



West Coast Local Government Reform

Community Discussion Document

Head Start Pathway

*Starting the conversation about the future of
local government on the West Coast*



Are there too many Councils on the West Coast?

Reform is coming. The Coast needs a voice.

The Government wants fewer, larger and more efficient councils across New Zealand.

Councils have been given a choice: develop a locally led proposal through the Head Start pathway or move into a central Government-led backstop process.

For the West Coast, this is our opportunity to help shape what happens next.

The scenarios in this document are starting points for discussion. The Government's guidance points toward fewer, larger unitary-style models, so some options are more likely to align with Head Start than others. No final decisions have been made, and any option taken forward would need further testing, evidence and community engagement.

Coast leaders want to know: what do you think would work best for the West Coast?



STARTING THE conversation



This is the beginning of the discussion – not consultation on a final model.

No decisions have been made on the future structure of local government on the West Coast.



This discussion document is intended to help West Coast communities understand the Government's Head Start pathway, why the Coast is taking part, and the kinds of questions that need to be worked through.



At this stage, we are asking communities to help identify what matters most: what is working well now, what could be improved, what local voice should look like, and what would need to be protected in any future system.



Feedback from this first phase will help inform the West Coast's outline proposal to Government by **9 August 2026**. The options identified through that proposal will then need to be tested in more detail to build a strong evidence base before communities are asked to consider them further.



To provide feedback online

Scan the QR code or visit the regional engagement platform:

[West Coast Councils](#)



What fits the West Coast?

Change is coming to how local government works across New Zealand.

The Government has announced a Head Start pathway, giving councils until 9 August 2026 to put forward outline proposals for how local government could be reorganised in the future.

The Government has signaled a clear direction toward fewer councils and larger unitary-style models, where regional council and district council responsibilities are brought together in some form.

For the West Coast, this raises important questions. How do we protect local voice? How do we keep services accessible? How do we manage affordability, infrastructure, resilience and regional capability across a large and dispersed region?

There are a number of possible scenarios to consider. Some may keep decision-making closer to existing districts and communities. Others may involve a wider regional structure or different arrangements with neighboring areas. Each option comes with trade-offs for local representation, cost, service delivery, regional coordination and community identity.

No decisions have been made, and there is no preferred model at this stage.

This first phase is about starting the conversation with West Coast communities before future options are tested in more detail. We want to understand what people value about local government now, what could be improved, and what would need to be protected in the future.

By taking part in the Head Start pathway, West Coast councils have an opportunity to put forward a locally shaped response to a Government-directed reform process. If the West Coast does not put forward a proposal, the region will move into the Government's Backstop process. Under that process, the future structure of local government on the Coast would be determined through a central Government-led process.

Any future model needs to reflect the realities of the Coast: our geography, small and dispersed communities, infrastructure pressures, resilience challenges, local identities, and the services people rely on every day.

Decisions about the future of the West Coast should include the people who live here.

Why the Coast is different

The West Coast is geographically large, with small and dispersed communities connected across long distances. Councils manage important local infrastructure and services, support nationally significant tourism and transport routes, and respond to resilience, flood protection and environmental challenges that are different from larger urban centres.

Why we are starting now

The Government has given councils until 9 August 2026 to submit outline proposals through the Head Start pathway. This is a short timeframe, so this first phase is about starting the conversation, understanding what matters most to communities, and helping ensure the West Coast has a strong voice in what happens next.

Key message

The West Coast should help shape its own future, rather than wait for decisions to be made elsewhere.

THE PROCESS

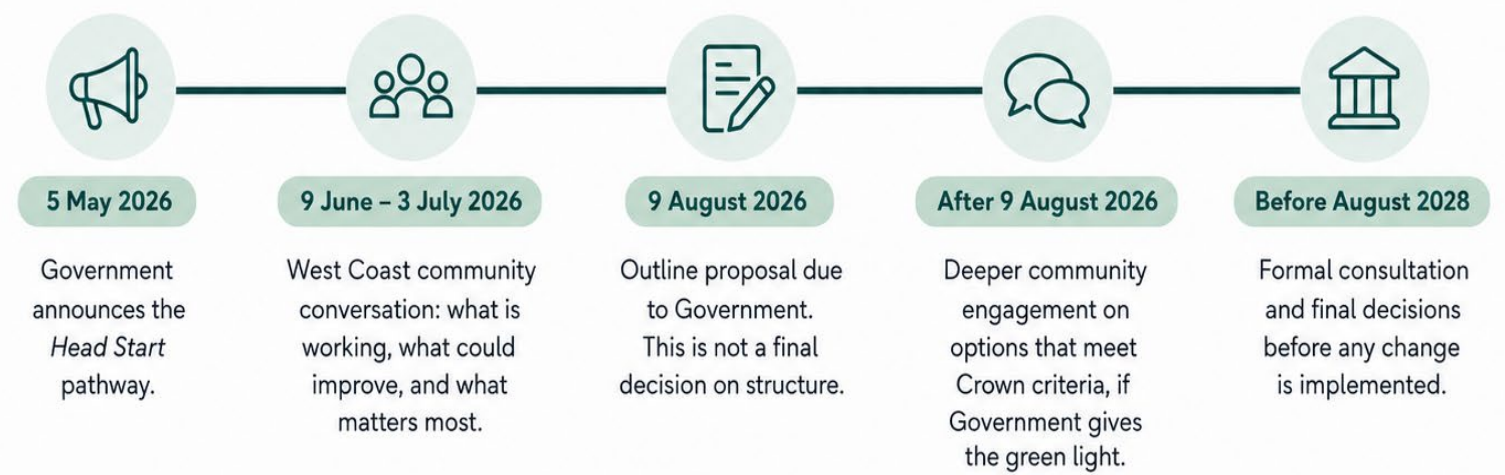
The Government has announced a *Head Start* pathway for councils to submit outline proposals for local government reform.

West Coast councils are using this as a locally led opportunity to start the conversation and shape what could work best in a unique West Coast context.

The outline proposal is due by 9 August 2026.
This is not a final decision on structure.

If Government gives the green light, there will be deeper community engagement on options after 9 August 2026.

Formal consultation and final decisions would happen before any change is implemented.



What happens after the outline proposal?

Options identified through the proposal will need to be tested in more detail to build a strong evidence base before communities are asked to consider them further.

Government criteria

The Government has set out five criteria it will use to assess Head Start proposals.



1. Deliverability

Proposals are realistic and demonstrate how new arrangements can be implemented in a timely manner.



2. Supports the new planning system

Shows support for implementing the new planning system and avoids or minimises disruption to that work.



3. Simplifies local governance

Proposes more efficient regional governance arrangements, consolidating decision-making and improving alignment between councils.



4. Economies of scale

Supports regional strategic planning and effective delivery of key regional functions, responsible asset management, infrastructure investment and service delivery.



5. Maintains local voice

Demonstrates fair and effective representation for communities of interest and how decisions will be made at the local level.

West Coast principles to guide the process As agreed by the Mayors, Chairs and Iwi Forum

These are the principles agreed to guide how the West Coast works through local government reform.



- ✓ Protect strong local representation, local identity and community voice across the West Coast.
- ✓ Ensure decisions are grounded in evidence, analysis, affordability and long-term sustainability.
- ✓ Recognise West Coast geography, distance, resilience challenges, infrastructure pressures and dispersed communities.
- ✓ Maintain essential regional capability for flood protection, environmental management, emergency management, transport planning and resilience.
- ✓ Support meaningful partnership and engagement with Poutini Ngāi Tahu throughout the process.
- ✓ Engage communities early and openly before any formal consultation or future decisions occur.
- ✓ Maintain transparency, consistency and clear communication throughout the process.
- ✓ Ensure formal decisions remain with individual councils through existing democratic decision-making processes.
- ✓ Recognise that no final decisions on future structures or governance arrangements have been made.
- ✓ Focus on long-term outcomes and what will best support future generations of West Coast communities.

Glossary

Unitary Authority	A territorial authority that also has the responsibilities, duties and powers of a regional council, combining both local and regional functions in a district council and regional council combined.
Territorial Authority	A city or district council responsible for local infrastructure and community services such as roads, water supply, wastewater, stormwater, rubbish and recycling, libraries, parks and local regulatory functions.
Regional Council	A local authority responsible for environmental protection and sustainable development with services that affect a whole region such as flood protection, pest management, regional transport planning and environmental monitoring such as air and water quality.
Reorganisation	A formal change to how local government is structured. This can involve merging councils, changing boundaries, creating new councils, abolishing existing ones, or shifting responsibilities between councils.
Council Controlled Organisation (CCO)	An organisation owned or controlled by one or more councils to deliver specific services or activities on behalf of councils.
Community Board	A locally elected body that represents a specific town, community or local area within a council. Community boards mainly provide local advocacy and community input into council decisions.
Local Board	A locally elected decision-making body within a larger council structure. Local boards can have formal responsibility for local services, facilities, budgets and community priorities within their area.
Mayors, Chairs and Iwi Forum (MCIF)	A regional West Coast leadership forum. Members include: • Buller District Council Mayor • Grey District Council Mayor • Westland District Council Mayor • West Coast Regional Council Chair • Poutini Ngāi Tahu • Development West Coast CEOs support MCIF operationally, but are not MCIF members.

Potential scenarios

The scenarios in this document are included to help communities understand the types of pathways that could be considered, the trade-offs involved, and the issues that would need to be tested in more detail.

These are not final decisions. They are starting points for discussion.

Why scenarios are included

The West Coast needs to put forward a credible proposal that fits within the Government's criteria, while also reflecting what matters most to our communities.

The scenarios help test:

- how local voice could be protected;
- how services could remain accessible;
- how regional functions such as planning, flood protection, transport, resilience and environmental management could be delivered;
- what scale and capability would be needed;
- what risks, costs and trade-offs would need further analysis; and
- what communities think would work best for the Coast.

Important

- The Government's guidance indicates that a single unitary authority across a region is the most straightforward model under the Head Start pathway.
- More complex options, including sub-regional or cross-boundary arrangements, would need stronger evidence and further testing to show they are workable and would not fragment important regional functions.
- Detailed financial, rating, service delivery, representation and transition analysis has not yet been completed.
- Each scenario comes with trade-offs for local voice, service access, affordability, capability, regional coordination and community identity.
- The August proposal is not a final decision. Any option taken forward would need further evidence, detailed design and meaningful community engagement before final decisions are made.

Options unlikely to meet Government criteria

Government guidance is clear that proposals must focus on fewer, larger unitary-style models. The options below are shown for context and understanding only.

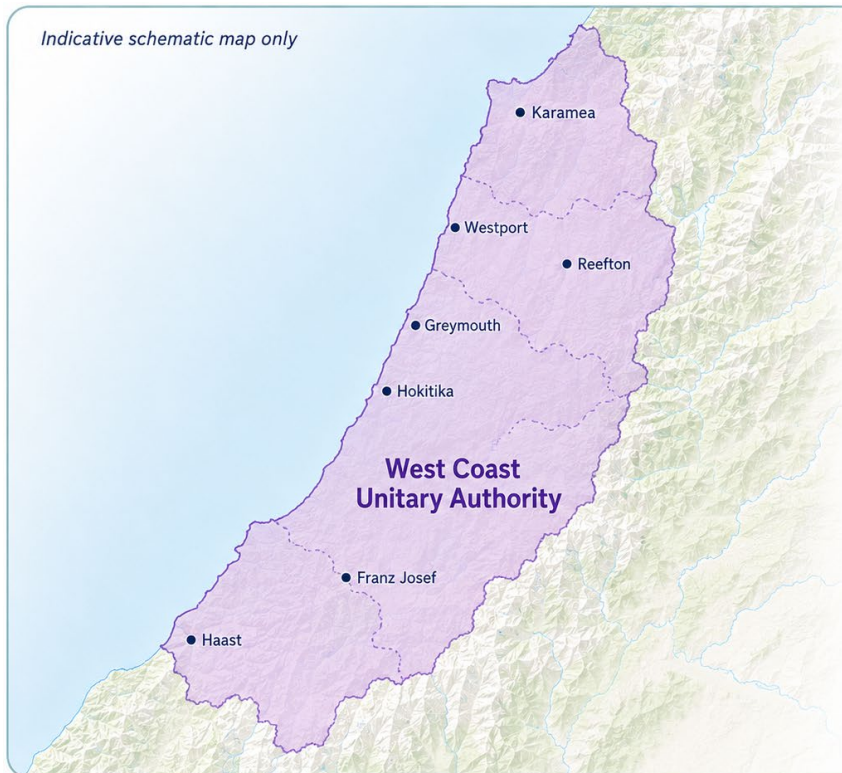
Option	Description	Alignment with Government criteria	Why unlikely to meet criteria
 1. Current structure Buller District Council, Grey District Council, Westland District Council and West Coast Regional Council remain as separate councils in their current form.	Four councils continue in their current form, including the regional council. The Government has signaled that the current regional council structure is unlikely to continue beyond 2028.	 Unlikely to meet Government criteria	- Does not align with the Government's direction for fewer, larger unitary-style models. - Keeps multiple councils and duplicated governance. - Regional council structure not expected to continue beyond 2028. - Less likely to achieve the scale, capability and efficiency the Government is seeking.
 2. Three separate unitary councils Buller District Council, Grey District Council and Westland District Council each absorb regional council functions and operate as separate unitary authorities.	Each district council becomes a unitary authority, taking on regional council functions independently.	 Unlikely to meet Government criteria	- Results in three small unitary councils, which does not align with the direction for fewer, larger councils. - Higher costs and duplication likely to remain. - Makes it harder to coordinate regional services and infrastructure across the West Coast.

 **We are not including these options as scenarios for further discussion and testing.**
They are unlikely to meet the Government's Head Start criteria and therefore are not appropriate starting points for reform.

Scenario A. One Council for the Coast, an amalgamated unitary authority

A single unitary authority is established across the West Coast, combining Buller, Grey, Westland and current regional council functions into one organisation. This would create one council responsible for local and regional decision-making across the entire West Coast.

Indicative schematic map only



One West Coast unitary authority

A single unitary authority is established across the West Coast, combining Buller, Grey, Westland and current regional council functions into one organisation. This would create one council responsible for local and regional decision-making across the entire West Coast.

Potential opportunities

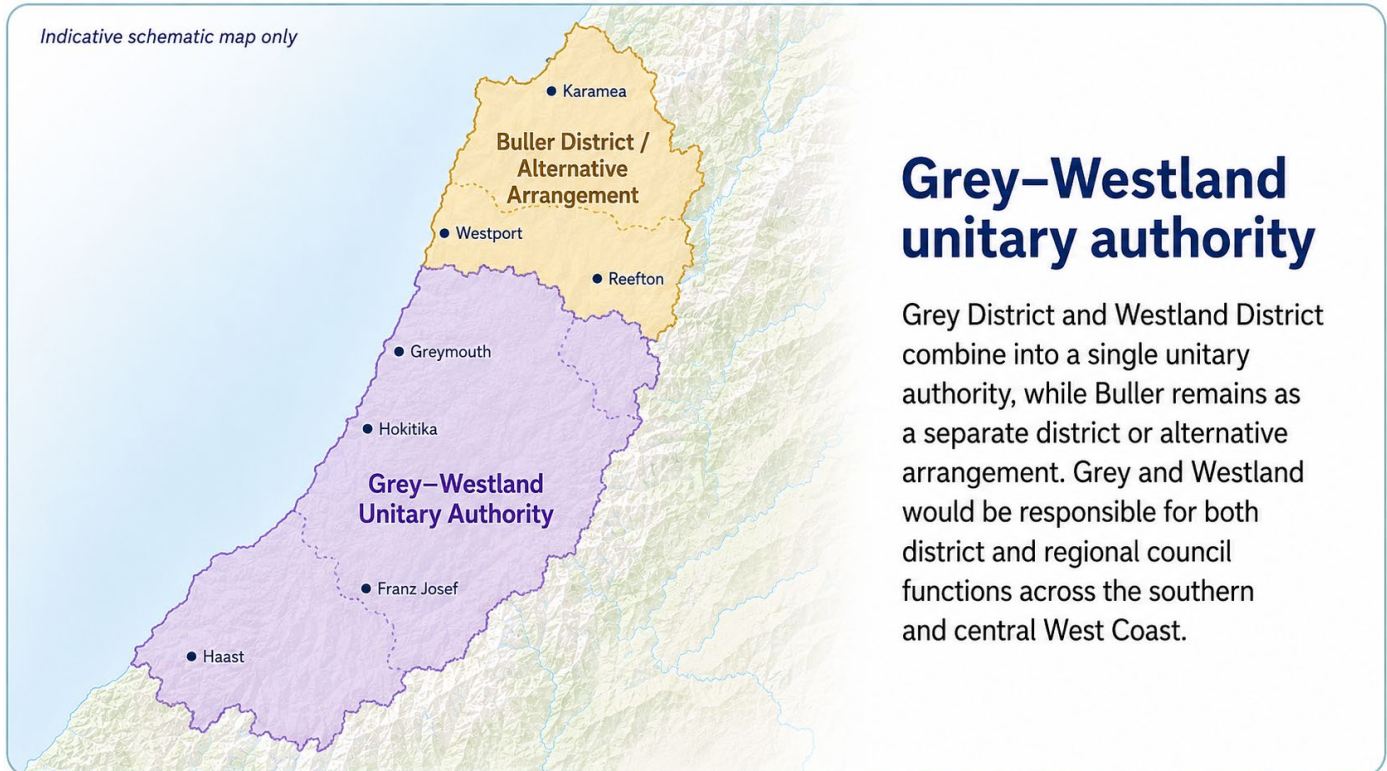
- Simplifies governance by creating one council for the Coast.
- Could improve regional planning, infrastructure coordination and service delivery alignment.
- May reduce duplication and provide a stronger collective voice to central government.
- Could help protect and strengthen regional capability if designed well.

Questions to test

- How would local voice be protected across Buller, Grey, Westland including smaller communities?
- What local boards, community boards or local leadership arrangements would be needed?
- What would the financial and rating impacts be?
- How would local service access be maintained across a large geography?

Scenario B. Grey-Westland unitary authority with separate Buller arrangement

Grey District and Westland District combine into a single unitary authority, while Buller remains as a separate district or alternative arrangement such as an alignment with Tasman. Grey and Westland would be responsible for both district and regional council functions across the southern and central West Coast.



Potential opportunities

- Could reflect some existing economic, transport, tourism and service connections between Grey and Westland.
- Creates a larger structure than current district arrangements.
- Could improve coordination across shared infrastructure and services in the central and southern Coast.

Questions to test

- How would regional functions be delivered across Buller?
- Would this fragment West Coast-wide planning and advocacy?
- How would the model support emergency management, resilience and infrastructure coordination across the whole Coast?

Scenario C. What alternative options or local voice arrangements are we missing?

The scenarios in this document are not the only possible ways local government reform could be designed. We want to know whether communities can see other options, combinations or local governance arrangements that should be explored further.

What else should be considered?

- Are there other combinations of councils or boundaries that would make more sense?
- Are there local board, community board or local leadership arrangements that would better protect local voice?
- Are there shared service, CCO or phased transition models that should be tested?

Community question:

- What are some alternative options, local governance arrangements, or design features that we may be missing?
- Use the regional engagement platform or discussion session to share your views.

Keeping local voice in any future model

West Coast Local Government Reform

A key question for the West Coast is how local representation and decision-making can be retained if governance structures become larger or more regional. This will need to be tested carefully before any final decisions are made.

Wards

Electoral areas within a council. Councillors are elected from different parts of the region, such as Buller, Grey, Westland or smaller communities of interest.

Potential strengths

- Simple and familiar
- Ensures different parts of the Coast elect representatives to the main council
- Helps avoid all councillors being elected from one population centre

Potential limitations

- Does not automatically create local decision-making
- Councillors still make decisions as part of the full council
- Smaller communities may still feel distant from regional-scale decisions

Community boards

Locally elected bodies that represent and advocate for a town, area or community within a council district. They can provide local input and may have delegated responsibilities from the council.

Potential strengths

- Keeps community advocacy close to local areas
- Flexible and familiar under the Local Government Act
- Could work well for smaller or distinct communities such as Reefton, Karamea or South Westland

Potential limitations

- Generally advisory unless given strong delegations
- Do not have the same statutory decision-making role as local boards
- Influence depends heavily on what powers and budgets the main council delegates

Local boards or local leadership bodies

A stronger local governance layer within a larger council structure. Local boards can be allocated decision-making responsibility for local, non-regulatory activities, local priorities, facilities and budgets.

Potential strengths

- Stronger local decision-making than community boards
- Could give Buller, Grey, Westland or other areas a defined role in setting local priorities
- May help balance one regional council with meaningful local control

Potential limitations

- More complex and potentially more expensive to establish and support
- Needs careful design so responsibilities are clear and not duplicated
- Would still sit within the wider council and would not be separate councils

Design questions for the West Coast

- What communities of interest should be represented locally?
- Should local representation be based on existing districts, towns, catchments, service areas, or another approach?
- What decisions should sit with the regional governing body, and what decisions should be made locally?
- Should local bodies have their own budgets or influence over local priorities?
- How would smaller and remote communities maintain access to elected members and council services?
- How would local voice be balanced with the need for regional coordination on infrastructure, resilience, environmental management and planning?

Key message

For the West Coast, retaining local voice will require more than electing councillors from different areas. Any future model would need to be clear about representation, decision-making powers, budgets, local service access and accountability.