Te Kaunihera-ā-Rohe o Taratahi
CARTERTON DISTRICT COUNCIL

MASTERTON WHAKAORIORI DISTRICT COUNCIL

Wairarapa Unitary Authority Head Start Proposal

AUGUST 2026

Letter from Mayors

A unique environment – the case for a Wairarapa Unitary Authority

Dear Minister,

Wairarapa is a unique region. We have a shared identity, shared rivers, long-standing relationships, plains and infrastructure, and communities that have considered their future together previously. Our boundary is clear, from the mountains to the sea. The issues we face are unique to our environment: catchments, primary production, large land areas, coastal communities and diverse populations spread across our landscape.

Our uniqueness is our strength. Wairarapa understands how to manage our environment better than anyone - through a Wairarapa Unitary Authority .

A Wairarapa Unitary Authority proposal stands out because it is ***not*** speculative. Wairarapa already has a significant number of shared services. Our interconnected relationships already exist. Wairarapa communities of interest already exist, and they have made their views clear. A Wairarapa Unitary Authority brings these elements together in a model that is simple, efficient, practical, local and delivers on the intent of Head Start.

As Wairarapa Mayors we recognise the work ahead is difficult. We propose to implement a structure for local government in Wairarapa that stands the test of time. Some questions remain unanswered, but we have a plan to answer them. The discussion across our councils has been robust; reflective of a decision of this scale and importance.

We are ready to step forward and face the hard issues. For Wairarapa, smaller is no longer enough. Head Start provides Wairarapa with an opportunity to simplify local government from the ground up in a manner that reflects the uniqueness of our region.

Our proposal:

- Simplifies local government, one council for all Wairarapa.
- Supports the planning system changes consistently across the region, with a focus on catchment, communities of interest and issues specific to our unique landscape.
- Maintains local voice, while driving efficiencies, accountability and reducing duplication.
- Delivers economies of scale encouraging growth and supporting housing development through consolidation of governance, services, functions and consenting.
- Is deliverable. Wairarapa councils already have a significant number of shared services and joint committees showing this can, and will, be done.

The Head Start pathway provides an opportunity for Wairarapa to deliver on the promise of more efficient, effective local government. Wairarapa's Head Start Pathway proposal is right-sized for our region.

As Wairarapa Mayors we are fully committed to doing what's best for our communities. We encourage Cabinet to support our submission and endorse a Wairarapa Unitary Head Start proposal for the benefit of all Wairarapa residents.

Bex Johnson
Mayor
Masterton
District Council

Steve Cretney
Mayor
Carterton
District Council

Contents

Letter from Mayors 1

Executive summary 4

Summary of the assessment criteria 6

Supports the new planning system 6
Simplifies local governance 6
Economies of scale 6
Maintains local voice 6
Deliverability 6

Eligibility 8

Wairarapa unitary body fit for a distinct region 9

Regional function allocation 10

Our approach to developing this proposal 11

Options considered 12
A Wairarapa unitary council as the preferred option 13

Building from strong Wairarapa collaboration 15

Existing Wairarapa shared services, joint arrangements and aligned systems 16

A model built for a distinct Wairarapa 17

Approach to transition 19

Priority matters for detailed design 19

Transition principles 19

Supports the new planning system 22

Simplifies local governance 24

Economies of scale 25

Maintains local voice 27

Deliverability 28

Critical path to implementation by the 2028 local elections. 29

Treaty obligations and the views of mana whenua 31

Partnership transition plan 32

Requests of Central Government 33

Transitioning outline into detailed design 34

Executive summary

Photo: Jeff McEwan

Executive summary

This proposal seeks agreement to establish a single Wairarapa Unitary Authority through the amalgamation of:

- South Wairarapa District Council
- Carterton District Council
- Masterton District Council
- the transfer of relevant regional council functions currently exercised by Greater Wellington Regional Council in Wairarapa.

It is jointly submitted by Masterton District Council and Carterton District Council. South Wairarapa is coopted into this proposal. This initiative is a locally led response to the Government's Head Start pathway and reflects a strong community preference for these councils to shape their own future governance arrangements. Community testing indicates support for a Wairarapa-based model and for councils to lead reform through the Head Start pathway (the majority of respondents supported a Wairarapa unitary option in surveys across the three districts).

Wairarapa functions as a distinct region separate from the rest of Wellington, with significant land area and its own catchments which end in South Wairarapa, service patterns, economic relationships and mana whenua connections. Wairarapa is a distinct community of interest with unique challenges, opportunities and strengths. These are best met through the formation of a single Wairarapa Unitary Authority.

The proposal meets the Government's five assessment criteria and presents a practical, locally led pathway to establish one accountable Wairarapa authority for Wairarapa-focused matters:

- **Supports the new planning system** by building from the Wairarapa Combined District Plan and existing planning collaboration. A Wairarapa Unitary Authority would provide one integrated framework for land use, spatial, natural environment, infrastructure, catchment and flood protection planning.
- **Simplifies local governance** by replacing split accountability across three district councils and Greater Wellington Regional Council with one authority responsible for Wairarapa-focused decisions. Limited regional interfaces would remain where wider scale or network coordination is required (e.g. public transport).
- **Delivers economies of scope and practical scale** by bringing local and regional functions into one organisation, strengthening capability, eliminating remaining duplication and providing operational resilience.
- **Strengthens local voice** by designing representation around Wairarapa communities of interest including towns, rural communities, coastal communities, catchments, and Māori. A proposed Wairarapa regional boundary also matches the rohe boundaries for Rangitāne o Wairarapa and Ngāti Kahungunu ki Wairarapa.
- **Is deliverable** because the proposed authority has a clear end-state and builds from existing shared services, joint planning arrangements, and mature working relationships. It is further supported by the previous investigations into amalgamation in 2013 and 2017 work and by the transfer of water services to Wāiti Waters. This reduces transition complexity and provides a strong foundation for design and implementation of this undertaking.

Our research indicates that Wairarapa is at a feasible scale for a unitary authority, as was found in benchmarking against comparable existing rural and provincial unitary councils. Greater Wellington Regional Councils' costs are far greater than benchmarked existing unitary and regional councils.

Unification will deliver improved accountability, capability, alignment of decision making and the long-term sustainability of local government services for Wairarapa.

Key issues to address are public transport, the Wairarapa Wellington inter-regional cross subsidiary and levels of service for Wairarapa.

A dedicated transition governance arrangement will be established immediately following Government approval to oversee detailed design, manage risks and prepare for implementation.

The proposal uses a staged transition to minimise risk and cost: governance is established first followed by a dedicated transition team with the delivery organisation then stood up by the 2028 local elections. Detailed design will define the target end-state supported by a deliberate phased integration of systems, services and operating arrangements over the following three years. This approach supports service continuity and implementation of other reform most notably the new planning system.

The two submitting councils believe this proposal represents a practical, credible and locally supported opportunity to simplify governance, strengthen accountability and create a governance model that better reflects how Wairarapa functions as a distinct region. Our communities have spoken; Carterton and Masterton District councils have listened. Wairarapa is ready, willing and able to amalgamate into a single unitary authority to drive scale and planning efficiencies and set us up for the next 40 years of local government.

We seek support of Cabinet to progress to the detailed design phase of the Head Start pathway.

Summary of the assessment criteria

Criteria		Met*	Key points
1	Supports the new planning system		✓ Builds from the combined district plan and existing Wairarapa planning collaboration and leveraging a Combined District Plan. ✓ One planning system for Wairarapa catchments. ✓ Aligns land use, infrastructure, freshwater, flood protection and growth planning.
2	Simplifies local governance		✓ Replaces split accountability with one Wairarapa authority for local matters. ✓ Reduces duplicated governance, inconsistent policies, consultation, reporting and administration. ✓ Evolves existing collaboration into unified governance.
3	Economies of scale		✓ Creates economies of scope by bringing territorial and regional functions together. ✓ Improves capability, procurement, asset planning and specialist workforce resilience. ✓ Uses existing shared services and systems as a transition base.
4	Maintains local voice		✓ Representation through a catchment model to best reflect communities of interest rather than restricted to existing boundaries. ✓ Treats local voice as a design condition, not an implementation detail. ✓ Aligns towns, rural, coastal, iwi and mana whenua into a single unified governance structure.
5	Deliverability		✓ Has a clear end-state by the 2028 local elections. ✓ Builds from existing Wāiti Waters transition and previous amalgamation proposals. ✓ Supports transfer of regional council functions to a Wairarapa Unitary Authority .

*Traffic light evaluation framework

Overview and eligibility

Photo: Mark Gee

Eligibility

This proposal is eligible for the Head Start pathway because it is a joint proposal from the two of the three Wairarapa territorial authorities.

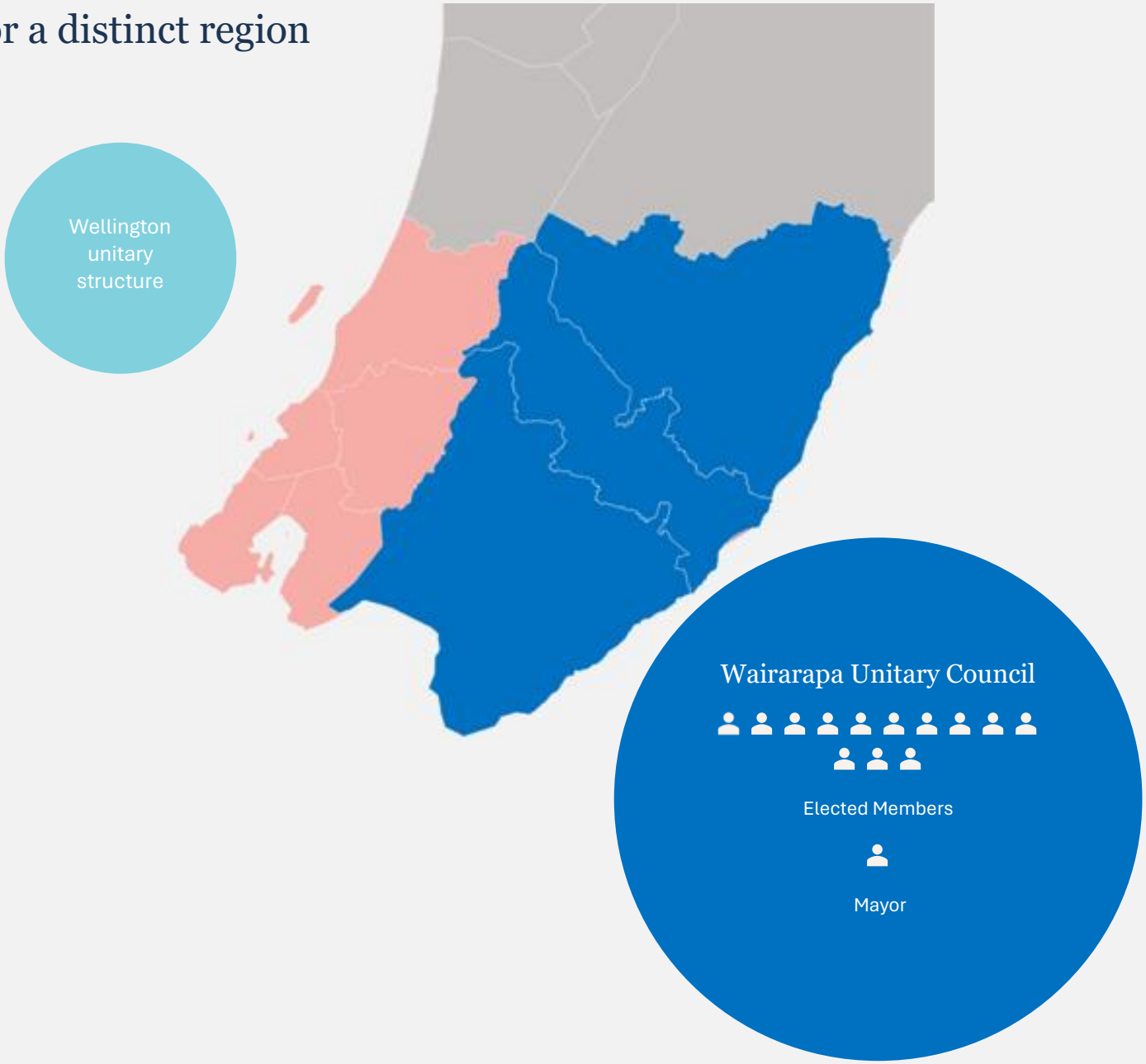
Requirement	Meets	Rationale
▪ Joint proposal	✓	Submitted by Masterton District Council and Carterton District Council. Together, we represent the majority directly affected territorial authorities in the proposed Wairarapa area.
▪ Majority support test	✓	The two submitting councils represent 76% of the directly affected population of the three territorial authorities in the proposed area.
▪ Creation of a unitary authority	✓	Establishes a new Wairarapa Unitary Authority by combining territorial authority functions with relevant regional council functions for Wairarapa.
▪ Fewer local authorities overall	✓	Replaces three territorial authorities with one Wairarapa Unitary Authority.
▪ Regional function delivery	✓	Relevant regional council functions currently exercised by Greater Wellington Regional Council in Wairarapa will transfer to the new Wairarapa Unitary Authority. Public transport and a small number of functions will be provided through shared services.
▪ Unites key regional and territorial functions for Wairarapa	✓	A Wairarapa Unitary Authority would put joint decision making around the functions, services and places that already operate at a Wairarapa scale. It would provide one integrated framework for catchment and environmental planning, housing and development, facilities and services, while reducing duplication (including regulatory) across councils.
▪ Treaty partnership and settlement continuity	✓	Proposed boundaries align with regional rohe and the proposal has iwi support. Treaty settlement redress, statutory obligations, partnership arrangements and mana whenua relationships would be preserved and enhanced through detailed design with affected iwi and Post Settlement Governance Entities (PSGEs).

Wairarapa unitary body fit for a distinct region

The model is one Wairarapa council for Wairarapa matters.

It would bring the three district councils together with the regional functions that are best managed at a Wairarapa scale. Wairarapa land area is 74% of the Greater Wellington Region (pink and blue combined). Wairarapa communities of interest have significantly different focus, priorities and challenges from those of metro areas, which needs to be reflected in local representation. One council would give this significant region one governance system, one accountable organisation and a clearer way to plan, fund and deliver services for Wairarapa communities.

The model is a strong fit because Wairarapa already functions as a distinct and connected region. Its towns, rural communities, catchments, economy, iwi and mana whenua relationships and service patterns are linked across current council boundaries. The proposal turns that reality into a practical governance model, with one Wairarapa authority for Wairarapa matters and formal regional interfaces where wider Wellington coordination remains necessary.



Regional function allocation

The starting proposition is that Wairarapa functions should be delivered by a Wairarapa Unitary Authority unless there is a clear reason for a wider inter-regional arrangement.

Most regional functions exercised in Wairarapa have a strong Wairarapa focus and can be delivered by a Wairarapa Unitary Authority. Wider interfaces would be retained only for limited functions where network integration, specialist capability or funding scale is required, such as public transport, harbourmaster functions and emergency management.

Emergency management arrangements will be reviewed through the lens of the proposed regional structure to confirm the model that will best support local preparedness, response and recovery for Wairarapa communities and where specialist capability is best secured from.

Function	Proposed treatment	Justification	Detailed design issue
Spatial, land and natural environment planning	Delivered by the Wairarapa Unitary Authority	Aligns with territorial authority functions	Align spatial plan boundaries with unitary boundary
Freshwater and catchments	Delivered by the Wairarapa Unitary Authority	Fits with catchment-based planning systems which end in South Wairarapa	-
Emergency management	Delivered locally and supported by contracted arrangement	Specialist function	Confirm service agreement and accountability
Environmental monitoring	Delivered by the Wairarapa Unitary Authority	Requires local knowledge	Confirm technical, systems, hydrology and monitoring arrangements
Compliance and enforcement	Delivered by the Wairarapa Unitary Authority	DIA guidance notes a possible national regulator	Maintain flexibility pending national policy decisions
Public transport and investments	Likely joint arrangement (CCO) as discussed in Greater Wellington Mayoral Forum	Interconnected Wellington, Kāpiti, Wairarapa rail and Metlink networks	Confirm funding, service levels and governance
Maritime, coastal and harbourmaster functions	Joint arrangement to be confirmed through detailed design	Specialist function	Confirm coastal service levels and accountability

Our approach to developing this proposal

A locally led proposal

This proposal has been developed jointly by the participating councils through the Wellington and Wairarapa Regional Mayoral Forum and the Wairarapa councils working group.

It reflects a shared regional view that councils are well placed to lead the design of future arrangements through the Head Start pathway and shape a model that reflects Wairarapa conditions.

The proposal has been shaped by:

- community testing
- iwi and Post-Settlement Governance Entity (PSGE) engagement
- existing Wairarapa collaboration and shared service experience
- evidence on communities of interest, service patterns, catchments, transport, affordability and financial sustainability
- assessment against the five Cabinet criteria for Head Start proposals.

It reflects a shared regional view that reform can be delivered in a practical, staged way within the Head Start timeframe.

Community testing and public sentiment

Community testing indicates a clear preference for a Wairarapa-based model over integration into a wider Wellington authority.

The key messages from community feedback are:

- **strong support for a Wairarapa authority,** with the majority of survey respondents supporting a single, unified Wairarapa authority
- **strong support for councils leading the process,** with 94.3% of respondents supporting councils taking control through the Head Start pathway rather than waiting for government intervention
- **high value placed on local delivery,** particularly for community facilities, parks, reserves and community development
- **clear accountability for local decisions** identified as the highest-ranked representation priority
- **value for money** and **quality of infrastructure and services** identified as the top community priorities.

The proposal has also been informed by engagement with Māori and relevant PSGEs. It is supported by Rangitāne o Wairarapa and Ngāti Kahungunu ki Wairarapa.

The intention is that reform strengthens these relationships rather than disrupts them and provides the opportunity for far stronger alignment of decision making, investment, and services for the Wairarapa community.

Options considered

The councils considered a range of options to test the right scale for future governance. The preferred model is a Wairarapa Unitary Authority because it best matches the region's communities, contained catchments, service patterns and existing collaboration. It provides one accountable council for Wairarapa matters, while retaining regional arrangements where wider Wellington scale is still needed.

The councils considered several broad options before identifying a Wairarapa Unitary Authority as the preferred model.

Status quo with continued collaboration

Retains the three Wairarapa district councils and Greater Wellington Regional Council's current regional role.

Continued collaboration would build on existing Wairarapa relationships, but would still require separate plans, decisions, systems and funding processes for issues that operate across the whole Wairarapa.

Wider Wellington-Wairarapa Unitary Authority

Creates one larger unitary authority for the wider region.

A wider Wellington Wairarapa model would provide greater regional scale, but would need deliberate safeguards to maintain Wairarapa visibility, local service settings, rural and catchment-based priorities, and effective representation.

Wairarapa + Tararua unitary model

Recognises natural relationships north and east of Wairarapa, including rural economy, service, infrastructure and resilience connections with Tararua.

This may be a logical future option, including for one of the two main PSGEs whose interests extend from north of Dannevirke down to Cape Palliser. Tararua is not in a position to commit at this stage. However, Wairarapa would welcome Tararua's future involvement if desired.

Legislative backstop

Councils have listened to community feedback which strongly indicates a preference for Councils to submit a Head Start proposal and show leadership, unitary and a clear path forward.

A Wairarapa unitary council as the preferred option

For Wairarapa, the key question is what is the right scale and focus for the functions, communities and systems that already operate across Wairarapa?

The Wairarapa case is that scale should match the functions, communities and systems being governed.

Benchmarking of existing regional and unitary councils shows that scale can matter for some activities, particularly where there are fixed costs, specialist capabilities are required or opportunities exist to reduce duplication. However, it also shows that the benefits of scale are not unlimited and that larger arrangements can create their own costs, complexity and accountability challenges.

Wairarapa is a feasible unitary structure comparable to existing South Island unitary councils in size (population, land and rural/urban need).

Right-sized

The Wairarapa case is not that bigger is better. It is that the model is large enough to support unitary functions and specialist capability, focused enough to keep costs low and Wairarapa priorities visible in planning, investment and service decisions.

Focused

The model keeps rural land use, catchments, flood protection, town-based services, mana whenua relationships and local infrastructure visible within one Wairarapa-focused council.

Connected

The model preserves regional interfaces where Wellington or other region scale is still needed, including public transport, emergency management, and harbour master requirements.

Accountable

It gives Wairarapa one clearer point of accountability for Wairarapa-wide decisions, eliminating attempts to coordinate three district councils and a metropolitan regional council.

Our case for change

Photo: Jet Productions

Building from strong Wairarapa collaboration

The case for change is not that existing councils have failed to collaborate. Wairarapa has built a strong platform of shared arrangements. The next step is to align that operational collaboration with one governance framework for Wairarapa wide decisions.

- **Governance can better reflect how Wairarapa works.** Wairarapa functions as one rural and provincial subregion with decisions currently split across three district councils and Greater Wellington Regional Council.
- **Clear accountability for Wairarapa wide matters.** A single Wairarapa authority is easier for residents to understand who is responsible for decisions. It supports more direct, timely decision making.
- **Wairarapa and metropolitan Wellington have different planning and service profiles.** Wairarapa needs are rural, catchment-based and town-focused, while wider Wellington priorities are strongly urban (e.g. housing growth, congestion, public transport and network renewal).
- **Existing collaboration provides the foundation for unified governance.** The Wairarapa councils have existing shared services, joint policy and planning arrangements, and some aligned systems. The Councils already work together.
- **Decision-making can be more direct and easier to understand.** Important choices often require alignment between several governance bodies, officer groups, consultation processes, funding decisions and implementation plans.
- **A single organisation can strengthen specialist capability.** A single Wairarapa council would allow specialist skills in planning, regulation, infrastructure, finance, digital, environmental management and transition delivery to be shared and deployed more effectively across the region.
- **The Wairarapa unitary model can strengthen financial sustainability.** Bringing rating, investment and service decisions into one Wairarapa organisation would allow funding choices to be tested against local priorities, assets and affordability. This would support clearer trade-offs, more targeted investment in Wairarapa infrastructure and resilience, and a stronger focus on the issues that matter most to Wairarapa communities.
- **Infrastructure and resilience settings require integrated planning.** Wairarapa's large road network, rural infrastructure, settlement spread, flood protection responsibilities and resilience costs are closely connected. A single Wairarapa council would make it easier to plan and prioritise these Wairarapa matters together across the region.
- **A unitary model would align accountability with delivery.** Bringing core decisions and delivery into one organisation will make Wairarapa-wide choices clearer and easier to implement.

Existing Wairarapa shared services, joint arrangements and aligned systems

These arrangements show that the Wairarapa councils are already working at a Wairarapa scale. This provides an important foundation for transition because the proposal is not starting from a blank sheet. It is building on an established tradition of collaboration across Wairarapa which will provide a solid foundation for the development of the future model.

Function	Delivery
Planning	Wairarapa Combined District Plan and associated shared support and technical advisory services
Bylaws	Wairarapa Consolidated Bylaws
Regulatory settings	Wairarapa regulatory policies
Alcohol licensing	Joint Wairarapa District Licensing Committee list
Solid waste	Single three-council Wairarapa solid waste contract
Shared roading	Shared roading services between South Wairarapa and Carterton
After hours services	Animal management
Emergency management	Joint Emergency Management agreement
Water services	Wāiti Waters together with Tararua District

Function	Delivery
Systems	Shared ePlan hosting GIS hosting
Visitor economy	Single regional tourism organisation - Destination Wairarapa
Dark sky initiative	Single Dark Sky coordinator funding
Employment initiatives	Mayor's Taskforce for Jobs joint service delivery model unique to Wairarapa
Building consent	Shared processing of consents Sharing of personal to cover leave/on call
Insurance	Masterton and Carterton jointly procure material damage and liability insurance
Utilities procurement	Shared Wairarapa electricity contract
Economic development	Joint Wairarapa Economic Development Strategy

A model built for a distinct Wairarapa

The Wairarapa region is connected to metropolitan Wellington, but it is not simply an eastern extension of the city. Its communities, catchments, economy and service patterns point to a coherent Wairarapa community of interest. The evidence shows two complementary but different regional systems.

Wairarapa is a rural and provincial community with distinct catchments, service patterns, mana whenua relationships and affordability considerations. Metropolitan Wellington has a larger urban population, different growth pressures, major public transport networks and significant infrastructure renewal needs. A Wairarapa Unitary Authority would allow each set of priorities to be addressed at the scale that best fits the communities and functions involved, while retaining regional interfaces where they add value.

Indicator	Wairarapa	Wellington urban
Population and scale	51,400 people 9% of regional population about 6,000 km^2 about 9 people per km^2	433,900 people 80% of regional population about 1,400 km^2 about 310 people per km^2
Growth to 2053	19.7% (average)	13%
Age and dependency	Older age profile, dependency ratio 72.6%	Younger working-age profile, dependency ratio 48.7%
Economic role	$3.2b GDP 5.7% of regional GDP 21,862 filled jobs 6.8% of regional jobs	Wellington City $35.8b GDP 63.5% of regional GDP 188,385 jobs 58.5% of regional jobs
Income and affordability	Average earnings $63,714 Housing affordability: 4.7	Average earnings: $83,350 Housing affordability 4.7
Movement and connectivity	Wairarapa to Upper Hutt: 10,202 daily crossings SH2 and Wairarapa rail line	Kāpiti to Porirua: 45,131 daily crossings Wellington CBD attracts about 40% of commuter trips
Local spend	75% of spend in Wairarapa merchants comes from Wairarapa residents 86% of Wairarapa residents' spend is in Wairarapa	59% of spend in Wellington City merchants comes from Wellington residents 81% of Wellington residents' spend is in Wellington City

Indicator	Wairarapa	Wellington urban
Environment and catchments	Ruamāhanga River system Wairarapa Moana large rural catchments all contained in Wairarapa productive land, freshwater and floodplain management	Wellington Harbour Porirua Harbour Hutt River urban stormwater, contaminants and network capacity
Mana whenua and settlements	Rangitāne o Wairarapa Ngāti Kahungunu ki Wairarapa Wairarapa Moana and Te Rohe o Rongokako arrangements	Ngāti Toa Rangatira Taranaki Whānui ki te Upoko o te Ika Te Ātiawa ki Whakarongotai Ngā Hapū o Ōtaki

Several points are particularly important:

- Masterton is the main subregional service centre, supporting employment, education, retail, public services and health access for the wider Wairarapa.
- Wairarapa Hospital in Masterton anchors the local health catchment for Masterton, Carterton, South Wairarapa and outlying rural communities.
- Wairarapa has transport links in more than one direction, with Wellington connections through State Highway 2 and the Wairarapa rail line, and practical northern links to Tararua and Palmerston North.
- Public transport is a regional interface that will be developed further through detailed design.
- Investment decisions can and are being made in Wairarapa. Examples include Hood Aerodrome, the Waingawa Industrial Park, and strategic water and flood protection infrastructure. These assets have planning, operational, investment and resilience considerations that are closely linked to Wairarapa communities, economic development and service delivery outcomes. Decisions regarding their future development and funding are therefore primarily matters of Wairarapa interest and accountability.
- Consumer spend and service access patterns show that much of the everyday activity remains within Wairarapa.

Approach to transition

The transition is proposed to be staged, disciplined and focused on the hard issues early. Not all functions, systems, rates and service levels are harmonised on day one. Our preferred approach is to establish one Wairarapa authority with clear governance, service continuity and regional interfaces, then integrate systems and settings over a managed post-establishment period.

The first transition task is to stand up governance and decision-making arrangements for the new authority. This will include ongoing reporting to the existing councils as details are developed on governance arrangements, structure, funding arrangements and community engagement. Management, systems and operational consolidation would then be sequenced underneath that governance structure. Continuity of services on day one of the new unitary council will be a key priority.

Wairarapa's existing shared arrangements provide a practical foundation for transition and reduce the risk of misalignment.

Transition principles

The following principles would guide the transition:

- Maintain service continuity
- Keep elected members informed in key decisions through the detailed design process
- Resolve the hard issues early
- Ensure community trust and confidence through engagement
- Design from the ground up to be fit for purpose
- Consider deliberate, staged integration to reduce transition risks and costs
- Keep inter-regional interfaces clear
- Maintain business-as-usual services and functions
- Manage structural transition transparently

Priority matters for detailed design

- **Affordability and service levels**

  Test rating impacts, service levels, transport costs, transition costs and any Crown support needed to avoid sudden rate shocks.

- **Transport**

  Confirm the future governance and funding model for rail, buses, fares, regional transport planning, CentrePort and Wellington International Airport access, including whether Wairarapa participates in a wider regional transport CCO or equivalent arrangement. Changes to cost allocation, ringfencing or cross-subsidisation could create material rating impacts, potentially causing affordability issues for local residents

- **Local voice**

  Design representation around Wairarapa communities of interest, Māori representation, catchments, rural and coastal communities, to ensure effective local input into Wairarapa-wide decisions.

“The reform opportunity is to translate existing Wairarapa collaboration into a single governance model that is clearer, more efficient, financially sustainable and better aligned with Wairarapa’s unique priorities”
Photo: Jack Austin

Assessment Criteria

Supports the new planning system

Improvements to the system

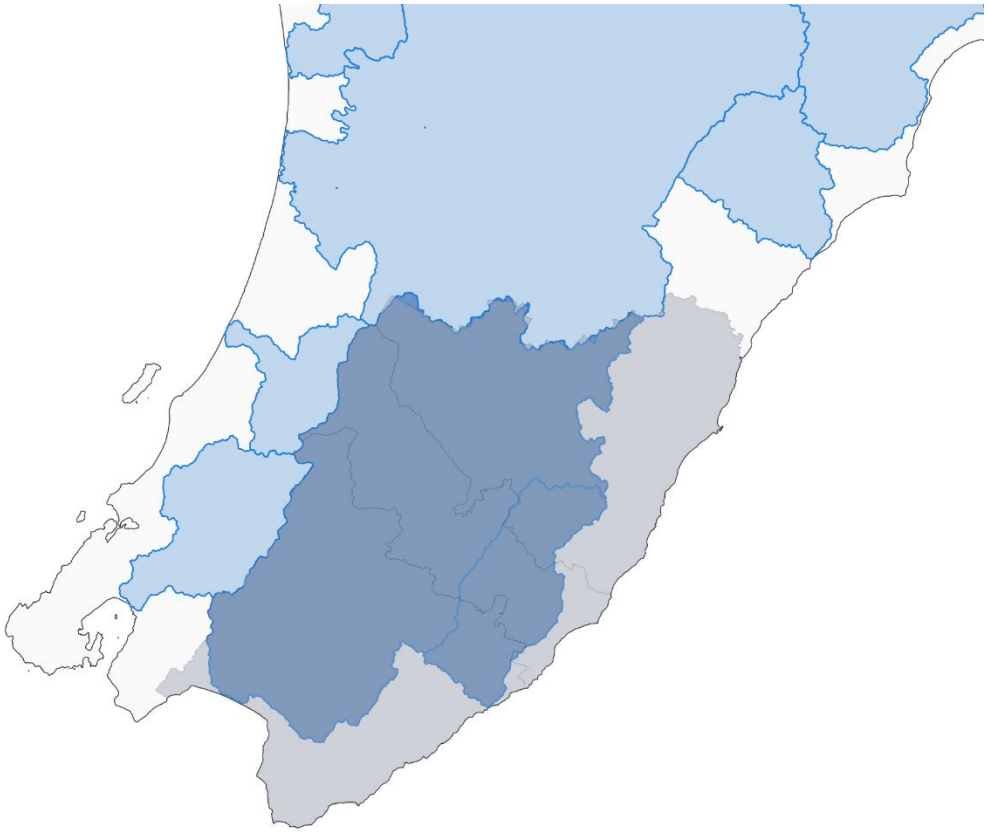
The proposal supports the new planning system by building on Wairarapa's existing integrated planning platform, including the Combined District Plan and established planning collaboration.

A Wairarapa Unitary Authority would provide one institutional home for Wairarapa focused land use, freshwater, flood protection, infrastructure and growth planning, while retaining modest regional interfaces where matters extend beyond Wairarapa (e.g., climate adaptation). It would ensure that these decisions are being made locally, by the people that are most affected by them.

Wairarapa is shaped by the Ruamāhanga River system and other large rural catchments. These cross current district boundaries but are contained within Wairarapa (grey shadow). They connect land use, freshwater quality, floodplain management, rural production, biodiversity and climate resilience. A single authority would align planning responsibilities with the way these systems function in practice.

How the proposal improves current arrangements

This proposal reduces the need to coordinate regional and district planning functions across multiple councils. This would support more consistent decision making, reduce duplicated engagement and analysis, and give communities a clearer line of accountability for Wairarapa-wide planning choices.



Wairarapa catchments fit with the boundaries of the three councils not in Wellington region.

Trade-offs and risks

The proposal would substantially simplify planning within Wairarapa. Only a small number of clearly defined regional interfaces need to remain. These interfaces are narrow and relate mainly to functions where wider network coordination adds value, such as public transport, emergency management, and any environmental matters that genuinely extend beyond Wairarapa. These will be managed through clear roles, decision rights and accountability arrangements with the wider Wellington region.

Transition can be managed through a clear, staged approach that protects current planning work and statutory continuity. Planning staff, systems, data, consents, plan changes, monitoring responsibilities and flood protection programmes will transfer under agreed transitional arrangements, with interim decision-making processes in place with Combined Territorial Boards (CTB) where needed. This will allow existing plans, designations, consents and regional workstreams to continue while the new Wairarapa Unitary Authority is established.

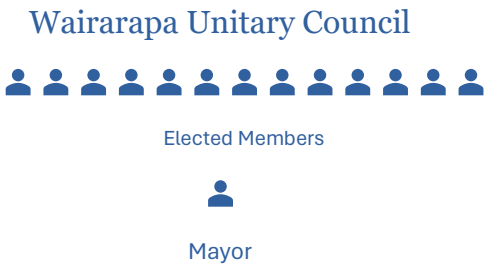
Matters to confirm through detailed design

Detailed design will confirm practical transfer arrangements for regional planning functions, with most Wairarapa planning matters able to move into the new authority in a straightforward way. Current spatial planning, natural environment planning, catchment and flood scheme work can continue, while targeted joint arrangements are confirmed for transport and emergency management.

Simplifies local governance

Improvements to the system

A Wairarapa Unitary Authority would simplify local governance by bringing Wairarapa-focused territorial and regional responsibilities into one council. This would replace split accountability across three district councils and Greater Wellington Regional Council with one elected body responsible for Wairarapa-wide planning, funding and delivery decisions.



A single Wairarapa authority will reduce duplicated governance, policy, engagement, reporting and administration. It would also make decision making easier to understand, with residents, iwi, businesses and partners having one clearer point of accountability for Wairarapa matters.

How the proposal improves current arrangements

Current arrangements require communities and development partners to work across several councils depending on the issue or function. This can result in inconsistent policy, pricing and regulatory practices across Wairarapa.

A Wairarapa Unitary Authority would create one governance and funding framework for Wairarapa matters. It would make it easier to connect land use, infrastructure, environmental management, flood protection, growth, transport access and community services in one place.

The model is deliberately simple and based on proven, existing models used by similar sized unitary authorities. It avoids the introduction of a second layer of governance that is unproven in New Zealand and risks introducing stagnated decision making and adding layers of bureaucracy.

This would support clearer trade-offs, more direct decision making and better alignment between strategy, funding and delivery.

Trade-offs and detailed design considerations

The main detailed design task is to balance Wairarapa-wide governance with strong local influence for Masterton, Carterton, South Wairarapa, smaller towns, rural communities and coastal communities. This can be addressed through deliberate representation design, accessible local services and clear mechanisms for local priorities to influence budgets and service levels.

A key matter will be the ratio of population to councillor appropriate for a large land mass and increased responsibilities.

Matters to confirm through detailed design

Detailed design needs to confirm the local representation model, including voting system, local boards, committees, advisory groups, community forums or another local mechanism. It also needs to define the scope of any local delegations, how local priorities would influence budgets and service levels, and how local service access would be maintained across Masterton, Carterton, South Wairarapa, smaller towns, rural areas and coastal communities.

Detailed design will also confirm the limited inter-regional interfaces that need to remain. These should be focused on functions that genuinely require wider scale or network coordination, with clear roles, funding arrangements, decision rights and accountability.

Economies of scale

Improvements to the system

The strongest efficiency case for a Wairarapa Unitary Authority is economies of scope and practical scale. Bringing territorial and regional functions into one organisation would reduce structural duplication, strengthen specialist capability and improve alignment between planning, infrastructure, environmental management, flood protection and local service delivery.

How the proposal improves current arrangements

Current arrangements require three district councils, alongside Greater Wellington Regional Council, to maintain separate governance, planning, financial, policy, reporting, consultation and corporate processes for issues that often operate across Wairarapa. Existing collaboration has reduced some duplication, but it cannot remove separate decision-making, statutory accountabilities, systems, budgets and reporting cycles. A Wairarapa Unitary Authority would move from coordination between councils to one organisation with a single Wairarapa-wide mandate and a single decision-making framework.

A single organisation will also create a stronger platform for specialist capability, workforce planning and operational resilience, particularly in planning, environmental management, infrastructure, finance, digital and regulation.

Area	Where duplication reduces
Governance, policy and strategy	This will remove the parochial decisions, duplication of services and facilities and provides for consistent approach to growth and development.
Policy and strategy/reporting	Coordinated strategies, policies, bylaws with fewer consultations reports and accountability documents.
Planning and regulation	One framework for land use, regional planning interfaces, consenting, monitoring and compliance for Wairarapa matters.
Asset management and infrastructure investment	One Wairarapa-wide approach to infrastructure, local roads, flood protection, community facilities and resilience investment.
Procurement and contract management	Ability to tender larger Wairarapa scale contracts, driving efficiencies and savings. Fewer duplicated tenders, stronger contract management and clearer market signals for Wairarapa-wide work programmes.
Specialist capability	Less reliance on small teams and key individuals, with stronger shared capability in planning, environmental science, flood management, finance, legal, digital, regulation and infrastructure.
Corporate systems and customer service	Fewer duplicated systems, processes, senior management and service channels, subject to staged integration and transition costs.

Where efficiencies may come from

Efficiencies should be framed carefully. History suggests amalgamation savings are often over estimated. However, one Wairarapa organisation will provide a better platform for managing affordability, reducing duplicated processes, prioritising investment and making transparent trade-offs over time. Direct operating savings, transition costs and rating impacts will be tested through detailed design.

The evidence suggests:

- **The Wairarapa model has the strongest efficiency potential where functions already operate at Wairarapa scale**, including planning, catchments, flood protection, regulation, procurement, asset management and corporate services.
- **The Wairarapa model has the greatest potential for efficiencies**. Completed modelling made this finding in relation to the work informing the Greater Wellington Mayoral Forum process.
- **Operating cost reductions are possible**. Benchmarking suggests potential operating cost reductions of **5% to 25%**, subject to assumptions about duplication, service levels, staffing, systems and regional function allocation.
- **Lower operating costs may not mean lower rates**. Under any scenario, regional rating flows, public transport funding and infrastructure renewal and resilience remain key challenges.
- **Public transport funding is a material consideration** separate from this proposal, including NZTA subsidies and Metlink fares, rail, buses, regional transport planning and whether costs remain ringfenced.
- **Rates, debt and reserves need fair treatment**. Detailed design should confirm what transfers, what is shared what is ringfenced, and what moves over time.
- **Transition costs need to be explicit**, including systems, staff, contracts, assets, liabilities, data and customer channels. These have been estimated as $20 – 42 million based on 25% – 30% of combined operating costs. The breadth of Wairarapa's existing shared service arrangements, and experience from its water services transition supports this number being at the lower end of the range.

Trade-offs and risks

A Wairarapa authority will strengthen local coherence, accountability and integration by matching governance to the scale at which Wairarapa communities, catchments and services already operate. While a larger model may offer greater organisational scale, it would dilute the Wairarapa focus and reduce the visibility of efficiencies that come from aligning decisions, services and investment around Wairarapa priorities. For this proposal, the right test is not size alone, but whether the model provides the clearest and most effective platform for Wairarapa outcomes.

Maintains local voice

Local voice is a core design condition for the Wairarapa Unitary Authority. The proposal assumes that Wairarapa-wide governance must be paired with practical local influence for towns, rural communities, coastal communities, iwi, Māori and other communities of interest.

The outline proposal keeps the structure simple for Head Start while allowing detailed design to test the right catchment boundaries, Māori representation, local engagement mechanisms and service access arrangements.

Wairarapa identity operates at more than one scale. There is a strong Wairarapa-wide identity, but there are also distinct local communities.

The indicative model is a catchment-based council, with one mayor elected at large and councillors elected from catchments rather than any restrictive existing district boundaries.

A catchment-based model would be supported by practical mechanisms for local input, including:

- local engagement plans for iwi and mana whenua, towns, rural communities and coastal communities
- regular place-based forums for local priorities such as town centres, parks, reserves and community facilities
- clear community funding processes
- accessible service centres and customer channels
- regular reporting back on decisions affecting local areas
- targeted advisory mechanisms where a clear need is identified.

The aim is to give communities visible and practical influence without creating unnecessary governance complexity.

How the proposal improves current arrangements

The current system provides district-level representation, but local influence can be indirect when decisions cut across district and regional responsibilities. A Wairarapa Unitary Authority would bring those decisions into one accountable Wairarapa system, so local priorities can be considered alongside Wairarapa-wide funding, planning and service choices.

Trade-offs and risks

The shift from three district councils to one Wairarapa authority is a material change, but it is also the opportunity to design local voice deliberately and consistently across the whole region. Previous Wairarapa amalgamation discussions show that communities will need confidence that local access and influence are protected. The proposal addresses this by treating local voice as a core design condition, supported by catchment-based representation, accessible service points and practical mechanisms for local priorities to shape decisions.

Matters to confirm through detailed design

For a council of around 50,000 residents, representation models will range between 1:2,000 and 1:4,000 residents, an increase from existing models that are as low as 1:1,200. The preferred approach is to make catchment design, councillor accessibility, service centres and local engagement strong enough to provide effective local influence without adding unnecessary structure. This will be tested as part of detailed design. The aim is a model that provides one accountable Wairarapa authority while keeping local influence clear, practical and close to communities.

Deliverability

This proposal is deliverable because it has a clear end-state and builds on strong existing working relationships. It establishes a single Wairarapa Unitary Authority by the 2028 local elections, with territorial and relevant regional functions brought into one organisation.

The starting point is strong. Wairarapa councils already have a practical transition base through existing shared arrangements, joint planning work and the move to Wāiti Waters.

With a relatively simple structure proposed, the Wairarapa Unitary Authority is likely to need less bespoke legislation.

The Head Start timetable is demanding, but workable if the detailed design phase is treated as an establishment programme.

A dedicated transition body will be established immediately after Government approval. It will have clear authority, milestones, programme support and direct involvement from the participating councils, GWRC, mana whenua and PSGEs, and support from central government officials. Reporting to existing councils at key stages of the sign process, will allow opportunities for local views to be reflected in final design.

The transition can be staged. Governance and establishment settings should be confirmed first. Transfer planning, representation, funding arrangements and day one readiness should follow. Detailed design will be completed early from the ground up, however operational integration, including systems, service model refinement, and rating harmonisation may be implemented over a managed post-establishment period, potentially post 2028 local body elections.

Risks

Timing is the main delivery constraint, but can be managed through early establishment decisions, a dedicated transition body and escalation points. The highest priority is to resolve the matters affecting legislation, funding viability, elections and service continuity before implementation.

Matters to confirm through detailed design

Detailed design should focus on the establishment matters that determine deliverability:

- Public transport: establish ongoing basis for NZTA public transport subsidy for Wairarapa commuters.
- Transition governance: establish the body, authority, milestones and programme support needed to manage the transition.
- Legislation and transfer powers: confirm the statutory changes, transfer instruments and decision rights needed before the 2028 elections.
- Align spatial planning boundary with Wairarapa unitary boundaries.
- Representation settings: confirm catchments, Māori wards and election arrangements in time for establishment.
- Regional function arrangements: confirm delivery arrangements and shared arrangements for a small number of functions which require ongoing inter-regional coordination.
- Financial transition: confirm transition costs, rates, debt, reserves, assets, liabilities, service levels and any Crown support.
- Day one readiness: confirm how core services, statutory functions, staff, systems, data, contracts, customer channels and records will continue from establishment.
- Treaty settlement continuity: confirm how existing settlement obligations, statutory relationships and partnership arrangements transfer or continue with the same or equivalent effect.

Critical path to implementation by the 2028 local elections.

The critical path is clear alongside other local government reform. Identified dependencies are manageable if work begins immediately after outline approval and is sequenced through a single transition programme.

Period	Critical milestone	Main dependency
September 2026	Cabinet decision on outline proposals	DIA assessment against Head Start criteria.
October 2026 to March 2027	Detailed proposal developed	Support from councils, GWRC, iwi, PSGEs and central government officials. Ongoing reporting to councils
March 2027	Detailed proposal submitted	Resolved policy choices and evidence base.
May 2027	Cabinet agreement in principle	Clear transition model, costs, risks and support requirements.
Mid to late 2027	Legislation and establishment settings	Cabinet policy decisions and Parliamentary timetable.
Late 2027 to mid-2028	Transition implementation	Transition body, council resources and Crown support.
Mid 2028	Elections preparation	Legislation enacted before nominations open.
October 2028	New Wairarapa Unitary Authority established	Day one readiness, service continuity and interim regional arrangements.
Late 2028 onwards	Post-establishment integration	Stable governance, funding pathway and implementation plan.

The way forward

Photo: Jet Productions

Treaty obligations and the views of mana whenua

The settlements of Ngāti Kahungunu ki Wairarapa Tāmaki nui-a-Rua and Rangitāne o Wairarapa and Rangitāne Tāmaki nui-ā-Rua recognise relationships with cultural, environmental and catchment systems across the Wairarapa. A future unitary authority would maintain existing Treaty settlement obligations and provide a more integrated platform for engagement across planning, freshwater management, environmental stewardship and community development.

A Wairarapa Unitary Authority would provide an opportunity to align local government boundaries more closely with these relationships and to strengthen direct partnerships between mana whenua and local decision makers. This is particularly relevant for freshwater management, Wairarapa Moana, catchment management, land use planning, cultural heritage and environmental stewardship, where many existing relationships and interests already operate across the Wairarapa rather than reflecting current council boundaries.

Treaty settlement arrangements further reinforce the need for governance structures that can engage consistently with mana whenua at a catchment scale, due to the statutory acknowledgements associated with areas such as:

- Ruamāhanga River
- Akitio River
- Wainui River
- Manawatū catchment areas
- Coastal marine areas

Key matters for detailed design include:

- continuity of Treaty settlement redress, statutory acknowledgements and associated governance arrangements
- future arrangements for Wairarapa Moana and related settlement commitments
- treatment of existing regional partnership and advisory mechanisms
- recognition of iwi planning documents and mana whenua interests in freshwater, land use, biodiversity, natural hazards and catchment management
- mana whenua participation in governance, strategic planning and decision making
- resourcing, accountability and monitoring arrangements to ensure partnership commitments are maintained through transition
- A partnership transition plan

Partnership transition plan

A partnership transition plan will be developed with mana whenua and relevant post-settlement governance entities during detailed design.

Detailed design should be undertaken in partnership with mana whenua and PSGEs, with a clear focus on maintaining the same or equivalent effect for existing Treaty settlement arrangements.

Workstream	Purpose	Detailed design output
Settlement obligations	Identify all Treaty settlement redress, statutory boards, statutory acknowledgements, & settlement-derived mechanisms affected by the proposal.	Settlement obligation register and agreed approach to same or equivalent effect.
Existing relationships	Map current iwi, Māori and PSGE relationships with the three district councils and Greater Wellington Regional Council.	Relationship transfer plan, including partnership forums, protocols and points of contact.
Planning and environmental roles	Confirm how mana whenua participation will be maintained in freshwater, Wairarapa Moana, catchments, land use, biodiversity and environmental management.	Agreed participation model for planning, monitoring, decision making and advisory roles.
Governance and representation	Confirm how mana whenua voice and Māori representation will operate at Wairarapa-wide and local levels.	Indicative governance settings for Māori wards, committees, partnership forums and local voice mechanisms.
Resourcing and accountability	Ensure partnership commitments are supported through capability, funding, monitoring and reporting.	Implementation plan with resourcing, reporting and accountability arrangements.

Requests of Central Government

Successful implementation will require partnership with central government. The participating councils are seeking support that enables a staged, practical and locally led transition to a Wairarapa Unitary Authority , while maintaining service continuity and community confidence.

The transition will require timely central government support. Likely support includes:

- bespoke legislation and transfer powers
- transitional governance arrangements
- electoral and representation provisions
- timing relief for Long-term Plans, Annual Plans or representation review requirements, where needed
- support to encourage regional transport
- support for rates and debt transition, where required
- implementation support for day one readiness.

Wairarapa unitary specific requests

Transport and Metlink

Public transport fare and rating settings should not be adversely affected by structural reform in local government.

Future arrangements should seek to ensure neither Wairarapa communities nor the remaining Wellington councils are materially worse off. Councils would welcome government support to guarantee future transport subsidy ratios do not disproportionally affect Wairarapa commuters, and that governance and funding arrangements endure, including through transition to a Wellington-wide transport CCO.

Planning management

Alignment of Unitary Authority boundaries and spatial and regional planning boundaries makes sense. We seek to ensure the Wairarapa Region as defined in the new Planning and Natural Environment Bills is aligned with the Wairarapa Unitary Authority boundaries.

Financial, planning and transition support

Councils would welcome targeted support to help manage transition to a Wairarapa Unitary Authority . This would include flexibility in relation to long-term and annual plans, support for transition costs or resourcing to ensure BAU service delivery, and assistance in establishing appropriate transition governance arrangements.

Rate capping flexibility

We request flexibility in applying rate capping requirements during transition, recognising that establishment, rating harmonisation and service continuity may require temporary transitional settings. We request a delay of three years to meeting the rate capping requirements.

Transitioning outline into detailed design

The detailed design phase will test whether a Wairarapa Unitary Authority can be implemented in a practical, affordable and deliverable way by 2028. A transition governance arrangement will be established immediately following Government approval to provide clear leadership, oversee detailed design, manage risks and maintain momentum through to implementation.

Priority areas for detailed design include:

- governance, representation and local voice
- transport governance and funding arrangements
- legislative requirements and Government support.
- delivery of regional council functions
- workforce, systems and service transition
- rates, debt, affordability and financial impacts
- Treaty settlement continuity and mana whenua participation
- remaining small inter-regional interfaces

The detailed design phase will identify what must be ready on day one, what can operate through interim arrangements, and what can be harmonised over time. This staged approach will support service continuity while reducing transition risk.

Engagement with communities, mana whenua, PSGEs, staff, elected members, Greater Wellington Regional Council and central government will help test options, refine the preferred model and build confidence in the final proposal.

The outcome will be a detailed proposal that provides Government with a clear implementation pathway, transition arrangements and evidence that the new authority can be successfully established by the 2028 local elections.

Transition governance

The first priority following approval should be the establishment of a transition governance arrangement to oversee detailed design and implementation planning. This arrangement will have sufficient authority while maintaining appropriate oversight by councils, mana whenua and Government. It will also provide a clear framework for programme management, reporting, stakeholder engagement and preparation for establishment of the new authority.

Detailed design will be run as a managed programme, with each workstream having a nominated lead, agreed scope, defined deliverables, reporting rhythm, decision points and dependencies. A programme management office or equivalent function will hold the overall programme view for the critical path to establishment.

This will help ensure the detailed proposal is not a set of disconnected technical workstreams, but a single integrated establishment plan.

FURTHER INFORMATION

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Photo: Sara Renall