



Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)

West Coast Local Government Reform – Head Start Pathway

What is the Head Start pathway?

The Government's Head Start pathway is part of the wider Simplifying Local Government programme. It provides councils with the opportunity to work together to explore what future local government arrangements could look like for their region.

The process is intended to support locally led approaches and allow regions to help shape how local government may evolve in the future.

What does “simplifying local government” mean?

Simplifying local government is about looking at whether there are more effective and efficient ways for councils to work together, reduce duplication where appropriate, and support better regional coordination.

The process is also intended to support delivery of the Government's new planning system and future infrastructure planning.

For more on the Government announcement: [Councils invited to fast-track local reform | Beehive.govt.nz](https://www.beehive.govt.nz/councils-invited-to-fast-track-local-reform)

What is a unitary authority or unitary-style model?

A unitary authority combines the functions of a regional council and city or district council/s into a single organisation.

The Government has indicated that Head Start proposals are expected to consider unitary-style arrangements as part of simplifying governance, reducing duplication, and improving regional coordination.

No decisions have been made about whether this would be appropriate for the West Coast, and the current process is focused on engagement and understanding community views.

What happens if one council is not on board?

Under the Government's Head Start pathway, proposals must be submitted by a group of two or more territorial authorities and must represent either:

- a majority of the directly affected councils, or
- a majority of the affected population.

This means it is possible for a proposal to proceed even if not every council involved supports it, provided the Government's eligibility requirements are met.

However, the West Coast councils are currently working collaboratively through the Head Start process and no decisions have been made regarding future structures or governance arrangements.

The current phase is focused on regional discussion, understanding opportunities and challenges, and developing an outline proposal for Government by 9 August 2026.

Any future structural proposals or governance changes would require further analysis, engagement, consultation and individual council decision-making processes.

Is this about council amalgamation?

No specific structure or model has been decided for the West Coast.

The Government has signalled a clear direction toward unitary-style reform models, which could involve changes to how local government is structured across regions. The Head Start process gives West Coast councils the opportunity to explore what might work best in our context, including how councils could work together and how services, local representation and regional functions could be delivered in the future.

Any future proposal would require further work, community engagement, formal consultation, Council decision-making, and Government consideration before final decisions are made.

What are West Coast councils doing?

Buller, Grey, Westland and Regional Councils have supported participation in the Head Start process.

The Coast is taking a coordinated regional approach focused on engagement, collaboration, and understanding community priorities before any future decisions are made.

How much is this going to cost?

The current phase of the Head Start process is focused on developing an initial regional proposal for Government between May and August 2026.

At this stage, councils are utilising a small regional project team and existing council resources to support coordination, communications, information sharing and community discussions throughout the process.

The current work programme is focused on understanding opportunities, challenges and potential future pathways for local government on the West Coast, rather than implementing structural change.

Any future phases of work beyond August 2026, including any additional analysis, engagement or formal consultation processes, would need to be considered separately by councils, including how those phases would be resourced and funded.

Councils have acknowledged the importance of ensuring the process remains practical, proportionate and mindful of costs, particularly given the wider financial pressures already facing local government and communities.

Why is the Coast taking part?

The Government has made it clear that local government reform will continue nationally over time, with a strong direction toward unitary-style models.

By participating in the Head Start process, West Coast councils are seeking to ensure the Coast has a strong voice in shaping its own future, rather than waiting for a centrally led process.

Taking part gives the region the opportunity to explore options that reflect West Coast realities, including our dispersed communities, affordability pressures, infrastructure and resilience needs, local representation, regional functions, and partnership with Poutini Ngāi Tahu.

What happens if the Coast does not participate in Head Start?

The Government has indicated that regions not progressing through Head Start would move into a compulsory “backstop” process after the 2028 local elections.

West Coast councils have chosen to participate in Head Start to ensure the region has the opportunity to take a proactive and locally led approach to the process.

Why is the Government doing this now?

The Government has linked the Simplifying Local Government programme to broader reforms, including the new planning system and future infrastructure delivery.

The stated aim is to create governance arrangements that are simpler, more effective, and better aligned with future planning and infrastructure needs.

Has a decision already been made about the future structure of local government on the Coast?

No decisions have been made on future structures or models for local government on the West Coast.

The Government has signalled a clear direction toward unitary-style reform models. This means the West Coast has been asked to consider what a unitary-style approach, or possible variants, could look like in our regional context.

The current phase is focused on listening to communities, understanding what matters most, and exploring options and trade-offs. Any future structure would require further work, community engagement, formal consultation, Council decision-making, and Government consideration before final decisions are made.

Does this mean services will be centralised away from communities?

No decisions have been made regarding service delivery arrangements.

Councils recognise the importance of local services, local identity, and strong representation for communities across the Coast. These will be important considerations throughout the process.

One of the aims of the Head Start process is to explore how local government could work better for the Coast, including how services can remain accessible and responsive to local communities while improving coordination, capability and efficiency across the region.

Any future changes to service delivery would require further detailed work, community engagement, formal consultation, and Council decision-making.

Will local communities still have representation?

Maintaining local voice and fair representation is one of the Government's assessment criteria for Head Start proposals.

Councils recognise that protecting local identity and ensuring communities continue to have a voice in local decision-making is important to the Coast.

Will councils engage with communities?

Yes.

Community engagement is a key part of the next phase of work. Councils will be seeking feedback from communities across Buller, Grey, and Westland districts to understand:

- What is important to communities
- What people value about local government
- What services and representation matter most
- What people believe the future of local government on the Coast could look like

Community engagement sessions, online feedback opportunities, and information updates will all form part of the process.

This first stage is not formal consultation on a final model. It is an early opportunity to hear from communities and help shape the proposal and the next phase of work. Detailed engagement and formal consultation would occur before any final decisions are made.

What does the August timeframe mean?

Councils have until 9 August 2026 to provide an initial regional proposal to Government.

The August milestone is not a decision point on the future structure of local government on the Coast. It is about outlining a credible pathway forward, identifying options that could work in a West Coast context, and showing how the region intends to work through the next phase of engagement, consultation, analysis and decision-making.

What happens after August?

Following submission of outline proposals, the Government will assess proposals against a range of criteria, including:

- Deliverability
- Support for the new planning system
- Simplified governance
- Economies of scale
- Maintaining local voice and representation

Cabinet is expected to consider proposals later in 2026, with further detailed work and consultation occurring before any final decisions are made in 2027.

How will proposals be assessed?

The Government has confirmed that outline proposals will be assessed against five criteria:

Deliverability – whether proposals are realistic and able to be implemented effectively.

Supports the new planning system – whether proposals support implementation of the Government's new planning system.

Simplifies local governance – whether proposals improve alignment and reduce duplication across councils.

Economies of scale – whether proposals support efficient service delivery, infrastructure planning, and regional coordination.

Maintains local voice – whether communities continue to have fair and effective representation and local decision-making.

Does the August proposal lock in a final outcome?

No.

The August milestone is about outlining how the Coast intends to work through the process and continue engagement with communities.

It is not a final decision point on the future structure of local government on the Coast.

Will this process happen quickly?

No.

The Head Start process is expected to take place over several years. Even where proposals progress, implementation would not occur until ahead of the 2028 local elections.

There is still significant work ahead, including community engagement and consultation, further investigation, detailed design work, and Government decisions.

What role do iwi have in the process?

West Coast councils and iwi have already been working together to build a shared understanding of the opportunities and challenges facing local government on the Coast.

The Government has also confirmed that Treaty settlement arrangements and existing relationship agreements and partnerships with iwi and Māori will continue to be important considerations throughout the process.

What happens to council staff?

The current phase of work is focused on engagement, understanding community priorities, and exploring what future approaches could look like.

This process is not about centralising services away from communities or reducing service delivery across the Coast. Local government will continue to require people and capability to deliver services,

maintain infrastructure, support communities, and undertake the day-to-day work councils are responsible for.

The Head Start process is also not a quick process. There is still significant work ahead, including community engagement and consultation, further investigation, detailed planning, and Government consideration before any future decisions are made.

Councils recognise that announcements relating to reform can create uncertainty and concern for staff and communities. Ongoing communication and engagement will continue to be an important part of the process moving forward.

How can I get involved?

In-person Community sessions will be held in communities across the Coast during June and July, with dates and locations to be confirmed shortly.

Information, updates, and opportunities to provide feedback will also be available through the regional engagement platform at:

[West Coast Councils](#)

Feedback can also be provided directly through local councils and online submissions.