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Hon Simon Watts
Minister of Local Government

By email: S.Watts@ministers.govt.nz

Tēnā koe Minister Watts

Manawatū-Whanganui regional response to the Simplifying Local Government process

We write collectively as the Mayors of the participating councils of the Manawatū-Whanganui region to outline our collective position and intended way forward in response to the Government's Simplifying Local Government process.

Our councils have heard clearly from our communities. They expect us to take the reform of local government seriously, but they also expect us to take the time to understand the problems being solved, test the benefits and trade-offs, protect local voice, and recognise the different circumstances of each district and city.

We also recognise that individual councils may choose to write separately to you to outline their own local context, community feedback, reform interests or formal position. Where that occurs, those letters should be read as that council's position, while this letter should be read as setting out the shared regional process and the areas of common ground between participating councils.

For that reason, we have agreed to work together through a locally led regional process. This is not an application to enter the Head Start pathway. It is a practical response to the Government's broader reform challenge and is intended to ensure that the region is organised, proactive and able to provide Government with a credible view of the options, risks and opportunities before more formal decisions are required.

The **attached** Memorandum of Understanding sets out the framework the councils intend to use. It provides for a Regional Working Party of mayors and appointed representatives, a Chief Executive Steering Group, a Technical Working Group, and an independent facilitator to support disciplined progress, constructive challenge and clear decision points. **This has been adopted by all participating Councils.**

To date, the councils have completed the initial work needed to establish a common direction. This includes confirming the need for a shared regional process, identifying the councils that wish to participate, agreeing the broad purpose and principles for collaboration, recognising the role of Horizons Regional Council in supporting regional knowledge and transition planning, and setting out an indicative work programme.

The work programme is designed to move at pace, but not at the expense of good process. It will develop a shared evidence base, identify district-specific interests and non-negotiables, test regional, sub-regional and relevant cross-boundary options, consider engagement and consultation requirements, and enable each council to make an informed decision on whether to proceed to a more detailed proposal or conclude the process.

Our approach also recognises that iwi, hapū, mana whenua and Treaty settlement responsibilities must be considered early and properly. These relationships and obligations are place-based, statutory and enduring, and they need to be understood as part of any credible discussion about future local government arrangements.

We also recognise that the participating councils do not all start from the same position. Each council has its own community of interest, neighbouring relationships, growth pressures, infrastructure challenges, financial context and appetite for change. Some councils may need to test local, sub-regional or cross-boundary options because those relationships are relevant to their communities. The MOU does not prevent that. Instead, it provides a way for those options to be surfaced, tested transparently against agreed criteria, and understood alongside regional options before any council makes a formal decision.

Our intention is to provide Government with a clear regional direction at the conclusion of the proposed work programme. That update will set out the evidence base, the options tested, the key benefits and trade-offs, the engagement and consultation considerations, and the next decisions required from individual councils. This will give Government visibility of our locally led approach as it considers its wider local government reform programme.

We would welcome ongoing engagement with officials as this work progresses, including early confirmation of Government contact points, any matters where central government guidance would assist, and any flexibility that may be needed to support a robust locally led process.

We are not waiting for decisions to be made for us. We are taking responsibility for working through the issues in a way that is organised, evidence-based and respectful of the communities we serve. We consider this a responsible approach for participating councils in the Manawatū-Whanganui region and a constructive contribution to the Government's reform objectives.

Yours sincerely

Nikki Riley
Chair
Horizons Regional Council

Bernie Wanden
Mayor
Horowhenua District Council

Michael Ford
Mayor
Manawatū District Council

Grant Smith
Mayor
Palmerston North City Council

Andy Watson
Mayor

Weston Kirton
Mayor

Rangitikei District Council

Ruapehu District Council

Scott Gilmore

Mayor

Tararua District Council

Andrew Tripe

Mayor

Whanganui District Council

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