planning systems and relationships already extend across existing council boundaries, including:

- the Future Proof growth area
- the Auckland-Waikato growth corridor
- city and regional deals
- the Waikato River and connected catchments
- nationally significant freight and transport networks
- nationally significant hydro electricity generation
- biodiversity, biosecurity and natural hazard systems.

Bringing responsibility for these matters into a single governance framework under a central secretariat would strengthen the region's ability to plan, align and prioritise investment and implement decisions over the long term.

✓ **Plans around natural systems and catchments**
A single unitary authority would retain region-wide responsibility for integrated catchment management while connecting it more directly with land-use planning, infrastructure and local service delivery.

The Waikato-Waipā and Waihou-Piako river catchments underpin the region's communities, economy and environment. They also support significant Treaty settlement, co-governance and co-management arrangements. Their effective management requires coordinated decisions across freshwater, flood protection, biodiversity, land use, infrastructure, climate adaptation and environmental monitoring.

A key advantage of a single unitary authority is that it avoids fragmenting the principal catchments currently managed through the Waikato regional framework. Alternative multi-unitary arrangements could divide responsibility for major river systems and associated planning, regulatory and investment decisions across multiple authorities, increasing the need for additional governance and coordination mechanisms. A single unitary authority provides a stronger basis for whole-of-catchment stewardship alongside iwi partners, communities and the Crown.

The proposed regional boundary would not align perfectly with every environmental, cultural or economic relationship. Some systems extend beyond the Waikato region and would continue to require supra-regional collaboration. However, a single unitary authority would preserve the integrity of the region's primary catchments and avoid creating additional governance boundaries within them.

Recent Bill amendments now require the spatial plan committees to have at least one member with "knowledge, skill, and experience relating to te ao Māori and Māori development", to address Māori interests in an appropriate way. A single unitary authority with a single Regional Planning Committee provides a simpler and more efficient framework for this.

✓ **Maintains continuity during transition**
Existing statutory plans, consenting and compliance functions, infrastructure programmes and planning partnerships would continue while the new authority is established. Clear transitional governance arrangements, delegations and accountability frameworks would ensure that existing responsibilities remain visible, are clearly assigned and continue to be effectively undertaken until replacement arrangements are confirmed.

The transition would be carefully coordinated with the national planning reforms. This would help minimise duplication and rework and reduce the risk of disruption to statutory deadlines, development activity or infrastructure investment.

Particular attention would be given to retaining specialist staff, preserving institutional knowledge and maintaining the technical capability required to deliver the planning reforms and local government reform concurrently.

Trade-offs and risks

The principal risks are associated with undertaking planning reform and local government reorganisation at the same time. These include:

- uncertainty while the final national legislative framework is being developed
- pressure on specialist planning, environmental and regulatory staff
- retention of specialist staff, technical capability and institutional knowledge during transition
- potential disruption to statutory planning and consenting processes
- the complexity of integrating existing plans, data, systems and policies
- the risk of unnecessary rework if transition and planning-reform timeframes are not aligned
- ensuring that stronger regional consistency does not diminish appropriate place-based input.

These risks would need to be managed through phased implementation, clear transitional accountabilities and close coordination with central government.

Matters for detailed design

Further work would be required to determine:

- governance arrangements for regional spatial planning committees, process agreements and secretariat structure
- statutory plan sequencing and transitional provisions
- consenting, monitoring, compliance and enforcement arrangements
- transitional delegations and decision-making responsibilities
- integration of regional planning data, systems and ePlans
- arrangements for retaining specialist capability and institutional knowledge
- mechanisms for regional, iwi partner and local input into planning decisions
- alignment between re-organisation and the final national planning framework.

Criteria: **Simplifies local governance**

✓ **Provides simpler governance and clearer accountability**

A single unitary authority would bring regional and territorial responsibilities together within a single democratically accountable organisation. Rather than several councils making related decisions through separate processes, one organisation would be accountable for coordinating priorities and delivering outcomes across the region.

The proposed representation structure (see section 3) uses existing territorial authority areas as the starting point for local wards and local councils. This anchors the model in familiar local geographies and established communities of interest, while allowing local council areas to be shaped through population, geography and representation analysis.

Local wards provide the representation and electoral basis for local councils, which may comprise one or more wards depending on local circumstances. Local councils hold the mandate for local, place-based matters. Authority-wide governance holds a separate direct democratic mandate for matters requiring integration, consistency, scale, statutory coordination or accountability, with authority-wide members directly elected from local council areas as a separate set of representatives.

It ensures local decisions sit where they matter most, and authority-wide decisions where they deliver the greatest benefit.

✓ **Reduces duplication and governance interfaces**

The proposed model would reduce the number of formal organisational boundaries across which decisions must currently be negotiated. The model also reduces the number of elected members from 120 to 67 (more or less depending on detailed design and community preferences).

A single organisation reduces the need for multiple Waikato councils to negotiate with one another before a regional position or decision could be reached. Other potential areas of simplification include:

- a single regional strategic direction
- one long-term planning and budgeting framework
- integrated regional and local planning functions
- fewer duplicated governance, reporting and corporate processes
- clearer accountability for infrastructure and environmental outcomes
- a more coherent interface for communities, businesses, iwi and central government.

✓ **Improves on current governance arrangements**

The proposed model would provide communities and partners with greater clarity about who is responsible for decisions and outcomes.

For example, an issue involving consideration of population growth, transport, required infrastructure and environmental limits would no longer require several councils to align separate mandates before a coordinated response could be developed. The authority responsible for planning growth would also be responsible for considering the associated regional transport, infrastructure, catchment and environmental implications.

This would provide a clearer basis for considering competing objectives and trade-offs and for holding decision-makers accountable for the resulting outcomes.

✓ **Provides simplification without unnecessary centralisation**

Simplification should not be confused with centralisation. This single unitary authority proposal does not assume that every decision would be made by the regional governing body. Instead, the governance model would distinguish between matters requiring regional leadership and those best decided locally.

Regionally significant matters would be managed through authority-wide governance, while clearly defined place-based responsibilities would be delegated to local councils and wards. The detailed local representation and delegation model is addressed further under the Maintains Local Voice criterion.

The intent is therefore to simplify the structure of local government without flattening local democracy. Regional matters would be governed regionally because they require scale, consistency and integrated decision-making. Local matters would remain locally informed and, where appropriate, locally decided through clearly defined local governance arrangements. This distinction is central to avoiding both the duplication of the current system and the over-centralisation risk that can arise in a larger authority.

This approach would enable organisational simplification while retaining local decision-making where it adds the greatest value.

✓ **Provides clear accountability for regional functions**

This single unitary authority would be responsible for regionally significant functions that are best planned, managed and delivered at a regional scale, including these functions current delivered by the regional council:

- catchment management
- flood protection and river management
- biosecurity
- environmental monitoring and regulation
- regional transport planning
- natural hazard management
- civil defence and emergency management
- regional spatial and strategic planning.

There are functions carried out by territorial authorities that could also be delivered at a regional scale for example, waste, building consents and roading.

Having these functions managed within a single organisation would provide clearer accountability for decisions that affect communities across the Waikato. It would also improve coordination with related responsibilities, including land-use planning, infrastructure investment and local service delivery, enabling decisions to be made within a single governance framework.

Detailed governance arrangements would ensure these regionally significant functions remain appropriately governed, resourced and visible, while local governance bodies exercise decision-making responsibility for clearly defined place-based matters.

Trade-offs and risks

The principal trade-off is between reducing organisational complexity and avoiding the creation of an overly centralised or internally complicated governance model.

Potential risks include:

- unclear boundaries between regional and local decision-making
- unnecessary centralisation
- failure to deliver to the intent of subsidiarity
- inconsistent delegations or accountability.

These risks would need to be addressed through a clear governance framework and transparent allocation of responsibilities.

Matters for detailed design

Further work would be required to determine the detailed design of the governance and representation model, including:

- the allocation of ward, local council and authority-wide responsibilities
- delegation and accountability frameworks
- Māori representation and partnership arrangements
- financial delegations
- the future role of council-controlled organisations
- mechanisms for reviewing and adapting governance arrangements over time.

Criteria: Economies of scale

A single unitary authority would create the greatest opportunity to realise the benefits of organisational scale. Greater scale would strengthen capability, improve access to specialist expertise, support more efficient service delivery, enable more coordinated infrastructure and asset management, and provide a stronger platform for long-term financial resilience. The primary benefit is not immediate cost savings or lower rates, but a stronger organisation that can deliver better value, capability and resilience over time.

✓ **A strong financial starting point and financial fairness**

Available baseline information provides a useful high-level financial starting point for the proposal. It shows that a Waikato-wide unitary authority would bring together a materially larger revenue base, asset base, debt profile and organisational capability than any individual council currently holds. This strengthens the case for scale, particularly for infrastructure planning, asset stewardship, regional transport, catchment management, specialist capability and long-term financial resilience.

While data in the attached PowerPoint (see Appendix A) is useful, it should be treated as indicative only as some baseline datasets use whole-district figures for areas that are only partly within the Waikato proposal area, including Rotorua and Taupō. In addition, whole-of-council figures do not yet fully separate water-services debt, revenue and assets that may transfer to separate water entities. These matters will need to be corrected and reconciled during detailed design before any final conclusions are drawn about rating impacts, debt settings, transition costs or long-term affordability.

The proposal does not rely on assumptions of immediate rates reductions or precise savings. Instead, it identifies financial resilience, transparency, staged transition and better value over time as the primary financial benefits. A core transition principle should be that legacy debt, assets, service levels and rating arrangements are clearly identified and managed transparently, with no silent cross-subsidies between communities.

Financial fairness is particularly important because existing councils have different debt positions, rating systems, service levels, asset conditions and growth pressures. Harmonisation will create different impacts across communities unless it is staged carefully and supported by clear principles for legacy debt, future borrowing, targeted rates, regional functions and local service levels.

Early directional analysis of flood protection, river management and catchment management funding shows that allocation methods can materially affect the distribution of costs across the region. Because catchment zones do not align neatly with territorial authority boundaries, these functions are difficult to divide cleanly between sub-regional entities. Costs, benefits, assets and risks are connected across the region's two large catchment systems: the Waikato-Waipā and Waihou-Piako catchments. This reinforces the need to retain region-wide accountability for functions where beneficiaries, funding responsibilities and physical systems cross local boundaries.

✓ **Improves operational efficiency and service delivery**

Bringing existing councils into one organisation would create opportunities to consolidate duplicated corporate and support functions, rationalise systems and standardise processes where this improves outcomes.

Potential areas of efficiency include:

- finance, human resources, legal and governance support
- information technology and digital platforms
- procurement and contract management
- customer contact and service channels
- planning and regulatory systems
- data, geographic information and reporting
- policy development and statutory reporting
- shared professional and technical services.

A common operating model reduces process variation, improves data quality and supports more consistent customer and regulatory experiences across the region. Residents and businesses operating across current council boundaries could benefit from clearer and more consistent processes, while local service variations could remain where justified by geography, community priorities or affordability.

✓ **Strengthens infrastructure and asset management**

A single authority provides a more integrated view of regional infrastructure needs, asset condition, population led growth pressures and renewal priorities. This could improve:

- coordination of investment programmes
- infrastructure sequencing alongside development and land-use planning
- procurement of major works and services
- asset management standards and data
- prioritisation across networks and geographic areas
- engagement with central government and infrastructure providers
- capacity to respond to natural hazards and economic shocks.

A larger organisation is better positioned to deliver complex or long-term infrastructure programmes that are difficult for smaller councils to fund and manage independently.

Amalgamation would not remove existing infrastructure delivery deficits, renewal requirements or affordability constraints. These issues would transfer into the new organisation and would need to be addressed transparently.

The regional spatial inventory provides a useful starting point for identifying public assets that would need to be considered through transition. A high proportion of these assets are council owned or controlled, and all councils hold infrastructure strategies, asset management plans and supporting financial information that provide more detailed asset-level information. This means asset transfer would not begin from a blank slate. The key issue is not whether public assets can transfer to the new authority, but how ownership, condition, liabilities, renewal requirements, funding arrangements and service responsibilities would be confirmed and transitioned.

✓ **Strengthens financial resilience and long-term affordability**

A larger and more diverse revenue base may improve financial resilience by spreading some economic, geographic and infrastructure risks across a broader region. Consolidated financial management could support:

- more coordinated capital investment
- region-wide debt and treasury management
- a stronger platform for engaging with lenders and central government

- greater flexibility in responding to shocks
- longer-term management of major infrastructure needs.

The proposal does not assume that amalgamation would result in immediate rates reductions. In the short term, transition costs, rating harmonisation, different debt positions and varying service levels could create uneven impacts across communities.

Some ratepayers may face increases while others experience reductions as funding arrangements and service levels are aligned. Any transition would therefore require careful consideration of affordability, equity and the pace at which harmonisation occurs. Efficiencies from systems, procurement and corporate consolidation are likely to be realised progressively rather than immediately.

Trade-offs and risks

Key risks include:

- significant upfront transition and integration costs
- benefits taking longer than expected to realise
- overestimating potential savings
- disruption from system and organisational change
- loss of local knowledge or relationships
- standardisation that does not reflect legitimate local circumstances
- uneven impacts from rating and debt harmonisation
- differing asset condition and renewal needs across the region
- increased borrowing capacity creating pressure for higher investment or debt
- uncorrected baseline data overstating population, land area, debt or rating impacts where only part of a district is included in the proposal
- community concern about perceived cross-subsidies if debt, assets, services and catchment benefits are not transparently allocated.

These risks reinforce the need for detailed financial analysis and a transparent benefits-realisation framework.

Matters for detailed design

The detailed design phase would include a specific financial and transition work programme to test affordability, funding fairness, asset transfer and benefits realisation before final implementation decisions are made. Further work would be required to determine:

- projected transition costs, cost categories and benefits-realisation measures
- rating harmonisation options, transitional protections and distributional impacts across communities
- principles for legacy debt, targeted rates, future borrowing and treasury arrangements
- correction of baseline data for part-district areas, including Rotorua and Taupō
- separation of water-services debt, revenue and assets from the future unitary authority baseline
- asset ownership, condition, renewal requirements, liabilities and transfer pathways
- regional versus local assets, services, funding responsibilities and service-level variations
- infrastructure investment priorities and procurement opportunities
- workforce, specialist capability, information technology and systems integration requirements
- water-services, council-controlled organisation, shared service, contractual and related entity arrangements
- how anticipated benefits would be measured, reported and independently assured.

Criteria: Maintains local voice

✓ **Principles for representation**

- Subsidiarity – decisions should be made as close as possible to the communities they affect.
- Fair and effective representation – representation should reflect both population and communities of interest.
- Māori participation – Māori should be enabled to participate effectively in decision-making and governance.
- Recognition of diverse communities – representation arrangements should reflect the Waikato's metropolitan, provincial, rural, coastal, lakes, and iwi and hapū communities, as well as other communities of interest.
- Democratic innovation and participation – representation should be supported by deliberative approaches that encourage broader community involvement and help address declining engagement in traditional democratic processes.

✓ **Balances regional governance and local voice**

Maintaining meaningful local voice is fundamental to the success of any future single unitary authority. This proposal recognises that effective regional leadership and strong local democracy are complementary rather than competing objectives.

The Waikato is not a single homogeneous community. It includes metropolitan, provincial, rural, coastal and lakes communities with distinct identities, priorities and relationships. A successful governance model must therefore provide the capability to make integrated regional decisions while ensuring communities continue to influence the decisions that affect their local places.

Accordingly, the proposed governance model seeks to balance strong regional coordination with meaningful local representation and decision-making.

✓ **Supports Māori participation and local relationships**

Māori participation would be embedded throughout the regional and local governance model. This includes elected Māori representation, enduring partnership arrangements and place-based mechanisms reflecting the distinct relationships of iwi and hapū across the Waikato.

The proposal recognises that there is not a single Māori community or view across the region. Iwi and hapū have distinct rohe, histories, Treaty settlement arrangements, aspirations and relationships with particular places and natural systems. The local governance framework should therefore retain space for locally appropriate relationships and participation alongside regional representation.

Treaty settlement continuity and wider partnership arrangements are addressed further in section 5.

✓ **Provides for representation that reflects Waikato's diversity**

Representation arrangements would need to reflect both population and communities of interest. Population would remain an important basis for democratic representation, but it would not be the only consideration. Geography, rurality, economic relationships, iwi interests, local identity and access to decision-makers would also need to inform the final model.

At the same time, patterns of community participation have changed. While place remains a fundamental basis for local democracy, many people – particularly Gen Z – are increasingly connected through digital communities that extend beyond traditional geographic boundaries. This presents a challenge for any representation model that relies solely on place-based structures and highlights the importance of exploring approaches to engagement and deliberative democracy that can strengthen participation and representation.

This would help ensure that metropolitan, rural, provincial, coastal and lakes communities are all effectively represented. It would provide for population growth and metropolitan issues to be appropriately reflected, while ensuring that rural, provincial, coastal and more geographically dispersed communities continue to have a strong and effective voice. At a high level, the model is expected to include:

- a directly elected regional governing body
- geographic and Māori wards or constituencies
- representation that balances population and communities of interest
- separately elected statutory local governance bodies.

The final number of representatives, boundaries and electoral arrangements would be determined during detailed design and the subsequent representation process.

✓ **Strengthens local representation with real authority**
Local governance is most effective where local bodies have clearly defined responsibilities, genuine delegated authority and appropriate resources.

The proposed representation framework (see section 3) anticipates strengthened local governance arrangements, potentially including wards, independent local councils and authority-wide governance.

The principle of subsidiarity would guide the allocation of responsibilities between local vs authority-wide decisions, noting decisions should be made at the lowest practical level, provided there is clear accountability and sufficient capability and funding. Below summarises what this could look like. Final allocation of functions, decision-making powers, delegations and operating arrangements would be determined through detailed design.

Table 3

Local council functions	Authority-wide functions
Local decision-making – within agreed delegations and local priorities.	**Regional strategy** – integrated planning and statutory responsibilities.
Local services – facilities, service levels and delivery priorities.	**Regional infrastructure** – network planning and asset strategy.
Local environmental priorities – place-based input and community advocacy.	**Regional environmental strategy** – regulation and monitoring.
Local growth impacts – place-based planning and community outcomes.	**Regional growth management** – spatial planning.
Local access and connectivity – community transport priorities.	**Regional transport integration** – network planning.
Local budget priorities – funding input and any local rating arrangements, subject to detailed design.	**Authority-wide financial strategy** – funding policy and long-term planning.

✓ **Provides local presence and access**
Meaningful local voice also depends on practical access to representatives, staff and services. A single unitary authority would need to retain a strong local presence through measures such as:

- locally based elected representatives
- local governance offices and service centres
- regular meetings within communities
- accessible engagement
- locally based operational and relationship staff
- clear and innovative processes for communities to influence priorities and decisions.

The objective would be to improve regional coordination without making local government feel more distant.

✓ **Balance equity of access with local flexibility**
Maintaining local voice also requires recognising that equitable treatment does not always mean identical services. Communities should have fair access to core services, but some service levels and local priorities may appropriately vary according to geography, population, affordability, risk and community preference. The governance model would therefore need to balance regional consistency with deliberate and transparent local flexibility.

Trade-offs and risks

The principal challenge is achieving the right balance between regional integration and local responsiveness. Too little delegation could leave communities feeling disconnected from decisions. Too much fragmentation could recreate the governance complexity the proposal seeks to reduce. Other risks include:

- local bodies having representation but insufficient authority or funding
- boundaries that do not reflect communities of interest
- urban population growth dominating smaller communities
- inconsistent local service expectations
- unclear accountability between regional and local bodies
- local governance arrangements becoming overly complex.

Matters for detailed design

Further work would be required to determine the detailed design of the governance and representation model, which anchors and protects local voice in the constitutional arrangements. Details would include:

- ward, local council and authority-wide constituency arrangements
- Māori representation
- the responsibilities delegated to local governance bodies, including additional mechanisms for democratic participation
- local funding arrangements and budget authority
- practical local access to representatives, services and staff
- new deliberative approaches to foster greater community participation
- mechanisms for rural, provincial, coastal and lakes representation
- mechanisms for reviewing and adapting the model over time.

Criteria: Deliverability

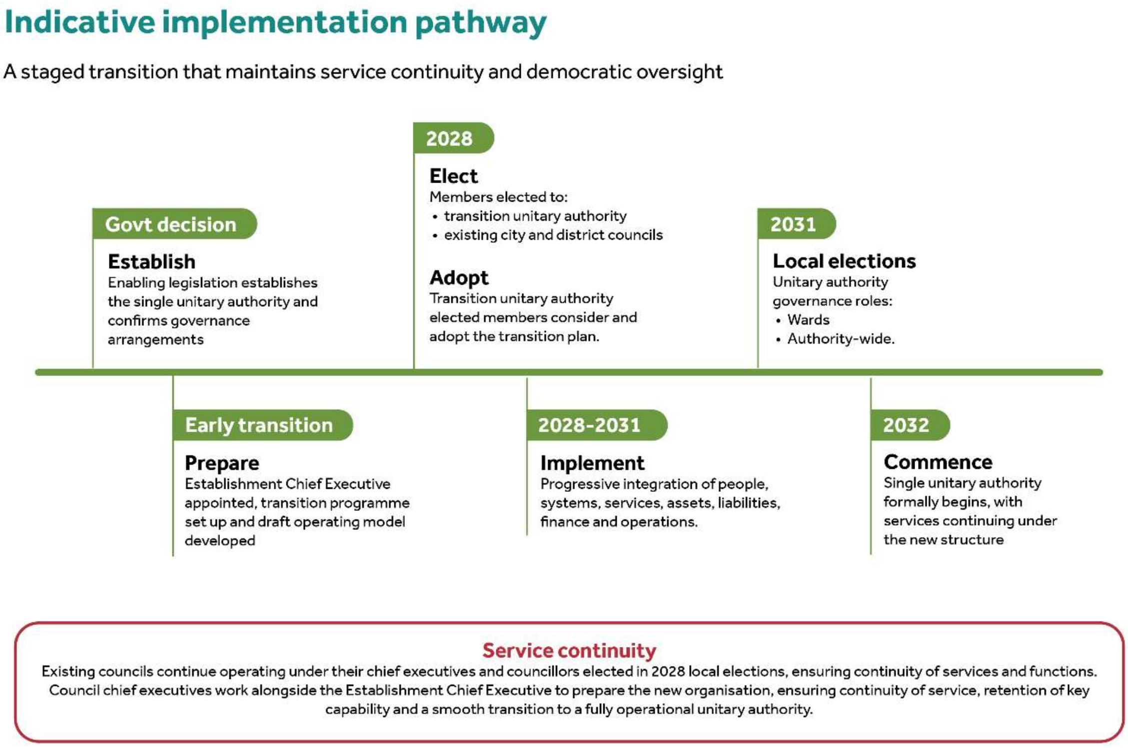
✓ **A practical and achievable implementation pathway**
The proposed single unitary authority is considered deliverable within the Government's proposed implementation timeframe, subject to enabling legislation, appropriate transition support, and a structured implementation programme. While detailed implementation planning would follow any Government decision to proceed, there is a clear pathway from legislative establishment through to commencement of the new authority.

Deliverability would be strengthened by early confirmation of the legislative steps Government will take. More detail on the legislative framework needed for this proposal is set out below (Government support and implementation enablers).

✓ **A staged transition**
Implementation would occur in a series of deliberate stages that balance early preparation with democratic oversight.

Initially, legislation would establish the new single unitary authority and provide for the appointment of an Establishment Chief Executive to lead the transition programme. Working alongside councils, iwi, central government and other key stakeholders, the Establishment Chief Executive would develop the future operating model and prepare a draft transition plan.

Following the 2028 local elections, the transition unitary authority elected representatives would consider and adopt the transition plan before overseeing implementation of the new organisation. This would include organisational design, transfer of staff, assets and liabilities, integration of systems and services, and establishment of the governance, financial and operational arrangements required for commencement. Initial discussions have indicated a commencement date of 2032.



✓ **Maintaining service continuity**

A fundamental objective throughout implementation would be maintaining uninterrupted service delivery and public confidence.

The proposal acknowledges that implementation would be complex, requiring detailed consideration of asset transfers, personnel transfers, regional council functions, council-controlled organisations, governance arrangements and service delivery structures.

This is why, in the interim (2028-2031), the current city and district councils would continue operating under their existing statutory responsibilities, chief executives and councillors (elected in the 2028 local elections) until functions are formally transferred to the new unitary authority (after the 2031 Local elections).

Chief executives would work closely with the Establishment Chief Executive to coordinate organisational, financial, operational and governance transition activities, while maintaining day-to-day service delivery and organisational performance.

This approach would enable detailed implementation work to proceed in parallel with ongoing council operations, reducing transition risk, maintaining public confidence and preserving critical capability, institutional knowledge and local relationships until the new unitary authority is fully operational. The proposal recognises that successful implementation requires a comprehensive change management process covering strong programme governance, effective engagement with communities, ongoing partnership with iwi and central government, and clear engagement and communication with staff, communities, suppliers and stakeholders throughout the transition period.

✓ **Democratic legitimacy**
The proposed approach deliberately separates establishment from implementation. Significant preparatory work can occur before the 2028 local elections, while key decisions about the future organisation remain the responsibility of the newly elected representatives for the transition unitary authority.

✓ **Indicative implementation milestones**
Subject to Government decisions, the implementation pathway is expected to include:

- legislative establishment of a single unitary authority, including wards, local councils and authority-wide governance
- appointment of an Establishment Chief Executive and establishment of the transition programme
- development of the future operating model and draft transition plan
- election of the inaugural governing body in 2028
- adoption of the transition plan by the new transition unitary authority elected representatives
- election to local councils in 2031
- progressive implementation of organisational, financial, technology and service integration
- completion of transition and readiness assurance activities
- commencement of the single unitary authority.

Government support and implementation enablers

Legislative framework

Successful implementation would require bespoke enabling legislation to establish the unitary authority, provide for the transition from existing councils, and transfer statutory responsibilities, assets, liabilities, staff and governance arrangements to the new organisation. The legislation would need to do more than simply create a new entity. It should confer core roles and responsibilities, provide for the allocation or delegation of local and authority-wide functions, and establish any necessary checks and balances between governance tiers so that the future system is clear, durable and workable.

Legislation would also need to provide appropriate transitional powers, define the role and authority of the Establishment Chief Executive, establish the legal framework for implementation, and set out how decisions will be made before and after commencement. This should include powers to prepare a transition plan, undertake organisational design, transfer employment arrangements, integrate plans, policies and systems, and preserve the validity of existing decisions, delegations, bylaws, plans, consents, contracts and proceedings until they are replaced or adapted by the new authority.

Where the future governance model includes local councils, and other local voice mechanisms, legislation should also specify the legal basis for those bodies, their purpose, membership, decision-making responsibilities, funding arrangements and relationship with the authority-wide governing body. This is important because roles that are merely delegated can generally be varied or withdrawn, while roles conferred in legislation provide stronger certainty and a clearer basis for accountability.

The legislative framework should include principles or requirements to guide allocation and delegation decisions, including when decisions are best made at the authority-wide level and when they should sit with local governance bodies. It should also provide mechanisms for resolving disputes or reviewing allocations over time, so that the balance between regional consistency, local voice and operational effectiveness can be maintained as the new organisation matures.

Transition support
Given the scale and significance of the proposed reorganisation, Government support would assist in ensuring an orderly transition while maintaining service continuity.

Support needs to include:
- transition funding
- establishment programme support
- specialist legal and technical assistance where appropriate
- coordination across central government agencies
- access to implementation guidance based on previous local government reorganisations.

Transitional compliance relief
During implementation, councils would continue to meet existing statutory obligations while preparing for the new authority.

Government should consider targeted and time-limited flexibility where appropriate, for example in relation to:
- planning and reporting requirements
- alignment with planning reforms
- statutory consultation processes
- timing of planning documents
- other administrative requirements where compliance would duplicate work during transition.

Any relief should maintain accountability while reducing unnecessary duplication.

Partnership with central government
Successful implementation would require an ongoing partnership between local government and central government throughout the transition.

This should include coordinated decision-making across relevant agencies, alignment with other reform programmes, and regular engagement to resolve implementation issues as they arise.

5 Treaty settlement arrangements

Overall assessment
The proposed single unitary authority is expected to provide a strong platform by upholding Treaty settlement arrangements with equivalent effect and undertaking detailed design in partnership with iwi, post-settlement governance entities (PSGE) and the Crown. The proposal seeks to protect continuity while creating opportunities to strengthen Māori participation and enduring relationships within the future governance model.

Te Tiriti o Waitangi

The Waikato occupies a unique place within Aotearoa New Zealand as the home of Te Kīngitanga, nationally significant Treaty settlement arrangements, a major Māori economy and enduring relationships between iwi, hapū, local government and the Crown. These relationships are fundamental to the governance, identity and long-term wellbeing of the region.

The proposal is founded on the principle that local government reorganisation should strengthen – not diminish – the relationships that have shaped the Waikato for generations. It therefore seeks both to protect existing statutory commitments and to provide a platform for enduring partnership through future governance.

Protecting existing Treaty settlement arrangements

The Waikato contains one of New Zealand's most significant concentrations of Treaty settlement legislation and relationship arrangements. These include Treaty settlement obligations, statutory acknowledgements, Joint Management Agreements, co-governance and co-management arrangements, and a wide range of formal and informal partnership mechanisms developed over many years.

These arrangements represent far more than statutory compliance requirements. They are enduring relationship mechanisms that support shared governance, environmental management, planning, cultural stewardship and collaborative decision-making across the region.

The proposal therefore adopts the principle that all existing Treaty settlement commitments, statutory obligations and partnership arrangements should continue with equivalent effect. Existing governance and relationship mechanisms should be maintained unless otherwise agreed by the affected parties, with any legislative or administrative transfer designed to preserve continuity, maintain confidence and provide certainty for iwi, councils and communities.

The table below identifies the principal Treaty settlement, co-governance and relationship arrangements that would be affected by this proposal, together with engagement undertaken to date at a high level. It also confirms that detailed transfer and implementation arrangements would need to be co-designed with affected PSGEs, iwi, hapū, councils and the Crown during the detailed design phase.

Arrangement	Parties / PSGEs	Proposed transfer approach
Waikato River settlement arrangements, including Te Ture Whaimana, the Waikato River Authority, integrated river management planning, resource consent, hearings and planning obligations	Waikato Raupatu River Trust, Waikato-Tainui, Raukawa Settlement Trust, Te Arawa River Iwi Trust, Tūwharetoa Māori Trust Board, Waikato River Authority, relevant local authorities, Crown agencies and other settlement parties	Transfer all relevant obligations, statutory functions, planning requirements, notification processes and relationship mechanisms to the new authority with equivalent legal and practical effect. Existing statutory priorities, co-governance arrangements and Te Ture Whaimana obligations should be preserved unless affected parties agree otherwise.
Waipā River and Maniapoto arrangements, including Ngā Wai o Maniapoto, Waipā River obligations and associated joint management arrangements	Te Nehenehenui, Waikato Regional Council, Waikato District Council, Waipā District Council, Ōtorohanga District Council, Waitomo District Council and relevant Crown agencies	Carry forward all joint management agreement, planning, monitoring, enforcement, resource consent and relationship obligations. Any future allocation of local and authority-wide functions must preserve the enforceability, decision-making role and relationship intent of the existing arrangements.
Te Kōpua Kānapanapa and Taupō Catchment arrangements	Te Kotahitanga o Ngāti Tūwharetoa, Waikato Regional Council, Taupō District Council and other relevant parties	Retain the permanent joint committee and associated obligations, including membership, administrative support, technical

		support, planning, resource consent and Te Kaupapa Kaitiaki obligations. Ensure the new authority assumes existing support and participation responsibilities without diminution.
Current Joint Management Agreements	Waikato-Tainui, Raukawa, Te Arawa River Iwi Trust, Tūwharetoa Māori Trust Board, Te Nehenehenui and relevant councils	Transfer all operative JMA obligations to the new authority, including governance forums, annual work programmes, planning processes, monitoring and enforcement arrangements, resource consent processes, information sharing, review obligations and dispute resolution mechanisms.
Waikato-Tainui Co-Managed Lands Agreement	Waikato-Tainui and Waikato Regional Council	Transfer responsibilities relating to flood protection scheme lands, co-managed lands, integrated catchment management, zone licence arrangements, communications protocols, information sharing and land management strategy to the new authority with equivalent operational effect.
Statutory acknowledgements and resource consent notification obligations	Affected PSGEs and iwi authorities across the Waikato region, including enacted and recently enacted settlement entities	Preserve all obligations to have regard to statutory acknowledgements, record statutory acknowledgements on planning documents, and provide summaries or notices of relevant resource consent applications. These obligations should remain embedded in consenting, planning and information systems through transition.
Recently enacted, upcoming and pending settlement arrangements	Relevant PSGEs and iwi authorities, including Pare Hauraki collective arrangements and other settlements progressing through or approaching legislation	Identify these arrangements separately in the transition register. Where obligations are not yet operative, ensure the new authority is designed to receive future obligations and participate in establishment, administrative, technical support and governance requirements as they come into force.

Engagement with PSGEs and iwi partners

For the purposes of this proposal, iwi partners refers to those iwi organisations with whom Waikato Regional Council has existing or pending co-governance and co-management Treaty settlement arrangements. Engagement has focused first on these iwi partners because these arrangements are most likely to require careful transfer, continuity and equivalent-effect provisions through any reorganisation. Other statutory obligations, including statutory acknowledgements, notification requirements and related procedural obligations, are considered more readily transferable into the new single unitary authority, provided they are clearly identified and preserved through transition. A stocktake of known Treaty settlement, statutory and partnership obligations has been undertaken and is attached as an appendix to this proposal.

The current assessment is limited to obligations held by Waikato Regional Council. It is expected that territorial authority obligations would also be capable of transfer to the new single unitary authority through appropriate transitional legislation and implementation planning. However, this would need to be confirmed with each territorial authority during detailed design. This is particularly relevant because several co-governance and co-management arrangements apply to both regional and territorial authorities, and the transfer approach will need to ensure those obligations continue with equivalent legal and practical effect.

Engagement to date has indicated support, interest or conditional interest from a number of iwi partners, particularly where the model is understood to preserve connected environmental relationships, uphold Treaty settlement intent, protect Te Ture Whaimana and retain local voice. Feedback has also made clear that interest in a single unitary authority should not be represented as universal formal support. Some iwi partners have indicated that further discussion with their own governance bodies, PSGEs, hapū or wider iwi membership is required before a formal position can be confirmed.

Further engagement is required with all affected PSGEs and iwi authorities to test the proposed transfer approach, confirm the completeness of the settlement inventory, and agree how equivalent effect will be maintained in legislation, governance design and operational systems. This should include engagement on existing arrangements, recently enacted obligations, upcoming settlements and pending settlement processes that may create future obligations for the new authority.

Strengthening partnership through future design

The proposal recognises that meaningful partnership extends beyond Treaty settlement obligations alone.

The Waikato is home to more than 200 iwi and hapū, each with distinct histories, rohe, priorities and relationships with local places. Local government reform should recognise and support this diversity rather than seek to replace it with a single regional approach.

The detailed design phase should therefore be undertaken in partnership with iwi, mana whenua, councils, communities and the Crown. This process should include the co-design of governance arrangements, Māori representation, local participation mechanisms and transition planning, while allowing sufficient time and support for iwi to consider proposals through their own governance processes.

Consistent with the broader principles underpinning this proposal, the future governance model should seek to strengthen Māori participation at both regional and local levels, recognising that enduring relationships are built through ongoing partnership, meaningful engagement and shared stewardship of the region's people, places and natural systems.

Matters for detailed design

Consistent with the Government's Head Start guidance, this outline proposal does not seek to resolve every Treaty settlement or relationship matter at this stage. Should the proposal proceed, detailed design should be undertaken alongside iwi, mana whenua, communities and the Crown and include:

- confirmation of all Treaty settlement obligations and statutory arrangements to ensure continuity
- development of a comprehensive inventory of existing partnership, co-governance and relationship mechanisms across the region
- confirmation of Māori representation arrangements within the future governance model
- continuation and, where appropriate, strengthening of co-governance and co-management arrangements
- transition planning to ensure continuity of relationships, institutional knowledge and organisational capability
- identification of opportunities to strengthen partnership and Māori participation within the future governance framework
- preparation of a comprehensive Treaty settlement and statutory obligations register covering current, recently enacted, upcoming and pending arrangements.

This approach recognises that successful transition is not simply an organisational exercise, but also one of maintaining trust, protecting relationships and carrying forward the shared foundations that already exist across the Waikato.

6 Conclusion

Waikato already functions as one interconnected economic, environmental and social region. This proposal recognises that local government arrangements should evolve to better reflect that reality while preserving meaningful local democracy and strengthening partnerships with iwi.

A single unitary authority provides the strongest platform for supporting economic growth, improving infrastructure coordination, strengthening environmental stewardship and delivering better long-term outcomes for communities.

While detailed design remains to be undertaken, the proposal demonstrates that this option is credible, achievable and aligned with the Government's objectives for simpler, more capable and more effective local government.

Appendix A

Waikato District Council

02

All of Region

EVIDENCE · THE PROPOSED AREA

Waikato ~ Roto ki te Moana

A proposal built around the river and its communities

The regional picture

Districts

- ☑ Thames-Coromandel
- ☑ Hauraki
- ☑ Waikato District
- ☑ Matamata-Piako
- ☑ Hamilton City
- ☑ Waipā
- ☑ Ōtorohanga
- ☑ South Waikato
- ☑ Waitomo
- ☑ Taupō
- ☑ Rotorua

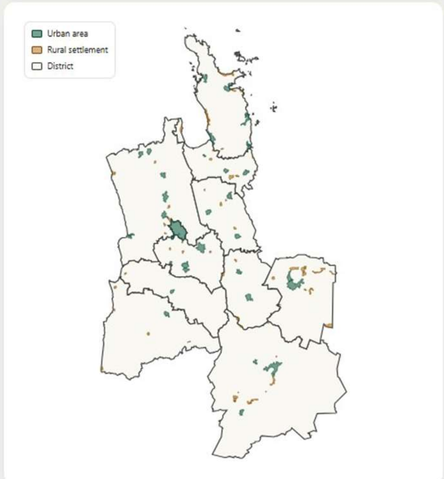
The all-of-region grouping

Why this shape

- Centres on the Waikato River catchment and the communities connected by it.
- Aligns everyday life — where people live, work, travel and access services.
- Supports catchment-based planning and delivery — one of the strongest opportunities in community feedback.

EVIDENCE · OUR COMMUNITIES

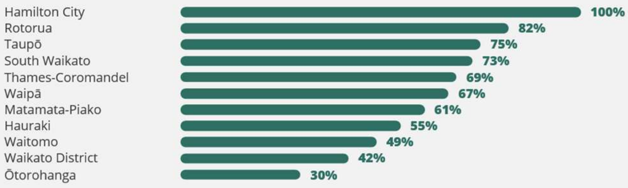
Who lives here — and how that is changing



About this configuration

This configuration combines **11** councils with a combined population of **606,250** across **27,313 km²**. Hamilton City accounts for **32%** of the people. It contains **32** urban areas and **62** rural settlements and is **2%** urban by land. Merging 11 councils means integrating **11** rating systems and **11** district plans, high transition complexity.

Urban share of population by council



Growth is uneven — one structure must serve fast-growing towns and communities managing decline.

EVIDENCE · FINANCE (1 OF 2)

The financial starting position, council by council

2.03× Debt to income

$2,945m Combined debt

$2,138m Borrowing headroom

9.2% Interest / income

These are whole-of-council figures. They do not yet split out water-services debt or water-services revenue, part of which transfers to separate water entities from 1 July 2026 and will then sit outside a merged council.

District	Debt/income	Interest/income	Rates/income	Op margin	Liab/assets
Thames-Coromandel	0.68× below 3.5× limit	3.3% (under 10%)	80%	−3.7%	5.4%
Hauraki	2.12× below 3.5× limit	9.1% (under 10%)	79%	−14.8%	14.0%
Waikato District	1.29× below 3.5× limit	6.7% (under 10%)	75%	−12.1%	10.2%
Matamata-Piako	1.08× below 3.5× limit	4.7% (under 10%)	71%	−11.4%	7.8%
Hamilton City	2.83× below 3.5× limit	13.1% (over 10%)	73%	−8.5%	18.4%
Waipā	3.00× near 3.5× limit	12.7% (over 10%)	62%	−10.2%	15.2%
Ōtorohanga	0.50× below 3.5× limit	2.0% (under 10%)	60%	−14.1%	4.0%
South Waikato	0.89× below 3.5× limit	3.9% (under 10%)	78%	−11.0%	9.4%
Waitomo	0.87× below 3.5× limit	4.2% (under 10%)	62%	−11.1%	6.0%
Taupō	1.74× below 3.5× limit	8.8% (under 10%)	80%	−6.1%	12.3%
Rotorua	2.62× below 3.5× limit	10.8% (over 10%)	82%	−8.6%	21.5%
Combined	**2.03×** below 3.5× limit	**9.2% (under 10%)**	**74%**	**−9.2%**	**13.9%**

Per ratepayer ($)

District	Debt/res.	Debt/RU	Rates/res.	Rates/RU
Thames-Coromandel	$2,826	$3,171	$3,335	$3,743
Hauraki	$6,335	$11,387	$2,353	$4,229
Waikato District	$2,654	$7,037	$1,529	$4,054
Matamata-Piako	$2,168	$5,431	$1,429	$3,578
Hamilton City	$6,148	$18,141	$1,588	$4,685
Waipā	$6,508	$16,274	$1,354	$3,385
Ōtorohanga	$1,159	$2,890	$1,402	$3,497
South Waikato	$1,923	$4,794	$1,685	$4,199
Waitomo	$3,337	$5,580	$2,352	$3,933
Taupō	$5,550	$9,523	$2,539	$4,356
Rotorua	$6,013	$14,830	$1,873	$4,620
Combined	**$4,858**	**$11,409**	**$1,782**	**$4,186**

Risk mitigation — ringfence legacy debt. Debt raised by each council for its own communities stays attached to them, rather than being spread across the new entity.

Directly answers the strongest financial concern in community feedback: taking on other councils' debt.

EVIDENCE · FINANCE (2 OF 2)

How the councils compare on rates and debt

District	Debt/income	Interest/income	Rates/income	Op margin	Liab/assets
Thames-Coromandel	0.68× below 3.5× limit	3.3% (under 10%)	80%	−3.7%	5.4%
Hauraki	2.12× below 3.5× limit	9.1% (under 10%)	79%	−14.8%	14.0%
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Combined	**2.03×** below 3.5× limit	**9.2% (under 10%)**	**74%**	**−9.2%**	**13.9%**

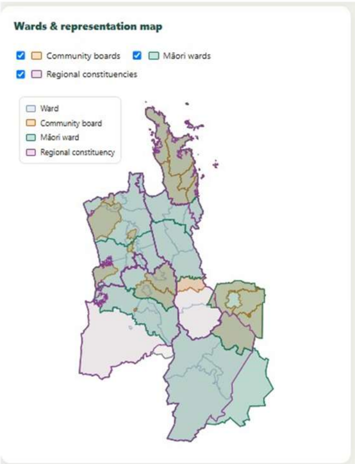
What the comparisons tell us

- Rating levels and debt burdens vary widely per ratepayer — harmonisation will create winners and losers unless staged carefully.
- Communities will ask a simple question: what happens to my rates? The proposal needs a clear, honest answer on transition.
- Financial fairness — not just efficiency — was one of the three strongest themes in feedback.

Principle for the proposal: transparency about who pays for what — targeted allocation of costs and debt, with no silent cross-subsidies.

EVIDENCE · REPRESENTATION

Representation today — the baseline any new model is measured against



At a glance

Hamilton City	14
Hauraki	13
Waikato District	13
Matamata-Piako	12
Taupō	12
Waipā	11
Thames-Coromandel	10
South Waikato	10
Rotorua	10
Ōtorohanga	9
Waitomo	6

This configuration has **120** elected members across **40** wards, including **10** Maaori wards, plus **18** community boards, about **5,052** residents per elected member. Māori make up **17.0%** of the electoral population. **9 of 11** councils currently have Maaori wards.

Why this matters

- Amalgamation almost always means fewer elected members overall — the question is where representation is protected.
- The four-tier model answers this structurally: fewer members at the top, protected representation and delegations below.
- Bespoke legislation can depart from the ±10% rule to protect communities of interest.

Loss of local voice was the single strongest concern in all feedback — this slide is where the proposal must be most convincing.

EVIDENCE · ECONOMY AND SOCIAL PROFILE

One connected economy — with very different community needs inside it

$36,230m
GDP (2024)

Hamilton City
Largest economy

19
Industries

606,250
Population

34
Median age

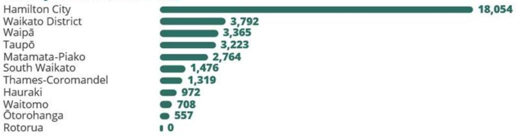
21%
Māori ethnicity

65%
Own home

$35,718
Median income

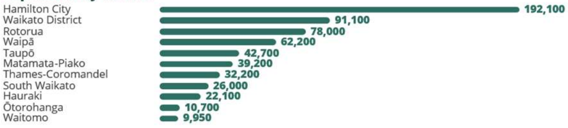
5.2/10
Deprivation

GDP by district (2024, $m)



GDP by industry (2023, $m and share)

Population by district



Age structure (population-weighted)

District	Population	% Māori	Median age	Households	Own home	Median income	Median rent
Thames-Coromandel	32,200	19%	55	13,557	78%	$30,000	$350
Hauraki	22,100	23%	48	8,343	72%	$32,000	$350
Waikato District	91,100	25%	38	28,401	74%	$45,300	$400
Matamata-Piako	39,200	18%	41	14,049	69%	$40,000	$350
Hamilton City	192,100	23%	33	60,897	54%	$42,200	$465
Waipā	62,200	15%	41	21,795	74%	$45,200	$450
Ōtorohanga	10,700	32%	38	3,699	65%	$38,000	$272
South Waikato	26,000	37%	37	9,075	64%	$34,900	$320
Waitomo	9,950	44%	39	3,588	64%	$35,600	$220
Taupō	42,700	29%	42	15,339	70%	$39,800	$385
Rotorua	78,000	0%	0	25,413	65%	$0	$400
Combined	**606,250**	**21%**	**34**	**204,156**	**65%**	**$35,718**	**$408**

An interdependent economy strengthens the economies-of-scale case (criterion 4); the social differences strengthen the case for protected local voice (criterion 5).

Stats NZ. Population is the estimated resident population at 30 June 2025; Māori ethnicity, median age, home ownership, income, rent, age bands and deprivation are 2023 Census / NZDep2023. Households = occupied private dwellings (2023 Census). Deprivation is the populationweighted NZDep2023 decile (1 = least deprived, 10 = most). Combined median age, ownership, income, rent and deprivation are populationweighted averages; population, households and Māori counts are summed.

EVIDENCE · CO - GOVERNANCE AND TREATY SETTLEMENTS

Settlement commitments are enduring — the structure must carry them

Iwi / PSGEs

Iwi and Post Settlement Governance Entity relationships

28
iwi and PSGE partners

5 of 5
joint management agreements

16
enacted settlements

Yes
Co-Managed Lands Agreement

Council	Current Treaty settlements	Current Joint Management Agreements	Current Statutory Acknowledgements	Upcoming Treaty settlements	Upcoming Mana Whakahono ā Rohe	Pending Settlements	Co-Managed Lands Agreement
Thames-Coromandel	Ngāi Tai ki Tāmaki, Ngāti Hei, Ngāti Pāoa, Ngāti Pūkenga, Ngāti Tara Tokanui	None	Ngāi Tai ki Tāmaki, Ngāti Hei, Ngāti Pūkenga, Ngāti Tara Tokanui	Pare Hauraki Collective	Ngāti Hako, Ngāti Pāoa, Ngāti Tamaterā, Ngāti Tara Tokanui, Ngāti Tumutumu	Ngāti Hako, Ngāti Maru, Ngāti Porou (ki Hauraki), Ngāti Tamaterā, Ngāti Whanaunga, Te Patukirikiri	No
Hauraki	Ngāi Tai ki Tāmaki, Ngāti Pāoa, Ngāti Rāhiri Tumutumu, Ngāti Tara Tokanui	None	Ngāi Tai ki Tāmaki, Ngāti Pāoa, Ngāti Tara Tokanui	Pare Hauraki Collective	Ngāti Hako, Ngāti Pāoa, Ngāti Tamaterā, Ngāti Tara Tokanui, Ngāti Tumutumu	Ngāti Hako, Ngāti Maru, Ngāti Porou (ki Hauraki), Ngāti Tamaterā, Ngāti Whanaunga	No
Waikato District	Ngāti Maniapoto, Ngāti Pāoa, Ngāti Tamaoho, Raukawa, Waikato-Tainui	Te Nehenehenui, Waikato-Tainui	Ngāti Hauā, Ngāti Tamaoho	Pare Hauraki Collective	None	Ngāti Hako, Ngāti Maru, Ngāti Tamaterā, Waikato-Tainui Remaining Claims	**Yes**
Matamata-Piako	Ngāti Hinerangi, Ngāti Pāoa, Ngāti Rāhiri Tumutumu, Ngāti Tara Tokanui	None	Ngāti Hauā, Ngāti Hinerangi, Ngāti Korokī Kahukura, Ngāti Rāhiri Tumutumu, Ngāti Tara Tokanui, Raukawa	Pare Hauraki Collective	Ngāti Hako, Ngāti Korokī Kahukura, Ngāti Pāoa, Ngāti Tamaterā, Ngāti Tara Tokanui, Ngāti Tumutumu	Ngāti Hako, Ngāti Maru, Ngāti Tamaterā, Ngāti Whanaunga	No
Hamilton City	Raukawa, Te Arawa River iwi, Waikato-Tainui	Waikato-Tainui	Ngāti Hauā	None	None	None	**Yes**
Waipā	Ngāti Hauā, Ngāti Korokī Kahukura, Ngāti Maniapoto, Raukawa, Waikato-Tainui	Ngāti Tūwharetoa, Raukawa, Te Nehenehenui, Waikato-Tainui	Ngāti Hauā, Ngāti Korokī Kahukura, Ngāti Maniapoto, Raukawa	None	Ngāti Apakura, Ngāti Korokī Kahukura	Waikato-Tainui Remaining Claims	**Yes**
Ōtorohanga	Ngāti Maniapoto, Raukawa, Waikato-Tainui	Ngāti Tūwharetoa, Raukawa, Te Nehenehenui	Ngāti Maniapoto, Raukawa	None	Ngāti Apakura, Te Rūnanga o Ngāti Mahuta ki te Hauāuru (NMKTH)	Waikato-Tainui Remaining Claims	No
South Waikato	Ngāti Hauā, Ngāti Tūwharetoa, Raukawa, Te Arawa River iwi, Waikato-Tainui	Ngāti Tūwharetoa, Raukawa, Te Arawa River iwi	Ngāti Hauā, Ngāti Korokī Kahukura, Raukawa	Pare Hauraki Collective	Ngāti Korokī Kahukura, Ngāti Tura Ngāti Te Ngākau Hapū	None	No
Waitomo	Ngāti Maniapoto, Waikato-Tainui	Te Nehenehenui	Maraeroa A and B Blocks, Ngāti Maniapoto	None	Te Rūnanga o Ngāti Mahuta ki te Hauāuru (NMKTH), Te Rūnanga o Ngāti Tama (o Taranaki)	None	No
Taupō	Ngāti Hāua, Ngāti Tūwharetoa, Raukawa, Te Arawa River iwi, Waikato-Tainui	Ngāti Tūwharetoa, Raukawa, Te Arawa River iwi	Affiliate Te Arawa, Maraeroa A and B Blocks, Ngāti Hāua, Ngāti Hineuru, Ngāti Tūwharetoa, Pouakani, Raukawa	None	Ngāti Tūrangitukua	None	No

Whole region + Rotorua + Regional council

12 districts

1.80×
Debt to income

$2,995m
Combined debt

$2,820m
Borrowing headroom

8.2%
Interest / income

These are whole-of-council figures. They do not yet split out water-services debt or water-services revenue, part of which transfers to separate water entities from 1 July 2026 and will then sit outside a merged council.

District	Debt	Op income	Op exp.	Rates	Interest	Op result
Thames-Coromandel	$91m	$134m	$139m	$107m	$4m	−$5m
Hauraki	$140m	$66m	$76m	$52m	$6m	−$10m
Waikato District	$242m	$187m	$209m	$139m	$13m	−$23m
Matamata-Piako	$85m	$79m	$88m	$56m	$4m	−$9m
Hamilton City	$1,181m	$418m	$453m	$305m	$55m	−$36m
Waipā	$405m	$135m	$149m	$84m	$17m	−$14m
Ōtorohanga	$12m	$25m	$28m	$15m	$1m	−$4m
South Waikato	$50m	$56m	$63m	$44m	$2m	−$6m
Waitomo	$33m	$38m	$42m	$23m	$2m	−$4m
Taupō	$237m	$136m	$144m	$108m	$12m	−$8m
Rotorua	$469m	$179m	$195m	$146m	$19m	−$15m
Waikato Regional Council (regional layer)	**$49m**	**$209m**	**$213m**	**$142m**	**$3m**	**−$4m**
Combined	**$2,995m**	**$1,661m**	**$1,798m**	**$1,222m**	**$137m**	**−$137m**