

## Council Amalgamations: Do it yourself or have it done to you

**On 5 May 2026, the Government announced the Head Start for Simplifying Local Government, a voluntary pathway enabling councils to reorganise before the wider local government reform takes place from 2028.**

**The pathway is available to councils that are willing and able to draw up outline reorganisation proposals by Sunday 9 August.**

**What proposals can be submitted and who submits them?**

The Head Start pathway is focused on structural reform, allowing councils to propose new unitary authorities that combine regional and territorial council functions. They do not need to cover an entire region and may involve neighbouring territorial authorities from other regions.

Any two or more territorial and/or unitary authorities (except for Auckland) including cross-boundary groupings, may submit a proposal by 9 August if they represent a majority of either the:

- directly affected territorial authorities, or
- population across directly affected areas.

Proposals cannot be submitted by minority groupings, individual territorial authorities, regional councils, individuals or other organisations.

**How will the proposals be assessed?**

All proposals must provide for the establishment of a unitary authority, and Cabinet will assess each proposal against five criteria:

- **Deliverable:** Proposals will need to be realistic and

show how new arrangements can be efficiently implemented.

- **Supports reform:** Proposals will need to clearly support the new planning reform.
- **Simplifies local governance:** Proposals will need to consolidate decision-making and improve efficiencies.
- **Effective and affordable:** Proposals will need to support regional strategic planning and effective delivery of regional functions, while demonstrating responsible and affordable asset management, infrastructure investment and service delivery.
- **Maintains local voice:** Proposals will need to demonstrate fair and effective representation for communities of interest and how decisions will be made at the local level, while balancing urban and rural interests.

The Government has also indicated that proposals should address the need to consolidate transport functions, propose interim arrangements with respect to the new planning system requirements, and explain how effective river catchment management can be maintained. Councils are also expected to engage with relevant post-settlement governance entities to demonstrate how existing Treaty settlement arrangements could be transferred to the new unitary authority.

**Next steps for councils**

Councils that submit their proposal by the deadline of 9 August will then wait to see if it will be accepted by Cabinet into the Head Start pathway. This deadline creates pressure on councils that may choose to consult with communities on their proposals before submitting. Once received, Cabinet will decide this year if proposals are to be put onto the pathway, with any successful proposals developed in detail and signed off in 2027 to be implemented ahead of the 2028 local elections.

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## Council Amalgamations: Do it yourself or have it done to you (Continued)

Councils not on the Head Start pathway will be subject to a backstop process. The backstop process gives councils not prepared to submit a proposal more time to concentrate on implementing the planning system reforms. It also means that reform will occur for those councils after the 2028 local elections through a compulsory process.

The backstop process has not been published yet but legislation for the process is aimed to be implemented in 2027 before the 2028 local elections.

### **Regional councils: the days are numbered**

The Head Start pathway is a significant departure from the original proposal to replace regional councillors with boards of Mayors. In this new update, the Government has indicated that regional councillors will not be elected at the 2028 local elections and will be replaced by an interim body of decision-makers.

While this interim body remains unclear, the Government has considered that it may look like the board of Mayors as originally proposed, or Crown commissioners, or a hybrid model. This model will be confirmed after the Head Start proposals are approved in 2027.

### **Want to know more?**

If you have any questions about the Head Start Pathway and how it might affect you or your Council, please contact our specialist [Environment and Planning team](#).