

Ōpōtiki District Council

Pānui

Ngā kōrero o te wā mai Te Kaunihera ā Rohe o Ōpōtiki | Keeping you up to date with Ōpōtiki District Council

Simplifying Local Government Reform: An update for our community

At its meeting on 4 August 2026, Ōpōtiki District Council resolved to participate in the Government's Head Start pathway by submitting a proposal for an Eastern Bay of Plenty unitary council alongside Whakatāne District Council and Kawerau District Council.

This is an important milestone in what is expected to be a multi-year process. While the proposal has now been submitted, no decisions have been made about changing local government arrangements, and there will be further opportunities for communities to have their say in the coming months.

Why is local government reform happening?

Earlier this year, the Government announced its Simplifying Local Government reform programme.

The Government has identified a number of challenges facing councils across New Zealand, including:

- Increasing financial pressure on councils and ratepayers
- Ageing infrastructure requiring significant investment
- Growing regulatory responsibilities
- Duplication between regional and territorial councils
- The need for more efficient and accountable local government.

As part of the reform programme, the Government has signalled its intention to replace the existing two-tier system of regional and district/city councils with a simplified structure focused on unitary authorities that combine regional and territorial council responsibilities into a single organisation.

What is the Head Start pathway?

The Head Start pathway gives neighbouring councils the opportunity to work together to design proposals that best reflect the needs of their communities, rather than waiting for a nationally directed solution.

Councils choosing this pathway have been asked to prepare proposals demonstrating how future governance arrangements could:

- Improve local decision-making
- Deliver more efficient and integrated services
- Strengthen long-term financial sustainability
- Better support economic development and environmental management
- Recognise the unique characteristics and aspirations of local communities.

Since the announcement, Ōpōtiki District Council has been exploring potential amalgamation options. These included a single unitary council for the whole Bay of Plenty, an Eastern Bay unitary council covering Whakatāne, Ōpōtiki and Kawerau councils and an expanded version of the Eastern Bay grouping which also included Rotorua.

Listening to our community

Before making its decision, Council undertook community engagement to understand local views.

Community feedback highlighted that people are passionate about the future of Ōpōtiki and want to ensure any changes deliver genuine benefits for local communities.

Some of the strongest themes emerging from the engagement included:

- Protecting our Ōpōtiki identity and voice
- Ensuring local decision-making remains close to communities
- Improving efficiency without reducing local representation
- Maintaining affordable services and infrastructure
- Ensuring Treaty settlement commitments and iwi partnerships continue to be respected
- Allowing sufficient time for any transition to be carefully planned.

Many submitters also expressed a desire for more information before significant decisions are made and emphasised the importance of meaningful community involvement throughout the process.

Feedback received showed a clear preference for an Eastern Bay of Plenty unitary authority, bringing together the three councils while transferring the current regional council responsibilities within the Eastern Bay to the new organisation.

What happens next?

Submitting a Head Start proposal does not automatically create a new council.

The proposal will now be considered by the Government as part of the national reform programme.

If the proposal progresses, further work is expected to include:

- Detailed assessment by central government
- Refinement of governance and service delivery arrangements
- Further engagement with iwi, stakeholders and the community
- Development of transition planning
- Future opportunities for public consultation.

Council has also been clear that, while it supports the proposal, careful implementation planning will be essential to ensure any future changes are well managed and continue to deliver quality services to our communities.

Looking ahead

Local government reform represents one of the most significant changes to councils in a generation.

While there is still considerable work ahead, Council believes participating in the Head Start pathway ensures the Eastern Bay has the opportunity to help shape its own future rather than having a solution designed elsewhere.

We appreciate everyone who has taken the time to participate so far and encourage our community to remain engaged as the process continues.

Together, we can help shape a future local government model that supports strong communities, effective local leadership and sustainable services for generations to come.

Continuing to have your say

Residents can stay involved by:

- Following updates on Council's website
- Subscribing to Council newsletters
- Attending future public information sessions
- Participating in consultation opportunities as they arise
- Sharing feedback through Connect Hono Mai
- Contacting councillors or Council staff with questions or comments.

Community input will remain an important part of the reform process, and there will be additional opportunities to provide feedback as further information becomes available.

Council is committed to keeping the community informed throughout this process and ensuring decisions continue to be guided by the interests of the people of Ōpōtiki.

For more information please visit the Council website or scan the QR code.

connect.odc.govt.nz