

Head Start Pathway

Thoughts from Mayor Ken Laban Koromatua
Te Awa Kairangi ki Tai Lower Hutt

7 July 2026



Foreword Mayor Laban



Kia ora,

The case for working together as a region is compelling. In response to the Government's local government reform agenda, Hutt City Council has considered how a unitary council can be designed to work for both our region and local communities.

It is a delicate balance, but not a leap into the unknown. Lessons from the Auckland amalgamation and other jurisdictions can help shape a

design that delivers the best outcomes at community and regional levels.

To ensure our thinking reflects what our communities value, we have engaged people through public feedback, an ongoing regional community panel testing ideas as proposals evolve, and an interactive stakeholder workshop.

There is strong support for amalgamation, but not at any cost. Our communities want control over what defines their area, including parks, facilities, events, grants and bylaws. They want the same or better services, accountability for expenditure and performance by area, and assurance that rates will not rise in the short term to cover another council's deferred maintenance or debt.

This document sets out practical responses to these concerns. It represents Hutt City's contribution to the regional design process and provides elected members with a reference point to assess the emerging design.

Working together, drawing on what each of us brings, is how we will get amalgamation right for our region.

Nāu te rourou, nāku te rourou, ka ora ai te iwi. With your food basket and my food basket, the people will thrive.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Ken Laban'.

**Mayor
Ken Laban**

Community engagement at a glance:

54.96% voted in favour of exploring amalgamation through a non-binding poll during the 2025 Local Elections.

16 consultation meetings during the draft annual plan engagement reaching around 500 people

418 community members shared their views in our public feedback process following the Government's Head Start announcement in June 2026.

~150 community leaders from organisations, businesses and community groups participated in the Mayor's Stakeholder Forum 1 July 2026.

101 residents from across the Wellington region are taking part in an ongoing Regional Community Reference Group, established by participating councils, providing iterative community insight over multiple rounds of engagement.

*Community engagement will continue throughout the development of any future proposals.

Introduction



Purpose

This document articulates concerns raised by communities, Mana Whenua, elected members, other senior leaders, and subject matter experts during the Headstart process. It provides targeted responses to each and sets out how these might be integrated into a coherent high level design.



What we are seeking

We are seeking robust discussion and alignment across partner councils on Head Start proposal content that addresses our highest priority concerns.



Why now

The outline proposal is due 9 August 2026. The choices we make in the coming weeks will determine whether we have used the Headstart process to:

- Agree practical solutions to common concerns
- Propose "innovative approaches to new forms of local representative bodies (i.e., not constrained by current Local Government Act 2002 options)" as requested by Government



Structure of this document

This document has two parts:

- **Part one:**
Subsidiarity
Local where it matters most, regional where it adds value
- **Part two:**
Design components
Provides a table of thirty design components. It articulates a high level design to demonstrate that the practical responses set out in this document can exist coherently within an overall high level design that can be further developed once a proposal is accepted by Government.

1

Part One Subsidiarity

Local where it matters most,
regional where it adds value



Our communities told us three things are important – and the evidence confirms they are right



<p>Local voice and identity</p>	<p>What we heard Communities want control over what defines their area – parks, facilities, events, grants, bylaws, service levels.</p>	<p>Why it matters</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Social cohesion is strengthened by decentralisation and citizen-driven accountability (World Bank, 2024) ▪ Climate and disaster resilience is strengthened by local participation, decentralisation, and flexibility in governance (Carabine & Wilkinson, 2016) ▪ Gaps between local needs and government responses during a disaster often drive public mistrust (Jewett et al, 2021)
<p>Service quality</p>	<p>What we heard Amalgamation is not a reason to reduce services. Communities expect the same or better, with accountability by area.</p>	<p>Why it matters</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Auckland’s local boards have no systematic mechanism to verify fair distribution of service delivery and spending ▪ Voter turnout dropped from 51% to 38% after amalgamation in Auckland; amalgamation failed to increase democratic engagement (Asquith, 2020) ▪ Auckland Local board chairs report funding reallocated without community input (NZ Herald, May 2024)
<p>Affordability and subsidisation</p>	<p>What we heard Communities want to know their rates won’t increase to pay for other councils’ deferred maintenance or debt.</p>	<p>Why it matters</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Auckland’s “Fairer Funding” reallocation left 8 boards with a \$6M shortfall (RNZ, Feb 2026); boards had no mechanism to prevent it ▪ Auckland’s amalgamation did not deliver material cost savings; staff numbers increased (Asquith, 2020) ▪ Each council enters amalgamation with a different debt and deferred maintenance position

We support a Unitary Authority with six Community Councils based on existing boundaries



Unitary Authority



What changes

Nine separate organisations become one. One CE, one rates system, one plan, one set of corporate functions.



What stays

Your community's identity, your elected representatives, your local decisions, and your Community Council's name.



Options

We think a minimum size for a community council is for a population of approximately 50k, so accept that within the Wellington City area, they may wish to break down further. Should the Councils at Upper Hutt and Hutt City area, a combined Te Awa Kairangi / Hutt Valley is an option.

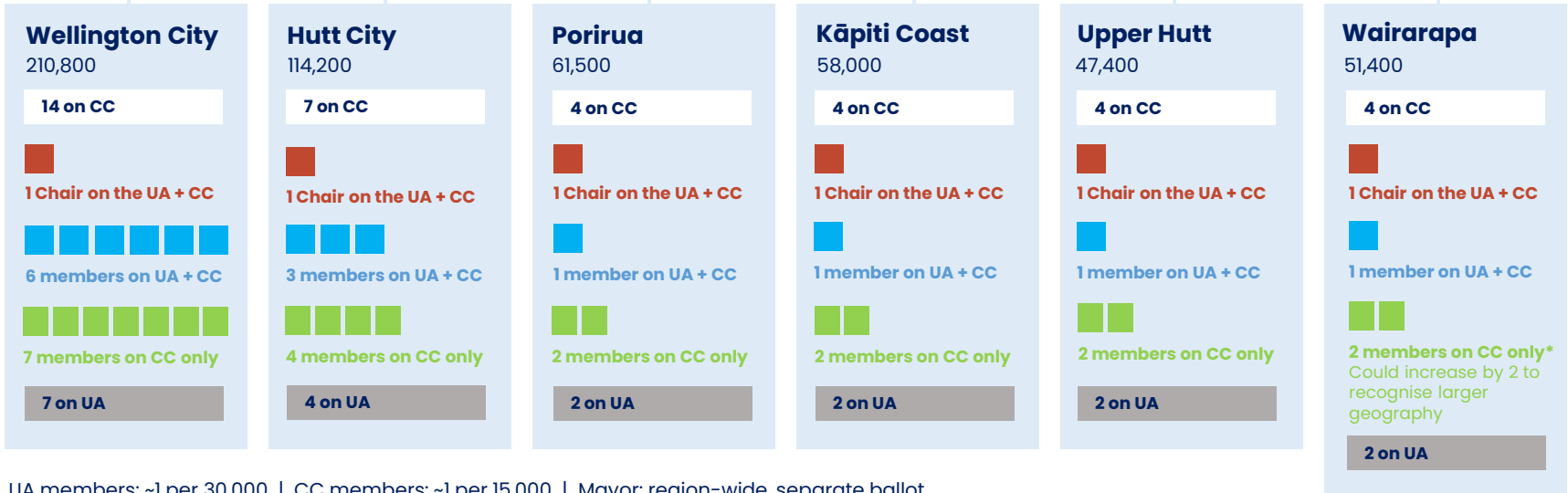
Why existing boundaries?

- Communities already identify with these places – people know what “Porirua” or “Kāpiti” means
- Existing relationships with Mana Whenua, community organisations, and local businesses are built around these areas
- Service delivery footprints, local knowledge, and institutional relationships are established
- Likely to satisfy the most people in getting over the line in short order
- These boundaries are closest to Iwi rohe and settlement areas
- Arbitrary new boundaries risk repeating Auckland's mistake – creating areas that don't match how people think about where they live

We support voters directly electing all seat types – the UA mayor, a Community Council chair, and two types of Community Council members



Unitary Authority ■ Mayor (region-wide ballot) + 19 members from Community Councils = 20



UA members: ~1 per 30,000 | CC members: ~1 per 15,000 | Mayor: region-wide, separate ballot

* Additional CC member for Upper Hutt and Wairarapa equalises representation (~25,000 per CC-only member, matching larger councils).

We support structural protection against one or two city control of the budget and policy framework, and appropriate protection to ensure water catchments are protected



Without two-thirds majority

- Simple majority = 11 votes
- Wellington City (7) needs only 3 allies from across the region plus the mayor to control every budget decision.
- Your community has no structural protection.

With two-thirds majority

- Budget adoption = 13 votes
- Wellington City (7) needs 5 allies plus the mayor
- Forces genuine cross-regional consensus.

The two-thirds majority is a structural mechanism that prevents a large population block from controlling the Unitary Authority's budget, policy framework and secures protection for wider catchment areas. For water catchments, protection also carries through the settlement-based arrangements already in place over the region's water bodies.

We support Community Councils deciding what's local, with their own funding base



Community Councils decide:

- Parks, reserves, and open spaces
- Community facilities and venues
- Events, festivals, and community grants
- Local bylaws (alcohol, dogs, noise)
- Local service levels
- Streetscape and placemaking
- Library services (local programme)

These are binding decisions. The Unitary Authority cannot override them.

Funded by:

- **Allocated budget** – formula-based share of UA revenue. CC sets priorities within it.
- **Local precept** – additional revenue your CC can raise for local priorities.

Unitary Authority decides:

- Rating policy and total revenue
- Regional infrastructure strategy
- Transport planning and Metlink
- Unitary district plan
- Resource consenting
- Environmental management
- CE appointment, civil defence

These decisions benefit from regional scale and coordination.

Funded by:

- **General and targeted rates** – set by the UA. Single rating system for the region.
- **Fees, charges, and grants** – development contributions, user charges, central government funding.

We support the delivery of some services by Community Councils and Community Councils holding the UA to account for others



Where it makes sense, the Unitary Authority delivers services on behalf of the Community Council – to standards the Community Council sets, under a published service level agreement.

Your Community Council:

- **Informs priorities** – what matters most for your area
- **Sets standards** – what level of service your community expects
- **Delivers some services**
- **Holds the UA to account for others** – through published SLAs and reporting



The Unitary Authority:

- **Sets budget and policy frameworks, priorities and spatial plans**
- **Delivers services** – to the standards your CC has set
- **Reports performance** – quarterly, by Community Council area, published
- **Is accountable** – CE's review includes delivery against each area's SLA
- **Is the system owner**

Example: parks and reserves

Your CC decides the service level – how often mowing happens, what the playgrounds look like, which reserves are prioritised within the budget parameters set for these services at a UA level. The UA's parks team delivers to that standard under an SLA. If they don't, your CC can see it in the quarterly report and escalate through the dispute process.

Our bottom lines need to be in enabling legislation – anything in policy can be changed by a future majority



Must be in the enabling Act

1. Community Councils as a statutory governance tier with protected decision rights
2. Entrenched Māori wards and a standing Mana Whenua body. Transfer of all Treaty settlement obligations
3. Common constitution – legally binding allocation of powers between UA and Community Councils; can be changed with 75% majority
4. Override protection – the UA cannot reclaim local decisions within defined areas
5. Two-thirds supermajority for budget, LTP adoption, and policy framework, and water catchment matters
6. Local precept authority – Community Councils can raise additional local revenue
7. Transitional rating differentials and debt ring-fencing
8. Service level agreements and dispute resolution framework
9. Performance reporting by Community Council area
10. Standing scrutiny committee with statutory mandate
11. Provision for ±10% representation deviation at both UA and CC tiers

Why legislation, not policy?

Auckland's local board protections sit in council policy. The governing body changed the funding formula in 2024, leaving eight boards with a \$6M shortfall. Boards had no mechanism to prevent or reverse the decision.

If it's not in the Act, a future UA majority can remove it by simple majority vote.

Can be done by UA policy

- Committee structures
- Advisory panels (youth, ethnic, disability)
- Channel strategy (offices, digital)
- Standing orders and meeting procedures
- Staff delegations for routine consenting
- Community engagement approaches
- Internal reporting format

We support a staged transition that protects service continuity, mitigates rate hikes, and limits the risks of cross-subsidisation



Service reform framework



Next stage design led by Councils with government, informed by communities, staff and cross-sector learning.
 Continuity guaranteed · Off-ramps at every step · Investment deferred until proven · Risk back-loaded

Four protections against cross-subsidisation

1

10-year rating transition

Rates converge gradually over a decade as per LTPs — no area faces a sudden shock.

2

Debt ring-fence

Each council's legacy debt stays with its own area; no community inherits another's liabilities.

3

Transparent reporting

A published account of what each area raises and what it funds.

4

Financial reserves

Existing financial reserves stay with that community, not absorbed into the Unitary Authority.

A single rating system delivers regional efficiency — these four protections mean no community subsidises another's legacy position.

2

Part Two Design Components



A. Governance tier structure and B. Regional political leadership

Ref	Component	Recommendation	Rationale
A. Governance tier structure			
A1	Governance tier structure	Two tier: unitary council with community councils	Unitary Council required by Head Start. Local councils provide a second level of governance that is critical to local voice and representation.
A2	Unitary boundaries	Existing GWRC boundary – option to join for Horowhenua	Matches functional economic area, catchments, and existing institutional relationships (Metlink, Wellington Water). Existing boundaries sit closest to Iwi rohe and Treaty settlement geographies.
A3	Legal basis	Bespoke enabling legislation	Allows specific priority governance features (empowered community councils, scrutiny function) to be protected in legislation. Auckland is a precedent for bespoke legislation. Bespoke legislation is the mechanism that carries Treaty settlement obligations to the new entity.
B. Regional political leadership			
B1	Regional mayor selection	Directly elected by all voters region-wide on a separate ballot	NZ norm. Provides democratic mandate for regional leadership.
B2	Regional mayoral powers	Strong executive Mayor. Mayor proposes budget and direction, council decides. Mayor has three powers: appoint deputy mayor, establish committees, appoint committee chairs. Mayor is an ex-officio member of each committee	NZ norm. Consistent with existing legislation. Moderate powers require broad support for major decisions and avoids the dominance possible under a strong mayor model with veto powers as seen in some overseas jurisdictions
B3	Deputy leadership	Mayor-appointed deputy. Potential for portfolio deputy mayors	NZ norm. Mayor needs a trusted deputy, and a council-elected deputy can create competing power centres in a new entity that needs cohesion. Portfolio deputy mayors allow for specialised accountability and leadership across distinct areas (e.g. infrastructure, environment, planning, community services) while keeping clear lines of responsibility visible to the public.

C. Regional governing body and D. Regional decision-making

Ref	Component	Recommendation	Rationale
C. Regional governing body			
C1	Unitary Council size	19 Councillors plus Unitary Mayor	Large enough for meaningful representation across diverse communities; small enough for effective decision-making.
C2	Electoral districts	Six localities based on existing council boundaries (with Wairarapa as one locality), with the number of Councillors per locality based on population. Same boundaries for Community Councils	Multi-member localities allow minority views within each area to win representation. Existing TA boundaries represent settled communities of interest, so aligning electoral districts with them allows voters to elect representatives who genuinely reflect coherent local communities rather than arbitrary administrative lines drawn for convenience. Some flexibility should those individual TA's decline.
C3	Electoral system	STV (Single Transferable Vote)	Best suited to a diverse region and produces more proportional outcomes than FPP. Already available under NZ law and used region-wide in GWRC elections and some TA elections.
C4	Electoral cycle	4-year terms	Give elected members enough time to develop a genuine long-term strategy and see it through rather than being forced into short-term decisions driven by an imminent election cycle. Requires legislation.
D. Regional decision-making			
D1	Executive model	Mayor leads, no cabinet — all councillors participate in the committee system.	Rejects an executive/cabinet model that would split the council into decision-makers and a backbench. Every councillor has a substantive role in governing, which builds cohesion in a new entity and ensures all localities share in regional decisions. The mayor leads through agenda-setting, chairing, and leading development of plans and budgets — a genuine leadership vehicle without concentrating executive power.
D2	Committee structure	Finance and strategy committee to shape the budget and LTP; standing committees by portfolio for infrastructure, regulatory, community, planning/environment/water catchment; Standing scrutiny committee (see K2); Community council chairs attend relevant committees.	Committees create specialised accountability across the unitary's core functions, Community Council chairs feed community knowledge directly into relevant decisions, and the scrutiny committee acts as the institutional check that stops portfolio committees becoming captured by their own subject matter. The catchment committee carries the settlement based arrangements already in place, those appointments retain their vote, consistent with the Systems Improvement Bill.
D3	Voting rules	Simple majority, with supermajority (two thirds) for budget, LTP, policy framework and water catchment matters.	Two thirds supermajority for budget, LTP, and policy framework and water catchment decisions prevents a bare majority from imposing its priorities on the whole region.

E. Second tier of governance — the critical design choices

Ref	Component	Recommendation	Rationale
E. Second tier of governance			
E1	Leadership and selection	Each Community Council has a Mayor/Chair who is directly elected by voters in that locality. CC Chair sits on Unitary Council	Direct election gives the Community Council Mayor/Chair a personal democratic mandate that is independent of the regional governing body, making them a genuine advocate for their community rather than a representative who owes their position to colleagues on the unitary council.
E2	Member selection	Community Council members are directly elected by voters in that locality	Democratic mandate is essential. Appointments lack legitimacy.
E3	Number and boundaries	Six based on existing council boundaries (with Wairarapa as one locality), with the number of Councillors per Community Council ranging from 4 to 14 based on population (totalling 37 community council members). Wairarapa having four members recognises the scale of geography. Some flexibility should TA's agree	Each locality is a recognisable democratic identity that communities can rally around, and treating Wairarapa as a single locality acknowledges that its three councils are too small to warrant separate representation. The size of each community council should match the volume of local governance work, with a larger population facing more issues and having more community organisations to engage (the ratio is ~14,000 residents per community council member; meets fair-representation ±10% rule (though not precisely). <i>Requires legislation</i>
E4	Role in unitary council	14 of the 37 Community Council members are also members of the Unitary Council, with the number of members on both ranging from 1 to 5 based on population.	Dual-mandate members create a structural link between tiers without needing separate liaison mechanisms, scaling by population preserves proportionality in unitary decisions while ensuring smaller localities aren't overwhelmed by the demands of operating at both levels. <i>Requires legislation</i>
E5	Powers	Allocated budgets for parks, events, grants, facilities and a statutory right to be heard on significant resource consents and plan changes in their area. Not full planning authority (incompatible with unitary) but a legislated requirement that the entity must consider and formally respond to community council views.	Gives community councils real decision-making power over day-to-day community life, while the legislated right to be heard on consents and plan changes — with a mandatory response requirement — ensures local voice is genuinely considered rather than merely consulted, without fragmenting the unitary's planning authority. <i>Requires legislation</i>
E6	Legal basis	Statutory basis in enabling legislation	Without a statutory basis, community councils exist at the pleasure of the unitary and can be defunded, restructured, or ignored — a statutory foundation locks in their powers, budgets, and right to be heard, giving communities certainty that local representation cannot be dismantled by a future governing body. <i>Requires legislation</i>
E7	Relationship to unitary governing body	19 unitary councillors are members of Community Councils; the Unitary Council Mayor is not a member of any Community Council; Community Council Chairs attend relevant unitary council committees; Community Councils have Statutory autonomy in defined areas + service management framework	Every unitary councillor has a direct local accountability relationship and can't operate purely as a regional politician detached from community concerns; chairs attending relevant committees creates upward flow of local knowledge without duplicating governance structures; and statutory autonomy with a service management framework gives community councils genuine authority in defined areas rather than delegated functions that can be withdrawn — making the two-tier relationship collaborative rather than hierarchical. <i>Requires legislation</i>

F. Indigenous and community diversity representation, G. Management, and H. Functional bodies

Ref	Component	Recommendation	Rationale
F. Indigenous and community diversity representation			
F1	Indigenous / Treaty	Māori wards + partnerships the norm	Māori Wards carry the general Maori and mātawaka voice. A new Mana Whenua standing body holds the settlement derived functions consolidated from the current nine councils. Committee appointments giving effect to settlements return their votes as per Systems Improvement Bill.
F2	Community diversity	Standing advisory panels	Auckland model. Panels for youth, ethnic communities, disability, seniors, business, rural. Established by council resolution — no legislation needed.
G. Management			
G1	CE appointment	Governing body appoints	Required under LGA 2002 s42. Non-negotiable. Open competitive process.
G2	CE accountability	To governing body	Required under NZ law. CE reports to council collectively, not to the mayor individually.
G3	CE contract	Fixed term, up to 7 years	System Improvements Bill will enable this. Longer term provides stability across electoral cycles. Critical for a new entity where the first CE sets the culture. <i>Requires legislation</i>
H. Functional bodies			
H1	Functional bodies	In-house default, CCO for transport only	Auckland’s CCO model created accountability problems. Default to in-house delivery. Transport (Metlink integration) justifies a CCO for operational independence — but with stronger accountability provisions than Auckland Transport.

I. Financial and J. Planning

Ref	Component	Recommendation	Rationale
I. Financial			
I1	Budget-setting	Mayor proposes, council approves (two thirds supermajority)	Auckland model. Mayor prepares budget with input from finance & strategy committee. Council must approve by 75% — forcing cross-community consensus.
I2	Rating	Differential rating with 10-year transition	Different areas have very different rating levels. Uniform rating overnight creates massive winners and losers. Auckland used transitional differentials — essential for Wellington too.
I3	Borrowing	Prudential (self-regulated via LGFA)	NZ norm. No change needed. LGFA provides efficient wholesale lending.
I4	Financial delegation	The Unitary Council is responsible for rating, fees, and regional investments. However, there is a regional/local hybrid budget. Community Councils have ability to set local precept.	Captures the efficiency and equity benefits of amalgamation. Allowing community councils to set a local precept preserves fiscal autonomy for localities that want higher local service levels than the regional baseline, making the funding model honest about the fact that different communities have genuinely different priorities and willingness to pay.
J. Planning			
J1	Planning framework	Inherited plans, with 5-year mandate for unitary plan	Inherited plans on day one (only viable approach). Enabling legislation should mandate a single unitary plan within 5 years.
J2	Regulatory delegation	Centralised, with staff delegation for routine consents	Standard NZ practice. Staff process non-notified consents under delegation. Hearings panels for contested applications. Community councils have statutory input rights (see E4).
J3	Bylaw authority	Sub-local can make local bylaws within defined scope	Auckland precedent. Community councils can make bylaws on matters like alcohol control, dog management in local areas. Strengthens local voice.

K. Accountability and L. Transition

Ref	Component	Recommendation	Rationale
K. Accountability			
K1	External audit	Auditor-General (OAG)	Required under NZ law. No alternative.
K2	Internal scrutiny	Standing scrutiny committee	Separate from decision-making committees. Mandate to investigate and report publicly. Members cannot simultaneously sit on executive committees. This is an ‘adaptation needed’ item — should be legislated in the enabling Act.
K3	Conduct standards	Code + external enforcement	Proposed in System Improvements Bill. Expected to become law. Strengthens public trust in the new entity.
K4	Transparency	Enhanced (open data + performance reporting by community council area)	Performance data broken down by community council area is essential for the service management framework and accountability. Communities must be able to see how their area is being served.
L. Transition			
L1	Interim governance	Appointed transition authority (Auckland model)	Auckland Transition Agency precedent. Independent body manages the mechanics of amalgamation. Current elected members continue until first election. Settlement obligations remain live through change, Mana Whenua representation keeps the contact
L2	First election	Before transition day	Auckland model. New council elected with democratic mandate before entity goes live, which would likely be one year later.

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