

BIG REFORMS DECISIONS

**TELL US
WHAT YOU THINK**

**Monday 6 July –
Friday 24 July
2026**

The Government is proposing the biggest **shakeup** to the way local government services are delivered across New Zealand since 1989.

FIND OUT MORE AT
timaru.govt.nz/headstart or
mackenzie.govt.nz

Councils across the country have been invited to put forward proposals for new unitary authorities – councils that would combine both district council and regional council responsibilities into one organisation.

Your council now needs to decide whether to submit an outline proposal to the Ministry of Cities, Environment, Regions and Transport by 9 August 2026.

Before making this decision, we want to hear what you think.

This information is being collated by Timaru District Council and Mackenzie District Council.



Why, What & When?

Why is this happening?

New Zealand currently has separate district/city councils and regional councils in many parts of the country. District councils are responsible for local services such as roads, community facilities, libraries, parks, cemeteries and local planning and building consents.

Regional councils are responsible for functions including freshwater management, flood protection, environmental monitoring, biosecurity, public transport, regional transport planning, and coastal management.

The Government says it wants a simpler system, with larger unitary councils that do all these things while ensuring they:

- support the new planning system;
- simplify local governance;
- create economies of scale;
- maintain strong local voice; and
- can be realistically delivered in time for the 2028 local elections.

What is a unitary council?

A **unitary council** is a single council that carries out both:

- the local functions currently carried out by district councils; and
- the regional functions currently carried out by regional councils.

This means one organisation is responsible for local roads, parks, libraries, community facilities, district planning, environmental regulation, river and catchment management, flood protection, regional transport planning, and other regional functions. It could also involve agreements to share the delivery of some services with other councils (but not the decision making).

A larger unitary council would not necessarily mean that every decision is made centrally. Any proposal would need to explain how local communities would continue to be represented and heard. Options could include wards, community boards, local committees, local service centres, or other arrangements designed to maintain local voice.

What decision is your Council making now?

Your local Council is **not** making a final decision to amalgamate with other councils through this consultation.

At this stage, your local Council is deciding whether to submit an outline proposal to the Government under the Head Start pathway and what form that should take.

If the Government accepts an outline proposal, it would move into a more detailed design phase. That later phase would involve more detailed work on representation, costs, services, staff, assets, debt, boundaries, regional functions, Treaty settlement arrangements, and public consultation before any final implementation.

The final shape of the council may differ from what we're suggesting in this paper, but your feedback will help us understand what's important to you.

Why is the timeframe so short?

The Government has set a deadline of 9 August 2026 for Head Start outline proposals.

This means we do not have enough time to run the type of full consultation process normally expected for a decision of this scale.

We are therefore running a shorter, focused consultation process to help inform your local Council's decision before it considers whether to submit an outline proposal. Although the timeframe is short, this is an important decision, so it's important that you have your say.

When is this happening? The proposed process is:

**Monday
JULY
06**

Public consultation opens

**Friday
JULY
END**

Councils consider feedback and decide whether to submit an outline proposal.

**Friday
JULY
24**

Public consultation closes

**Sunday
AUGUST
09**

Government deadline for Head Start outline proposals

September 2026

Cabinet decision – whether to approve or decline proposals

→ On the following pages you will find more information about the options we are considering

The options we want your feedback on

Council is seeking feedback on the following broad options A-E.

Note that all maps are indicative only and do not reflect what the final boundaries will look like. Information is sourced from publicly available sources.

At this stage, we are asking:

Do you support Councils putting forward a locally led Head Start outline proposal, and if so, which broad direction do you prefer?

Catchments vs territorial boundaries

Should the new council follow existing council boundaries, or should it include whole river catchments where that makes environmental and flood-management sense? We've highlighted the approximate expanded areas on the maps in green.

OPTION A

A South Canterbury Unitary Council based on either territorial or river catchment boundaries.

Size (territory)

13,425sq kms

GDP: approx.

\$5.4 billion

Population: approx.

63,500

Council assets: approx.

\$3.1 billion

This option would create a new unitary council covering:

- Timaru District;
- Waimate District; and
- Mackenzie District.

And optionally (extended part of map)

- the Rangitata River catchment currently within Timaru and Ashburton Districts; and
- the Waitaki River catchment currently within Waitaki, Waimate and Mackenzie Districts.



This option would bring together three districts with a combined population of just over **63,000 people**. It offers strong local coherence, easier delivery and a clear South Canterbury identity, but has the least scale of the Head Start options.

Using existing territorial boundaries may be easier to implement than a catchment-based model because it would avoid some of the boundary, rating, asset and debt-splitting issues that could arise from including parts of Ashburton and Waitaki districts. However, the council would still need to manage rivers within its territory and may need to collaborate with neighbours on rivers that cross or sit on boundaries.

Possible advantages

- Builds on existing economic and community connections across South Canterbury.
- May be more deliverable within the Government's timeframe.
- Could support better integration of local and regional functions than current arrangements.
- May provide stronger long-term planning for infrastructure, land use, freshwater, transport and economic development than current arrangements, although with less scale than the larger options.
- Gives local councils and communities more influence over the shape of reform than waiting for the backstop process.
- Could reduce some duplication between district and regional council functions over time.
- The three councils broadly agree on this approach already.

Possible disadvantages or risks

- Is likely to be too small to meet the Government's economies of scale measure.
- Some regional functions, especially river and freshwater management, may still require cross-boundary arrangements.
- Detailed arrangements for assets, debt, staff, services and representation are not yet known.
- Local voice arrangements would need careful design due to different population sizes in existing districts.
- Using only territorial boundaries would leave some river and catchment management issues to be managed through cross-boundary arrangements, including for the Waitaki River.

Including river catchments (highlighted in green)

- This option also recognises that some regional council functions, such as river management, flood protection and freshwater management, work most logically across catchments rather than existing district council boundaries.
- Including the Waitaki and Rangitata catchments could reduce the complexity of shared river management and provide a more integrated approach to environmental and infrastructure planning.
- This would add the additional cost of river management in these areas which may not be fully met by rates from the number of rating units gained.
- There will be boundary, rating, asset and debt-splitting issues to work through that would arise from including parts of Ashburton and Waitaki districts in any final model.

OPTION B

A Mid-South Canterbury Unitary Council based on either territorial or river catchment boundaries.

Size (territory)

19,607sq kms

GDP: approx.

\$8.4 billion

Population: approx.

100,900 people

Council assets: approx.

\$4.3 billion

This option would create a new unitary council covering the existing boundaries of:

- Timaru District;
- Waimate District;
- Mackenzie District; and
- Ashburton District.

And optionally (extended part of map):

- the Rakaia River catchment currently within Selwyn and Ashburton Districts; and
- the Waitaki River catchment currently within Waitaki, Waimate and Mackenzie Districts.



This option would bring together four districts with a combined population of just over 100,000 people, providing more scale and capability than Option A while still offering a reasonably coherent Mid-South Canterbury model.

Possible advantages

- Creates a larger organisation than Option A, with greater scale and capability.
- Better aligns local and regional functions in one council.
- May provide stronger long-term planning for infrastructure, land use, freshwater, transport and economic development.
- Gives local councils and communities more influence over the shape of reform than waiting for the backstop process.
- Could reduce duplication between district and regional council functions over time.

Possible disadvantages

- Larger boundaries may make some communities feel more distant from decision-making, and local voice arrangements would need careful design.
- Detailed arrangements for assets, debt, staff, services and representation are not yet known.
- There may be transition costs before any efficiencies are achieved.
- Ashburton's strongest links may differ across communities, with some connections north toward Greater Christchurch and some south toward Timaru.
- Agreement would be needed with other councils and the Government.

Including river catchments (highlighted in green)

- This option also recognises that some regional council functions, such as river management, flood protection and freshwater management, work most logically across catchments rather than existing district council boundaries.
- Including the Rakaia and Waitaki catchments could reduce the complexity of shared river management and provide a more integrated approach to environmental and infrastructure planning.
- This would add the additional cost of river management in these areas which may not be fully met by rates from the number of rating units gained.
- Including parts of existing neighbouring districts would add complexity, and local voice arrangements would need careful design.
- There will be boundary, rating, asset and debt-splitting issues that would arise from including parts of Selwyn and Waitaki districts in any final model.

OPTION C

A Mid-South Canterbury & North Otago Unitary Council based on either territorial or river catchment boundaries.

Size (territory)

26,715sq kms

GDP: approx.

\$10.5 billion

Population: approx.

125,400 people

Council assets: approx.

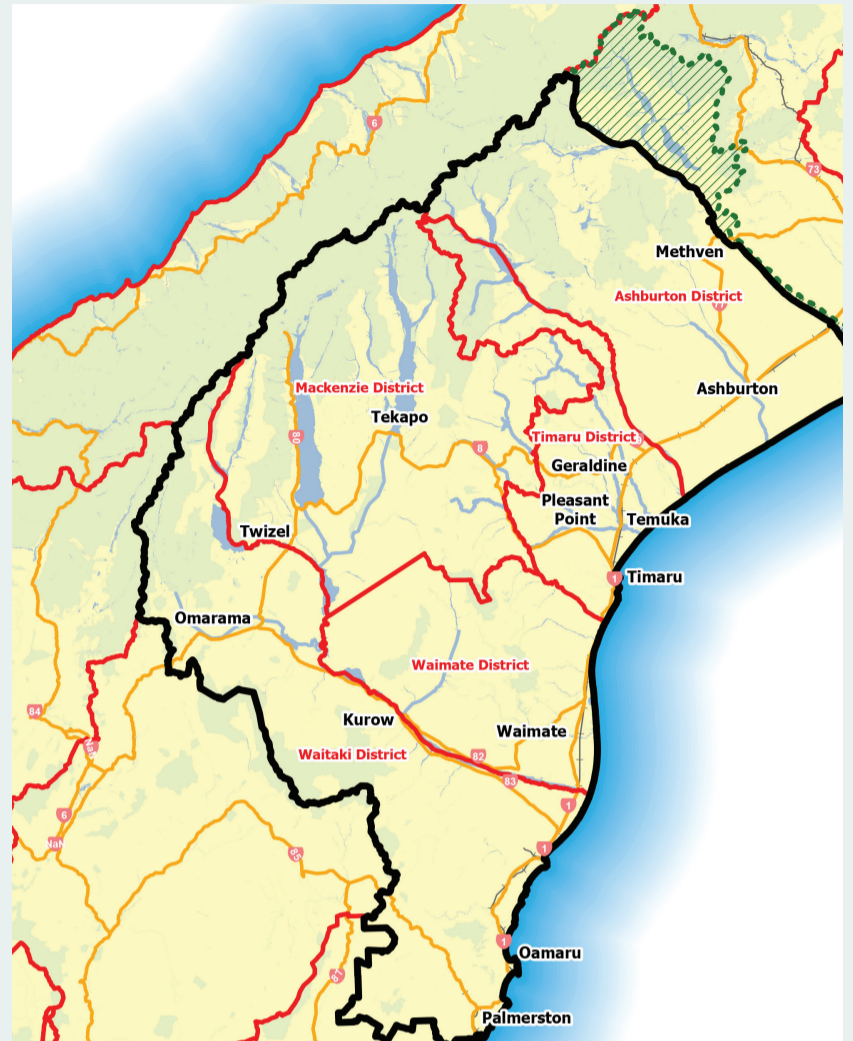
\$5.7 billion

This option would create a new unitary council covering the existing boundaries of:

- Timaru District;
- Waimate District;
- Mackenzie District;
- Ashburton District; and
- Waitaki District.

And optionally:

- the Rakaia River catchment currently within the Ashburton and Selwyn Districts.



This option would bring together five districts with a combined population of just over **125,000 people**. It provides the greatest scale of the options and the most integrated territorial approach to managing major rivers such as the Waitaki and Rangitata and Rakaia, but is also the most complex arrangement.

Possible advantages

- Creates the largest organisation of these options with the greatest scale and capability.
- Better aligns local and regional functions in one council, including management of major rivers such as the Waitaki and Rangitata and optionally the Rakaia.
- May provide the strongest long-term planning for infrastructure, land use, freshwater, transport and economic development.
- Gives local councils and communities more influence over the shape of reform than waiting for the backstop process.
- Could significantly reduce duplication between district and regional council functions over time.

Possible disadvantages

- The larger boundary may make some communities feel more distant from decision-making, and local voice arrangements would need careful design.
- Detailed arrangements for assets, debt, staff, services and representation are not yet known.
- There may be transition costs before any efficiencies are achieved.
- Ashburton and Waitaki's strongest links may differ across communities, with some connections north toward Greater Christchurch and some south toward Otago/Dunedin.
- Agreement would be needed with other councils and the Government.

Including river catchments (highlighted in green)

- This option also recognises that some regional council functions, such as river management, flood protection and freshwater management, work most logically across catchments rather than existing district council boundaries.
- Including the Rakaia catchment could reduce some shared river management complexity, but may also introduce new boundary and catchment management questions, including how complex sites such as Te Waihora / Lake Ellesmere would be managed.
- Including parts of existing neighbouring districts would add complexity, and local voice arrangements would need careful design.
- This would add the additional cost of river management in these areas which may not be fully met by rates from the number of rating units gained.
- There will be boundary, rating, asset and debt-splitting issues that would arise from including parts of Selwyn District in any final model.

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OPTION D

Do not submit a Head Start proposal and enter the backstop process.

Under this option, your local Council would not submit an outline proposal through the Head Start pathway.

Your local Council would continue operating under the current structure for now. However, based on the Government's current direction, councils that do not proceed through Head Start are expected to enter a later backstop process after the 2028 local elections. The detailed design of that process has not yet been confirmed.

Possible advantages

- Avoids moving quickly into an outline proposal before greater information is available.
- Allows more time to understand the Government's wider reform direction.
- Avoids some short-term transition planning costs, although transition costs may still arise later if reform proceeds through the backstop process.
- Maintains current council arrangements for the remainder of this triennium.

Possible disadvantages or risks

- Your local Council may have less influence over the final shape of local government reform.
- Detailed arrangements for assets, debt, staff, services and representation are not yet known and would still need to be determined through a later process by an external organisation.
- Future boundaries and governance arrangements may be decided through a more centralised process.
- The district could be grouped into a larger structure that has not been locally developed.
- The community may have less opportunity to shape the outcome than through a locally led proposal.
- Reform appears likely to happen regardless of whether Council participates in Head Start, based on signals from central government.

OPTION E

Other option – You may prefer another arrangement.

For example, you may support:

- a smaller South Canterbury unitary council;
 - a larger Canterbury or rural Canterbury model;
 - a different combination of districts;
 - different boundary arrangements;
 - shared services rather than amalgamation;
 - a different approach to local representation; or
 - another option entirely.
- We want to hear what you think would best serve **your district** and the wider region.

HOW TO HAVE YOUR SAY



If you are part of the Timaru District you can provide feedback by:

Preferred option:

Completing the online feedback form - visit timaru.govt.nz/headstart or scan the QR code here.



Or

Filling out the consultation form on the next page and:

- Dropping it into any Timaru District Council facility
- Scanning and emailing to submission@timdc.govt.nz
- **Freepost to:**
Freepost Authority number 95136
Timaru District Council
PO Box 522
TIMARU 7940

Please indicate whether you wish to speak to Timaru District Council at the Hearing on 31 July 2026.



If you are part of the Mackenzie District you can provide feedback by:

Completing the online feedback form - scan the QR code here, or visit letstalk.mackenzie.govt.nz/local-government-reform-headstart



Or

Filling out the consultation form on the next page and:

- Dropping it into our Mackenzie District Council offices
- Scanning and emailing to feedback@mackenzie.govt.nz
- **Post to:**
HeadStart Feedback
Mackenzie District Council
PO Box 52
FAIRLIE 7949

Please indicate whether you wish to speak to your Council at the Hearing (date and venue will be advertised separately, and communicated directly to submitters who have indicated they want to attend).

Forms can also be collected from council offices in Fairlie and Twizel.

All feedback needs to be received by 5pm on Friday 24 July 2026.

Your local Council will consider all feedback before making a decision in late July 2026.

Due to the nature of these reforms, which will involve multiple communities, as part of its decision making your local Council will also be considering the position of its neighbouring councils. This means the final shape of any proposal may vary from what is in this consultation document.

The outcome of any proposal cannot be guaranteed as the final decision sits with central government, and any councils that do not make a proposal may eventually be brought into already formed partnerships.

