

West Coast Local Government Reform

Head Start Community Engagement Report

Phase One – A Community Conversations Summary

July 2026



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Executive Summary

The West Coast Local Government Head Start Project was established to support a locally led response to the Government's Head Start programme and to ensure West Coast communities have an early opportunity to help shape future local government arrangements for the region.

The first phase of engagement focused on understanding what participants value about local government, the challenges they see in the current system, the opportunities for improvement, and the principles they believe should guide any future governance model. Engagement was undertaken between 6 June and 6 July 2026 through an online engagement platform, printed feedback forms, written feedback, social media engagement and seven community drop-in sessions across Buller, Grey and Westland. The project received 196 feedback-form responses and engaged with an estimated 130 people through drop-in sessions.

This report summarises the views of the 196 people who chose to participate in this initial phase of community engagement. While not statistically representative of the West Coast population, the feedback provides an early indication of the issues, opportunities and concerns participants consider important and helps inform the development of the Outline Proposal.

Participants were generally less focused on organisational structure than on whether any future model would deliver better outcomes than the current system. Many recognised opportunities to improve regional coordination, reduce duplication, strengthen capability and provide better value for ratepayers. However, there was less agreement on how those outcomes should be achieved. Views ranged from support for a single West Coast unitary authority, through to stronger collaboration between existing councils, shared services, or alternative governance arrangements.

Across all three districts, local voice and representation were identified as fundamental to any future arrangements. Participants wanted accessible local services, protection of community identity and assurance that decisions affecting local communities would remain connected to the people and places they impact. Affordability, financial impacts, implementation costs, service delivery and representation arrangements were also areas where participants sought more information before forming a final view.

Different emphases emerged across the three districts. Buller feedback placed strong emphasis on the district's geography, identity, funding challenges and the need to protect local influence. Grey feedback was generally pragmatic and evidence-focused, with participants seeking clear analysis that any reform would improve efficiency, governance and long-term sustainability. Westland feedback showed greater interest in creating a more capable future model, provided local representation, accessible services and community identity are protected.

The findings do not provide a mandate for any particular governance model. They represent the views of participants in an initial, time-limited engagement process and are intended to inform, not determine, the next phase of work. If Government agrees the Outline Proposal in principle, a substantially more comprehensive programme of evidence gathering, option development and community engagement would be undertaken before any preferred model or final decisions are considered.

If councils decide to progress through Head Start, further evidence gathering, financial analysis, option development, governance design and formal community consultation would be required before any final decisions on future local government arrangements are made.

Background

Purpose of the Head Start Project

Local government across New Zealand is entering a period of significant change. Through the Head Start pathway, the Government has invited regions to develop locally led proposals for future arrangements, consistent with its direction toward fewer, larger and more efficient councils. For regions that do not submit a credible proposal, the Government has indicated it may apply a backstop process: a Government-led approach to reorganisation, including transitional governance arrangements while new structures are established.

The West Coast Local Government Head Start Project is a collaborative initiative involving Buller, Grey and Westland District Councils, the West Coast Regional Council and Poutini Ngāi Tahu through the Mayors, Chairs and Iwi Forum. It was established to enable the West Coast to develop a locally led response to the Government's Head Start programme, announced on 5 May 2026, and to ensure communities have an opportunity to help shape the region's future local government arrangements.

The project brings together community engagement, technical investigation and council input to inform the West Coast Outline Proposal. While the Government has indicated a preference for unitary-style models, the Outline Proposal is not a final decision on council structure. If councils decide to progress beyond this stage, further analysis, option development and formal community consultation would be required before any future governance arrangements could be considered or implemented.

Purpose of Phase One Community Engagement

The purpose of the first phase of community engagement was to begin a conversation with West Coast communities about the future of local government and to understand the values, priorities, opportunities and concerns that are important to people across the region.

This was intentionally a limited first phase designed to begin the conversation. It was not intended to establish community support for a particular model or provide a representative sample of West Coast opinion. Rather, it sought to identify the issues communities believe should be explored through a more comprehensive evidence-gathering and engagement process.

West Coast communities were invited to share their views on the strengths and challenges of the current local government arrangements, the outcomes they believe are most important, and what should be protected if future governance arrangements are considered. Participants were asked to consider a small number of potential governance scenarios as discussion starters. These scenarios were selected because they represented plausible structural options that could meet the Government's Head Start criteria and helped participants test how different arrangements might affect regional coordination, local representation and service delivery.

The scenarios were not recommendations and participants were not being asked to choose a final model. Their purpose was to identify which options communities considered worthy of further investigation, understand the reasons for those views and invite alternative ideas that should be examined during any subsequent evidence and detailed-design phase.

The engagement was undertaken over a relatively short timeframe to meet the Government's Head Start programme timeframes which was announced on 5 May with an Outline Proposal due by 9 August 2026. A number of respondents commented that they would have liked more time and

information before providing feedback, reflecting the significance and complexity of the issues being considered. These views have been acknowledged as part of the engagement findings.

What this report covers

This report summarises the findings from the first phase of community engagement undertaken as part of the West Coast Local Government Head Start Project.

The report brings together feedback received through the online engagement platform, written submissions, community feedback forms, social media engagement and community drop-in sessions held throughout the West Coast. It presents both quantitative survey results and qualitative themes emerging from community comments and discussions. The report also includes observations from the project team regarding the engagement process and key issues consistently raised during conversations with participants.

The findings contained in this report do not represent a decision on any future governance model. Rather, they provide an evidence base to assist the participating councils and the project team in developing an Outline Proposal for consideration by Government. They will also inform the next phase of work, including further analysis, option development and future community engagement.

The report should be read as a summary of the views expressed by those who participated, rather than a measure of overall community opinion across the West Coast.

What happens next

The draft Outline Proposal and supporting engagement findings will be presented to the three West Coast District Councils for consideration as per the eligibility criteria set out by the Department of Internal Affairs. Regional Councils cannot submit a proposal however their support can be noted within an Outline Proposal. Should the councils agree to proceed, the Outline Proposal will be submitted to the Government by 9 August as part of the Head Start process.

Submission of an Outline Proposal does not represent a final decision on the future structure of local government on the West Coast.

Engagement Approach, Participation and Reach

Engagement objectives

Engagement was undertaken between 6 June and 6 July 2026 and was based on the principle that communities should have an opportunity to help shape the development of future governance options from the outset.

A range of engagement methods were used to encourage participation and ensure people could provide feedback in the way that best suited them. These included:

- An online engagement platform containing background information and an electronic feedback form.
- Printed feedback forms available through council offices and community locations.
- Community drop-in sessions held across the West Coast, providing opportunities for people to ask questions, discuss the project with members of the project team and provide feedback in person.
- Written submissions from individuals and organisations wishing to provide more detailed feedback.
- Project communications through council websites, social media, local media and stakeholder networks to raise awareness of the engagement period.

Feedback was welcomed from anyone with an interest in the future of local government on the West Coast, including residents, businesses, iwi, community organisations, industry representatives, ratepayers and people with an ongoing connection to the region.

Considering the relatively short engagement period, the engagement generated useful early feedback from across Buller, Grey and Westland despite the compressed timeframe. Participation was voluntary and self-selected, and the results are therefore intended to identify themes for further investigation rather than represent the views of the wider West Coast community.

The following sections provide an overview of participation, key survey metrics, community sentiment and the themes that consistently emerged throughout the engagement process.

PARTICIPATION AT A GLANCE



A snapshot of community engagement



TOTAL FEEDBACK
RECEIVED

196



COMMUNITY
DROP-IN SESSIONS

7



ESTIMATED ATTENDEES

130

BULLER
RESPONSES

89



GREY
RESPONSES

65



WESTLAND
RESPONSES

42



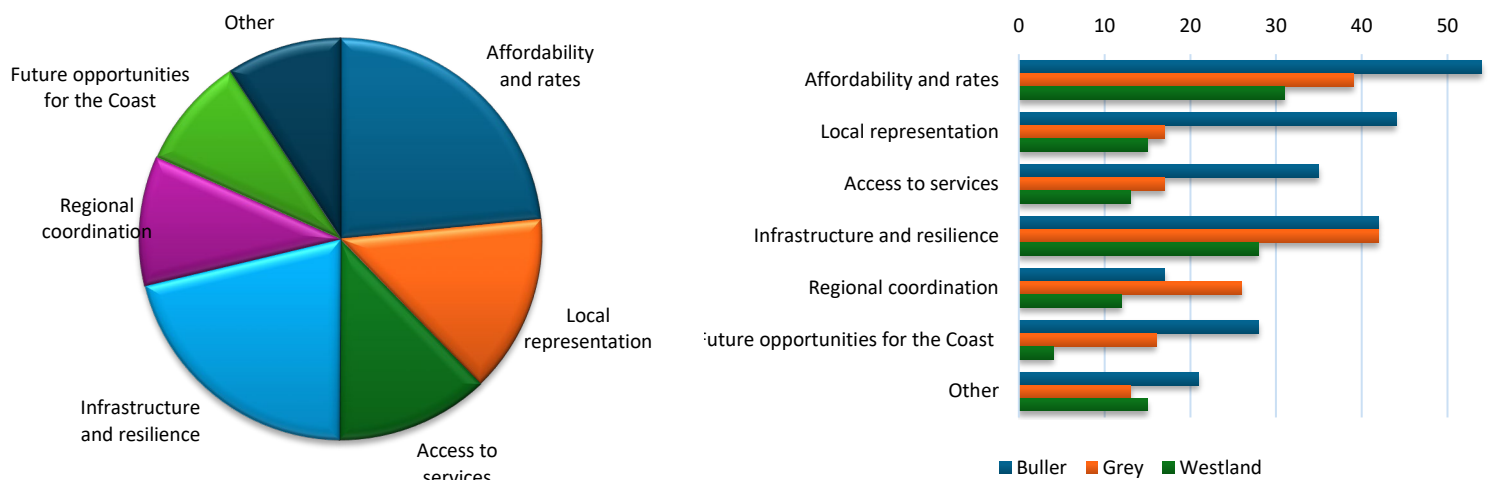
ENGAGEMENT PERIOD

6 June – 6 July 2026

Survey Results – Key Metrics Dashboard

The survey results presented below reflect the views of the 196 participants who chose to complete a feedback form during this initial engagement period. They should be interpreted as identifying issues and themes for further investigation rather than indicating overall community support for any particular governance option. These findings will be tested through future evidence gathering and wider community engagement if the Head Start proposal progresses.

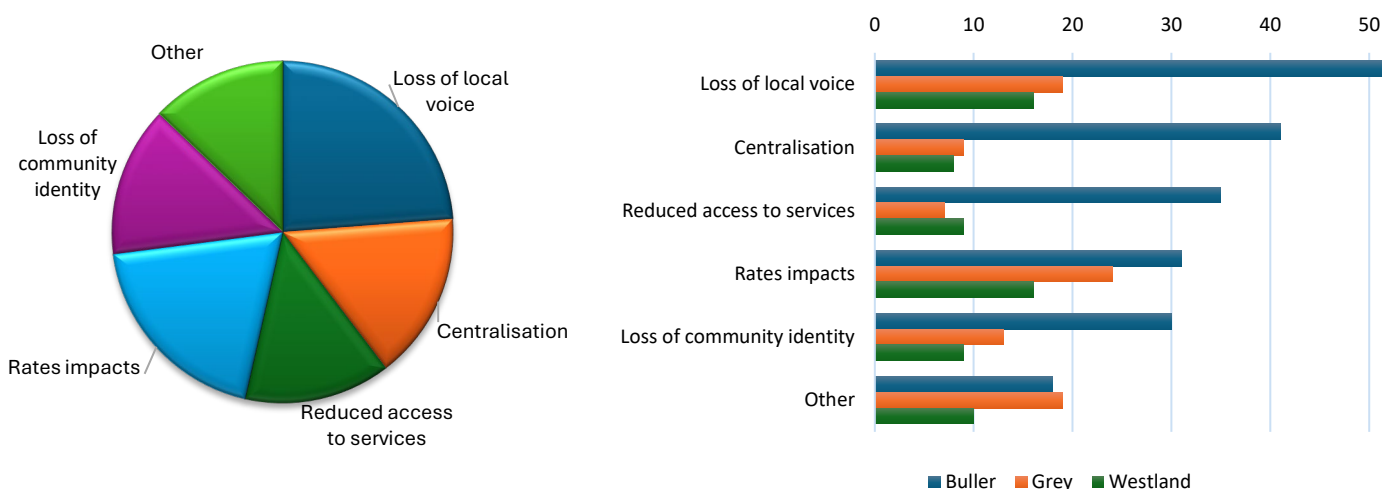
What outcomes matters most?



The Insight Cloud reflects the dominant themes emerging from respondents' explanations of why their selected outcomes were important. Rather than presenting the most frequently used words, it summarises the underlying ideas consistently expressed across survey responses, written submissions and community discussions. The strongest themes centred on maintaining local voice, ensuring affordability, investing in resilient infrastructure, strengthening regional coordination and creating future opportunities that support thriving and sustainable West Coast communities.



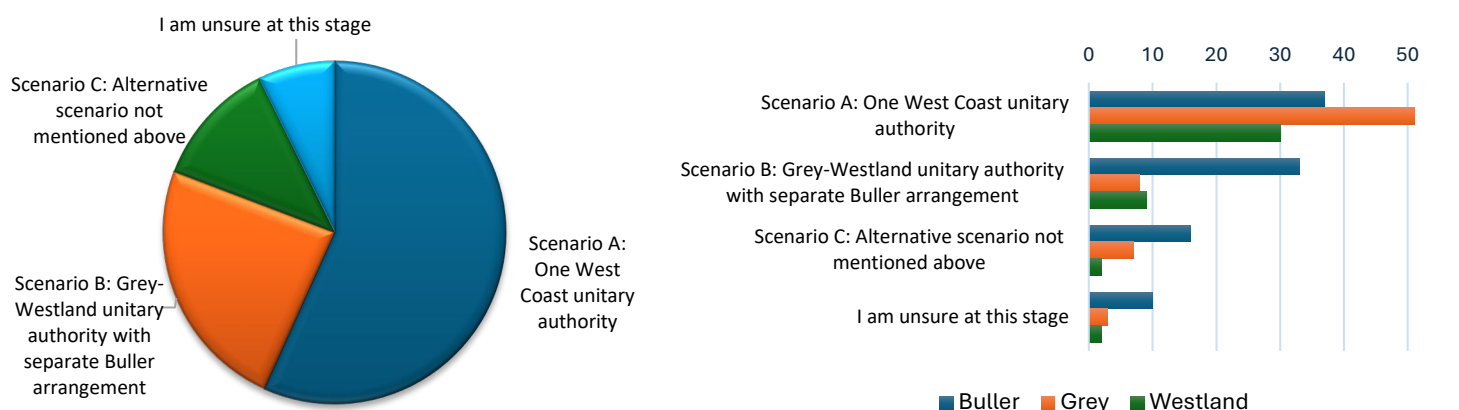
What concerns you most about possible changes?



The strongest concerns centred on ensuring that any future changes strengthen rather than weaken local communities by protecting local voice and representation, maintaining affordability, preserving community identity and accessible services, and providing clear evidence that reform would deliver genuine long-term benefits for the West Coast.



Future Scenarios



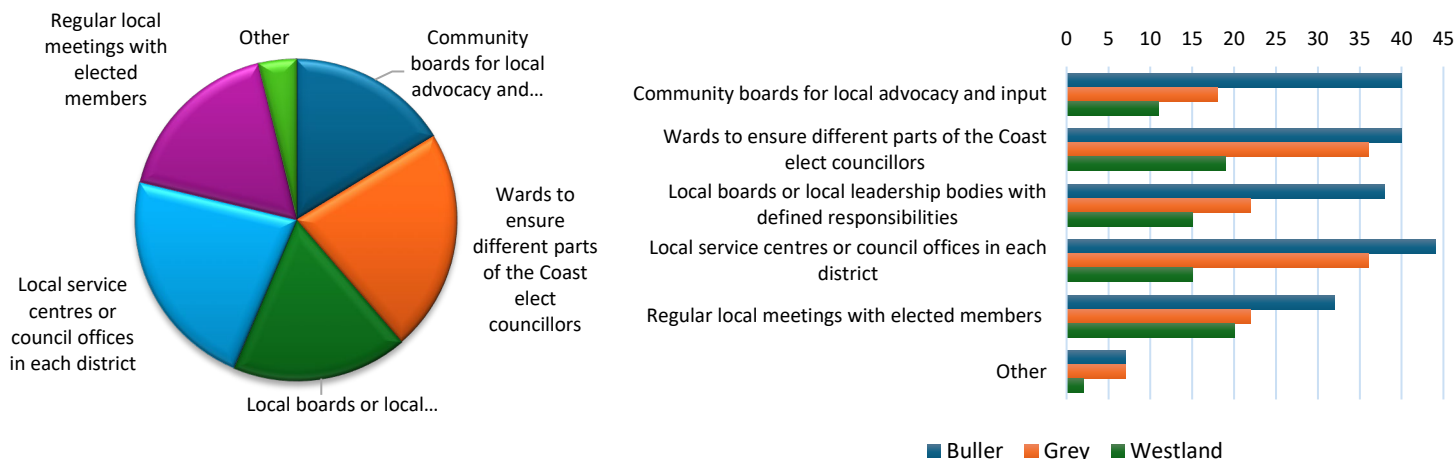
Scenario selected for further testing	Buller	Grey	Westland	Total selections
One West Coast unitary authority	37	51	30	118
Grey–Westland unitary authority with separate Buller arrangement	33	8	9	50
Alternative scenario	16	7	2	25
Unsure	10	3	2	15

Note: Some respondents selected more than one option.

The strongest themes centred on creating a more efficient and sustainable model of local government that strengthens the West Coast's regional voice while protecting local representation, community identity and access to local services. Respondents consistently emphasised that any future option should be evidence-based, financially sustainable and designed to meet the unique needs and geography of the West Coast.



How should local voice and decision making be protected



The strongest themes centred on creating a more efficient and sustainable model of local government that strengthens the West Coast's regional voice while protecting local representation, community identity and access to local services. Respondents consistently emphasised that any future option should be evidence-based, financially sustainable and designed to meet the unique needs and geography of the West Coast.



Key Findings and Community Sentiment

What communities value

While respondents expressed a wide range of views about the future of local government, there was strong consistency in the values and principles they believed should underpin any future governance model.

Across all three districts, respondents consistently identified the importance of meaningful local representation, accessible elected members and decision-makers who understand the unique needs of individual communities. Many valued the ability to influence decisions that affect their daily lives and wanted any future arrangements to retain strong connections between councils and the communities they serve.

Community identity also emerged as a recurring theme. Respondents recognised that each district and township has its own history, character, economy and priorities, and many considered these differences to be one of the West Coast's greatest strengths. There was a strong expectation that future governance arrangements should recognise these differences rather than adopt a one-size-fits-all approach.

While these themes were consistently valued, many respondents also questioned whether current local government arrangements always deliver these outcomes. Comments highlighted concerns about affordability, decision-making, responsiveness and accountability, with many people expressing a desire to see local voice strengthened rather than diminished through any future changes.

District Perspectives

Buller

- Strong emphasis on affordability, financial sustainability and value for money.
- Respondents consistently highlighted Buller's unique geography, economy and community identity, expressing the view that the district has different needs and priorities from other parts of the West Coast.
- Many respondents expressed concern that a single regional model could reduce Buller's influence and result in decisions being driven by larger population centres. Maintaining meaningful local representation and decision-making was therefore considered essential.
- While many recognised opportunities to improve regional collaboration and strengthen advocacy, views differed on whether this required structural reform. A number of respondents preferred greater shared services and collaboration, while others supported exploring alternative governance models that better reflected Buller's geographic connections, particularly with the Nelson–Tasman region.

There was a strong sentiment that governance models developed for larger urban regions may not adequately reflect the realities of remote, low-population districts such as Buller. Many respondents considered that any future model must recognise the district's unique characteristics rather than adopt a one-size-fits-all approach.

Grey

- Many respondents recognised that the current local government arrangements may not be sustainable in the long term and were generally open to exploring change where it could demonstrably improve efficiency, reduce duplication and provide better value for ratepayers.
- There was a strong expectation that any future governance model should be supported by robust evidence, with respondents seeking greater clarity around costs, benefits, governance arrangements and the practical impacts on communities before significant structural decisions are made.
- Protecting local representation, accountability and access to elected members remained important. While respondents generally supported stronger regional coordination for functions that naturally operate at a regional scale, they consistently emphasised that local priorities and community voices should continue to influence decisions affecting individual districts.
- Financial sustainability, infrastructure investment and transparent decision-making were recurring themes, with many respondents wanting assurance that any reform would deliver genuine long-term benefits rather than simply creating a larger organisation.

Overall, Grey respondents demonstrated a pragmatic approach to reform. There was a willingness to consider alternative governance models, provided they were supported by clear evidence, maintained strong local representation and delivered measurable improvements in efficiency, affordability and service delivery.

Westland

- Many respondents expressed the view that the current local government arrangements are no longer best positioned to meet the future needs of the West Coast. There was a clear appetite to explore change that delivers better outcomes for communities rather than simply maintaining the status quo.
- Respondents consistently identified opportunities to reduce duplication, improve efficiency, strengthen regional collaboration and build a more capable and sustainable model of local government. Many recognised that, given the size of the West Coast and its limited rating base, continuing to operate as currently structured may become increasingly challenging.
- At the same time, there was a strong expectation that any future model must deliver something demonstrably better than the current arrangements. Respondents wanted reform to improve service delivery, strengthen regional advocacy, provide better value for ratepayers and support more effective long-term planning, rather than simply changing organisational structures.
- Maintaining local representation, accessible service centres and meaningful local decision-making remained essential. Respondents consistently emphasised that stronger regional coordination should enhance—not replace—the connection between councils and the communities they serve.
- Many participants also reflected that discussions about local government reform are not new for the West Coast, asking what would be different this time and seeking confidence that any

future proposal would be supported by clear evidence, practical implementation planning and measurable long-term benefits.

Overall, Westland respondents were less focused on whether change should occur and more focused on ensuring any change delivers a better model of local government—one that is more efficient, financially sustainable, responsive and capable of meeting the future needs of West Coast communities while retaining a strong local voice.

Opportunities people see

While respondents expressed differing views about the preferred governance model, there was broad recognition that the Head Start process provides an opportunity to rethink how local government is organised and delivered across the West Coast.

Many respondents identified opportunities to reduce duplication, strengthen collaboration and make better use of the region's limited financial and human resources. There was considerable support for improving regional coordination where it could strengthen strategic planning, infrastructure delivery, specialist capability and advocacy with central government.

Respondents also recognised the opportunity to develop a more sustainable model of local government that is better equipped to respond to future challenges, including infrastructure investment, climate resilience, workforce capability and increasing legislative requirements. However, there was a consistent expectation that any improvements should enhance rather than diminish local representation, community identity and access to services.

Overall, respondents saw the greatest opportunity in creating a model that combines stronger regional capability with meaningful local decision-making, enabling the West Coast to work together where it makes sense while continuing to recognise the differing needs and priorities of individual communities.

District Perspectives

Buller

- Opportunity to strengthen the West Coast's collective voice when advocating to central government.
- Greater sharing of specialist expertise and resources while retaining meaningful local decision-making.
- Better coordination of strategic infrastructure, emergency management and region-wide services.
- A number of respondents suggested the project should also investigate alternative governance arrangements that better reflect Buller's geographic, economic and service connections, particularly with the Nelson–Tasman region, rather than limiting consideration to the scenarios presented
- Opportunity to review the wider local government system, including funding arrangements and regional organisations, rather than focusing solely on council structures.

Grey

- Opportunity to reduce duplication and improve operational efficiency across councils while maintaining strong local representation.
- Better long-term planning and investment in infrastructure through stronger regional coordination and more consistent strategic decision-making.
- Opportunity to strengthen governance capability, transparency and accountability, ensuring future decisions are supported by robust evidence and clear financial analysis.

- Greater consistency in regulatory, environmental and planning functions while protecting the specialist expertise currently provided at a regional level.
- Opportunity to improve collaboration across the West Coast to strengthen advocacy, attract investment and better respond to future challenges.

Westland

- Opportunity to create a more efficient, coordinated and sustainable model of local government that better meets the future needs of West Coast communities.
- Reduce duplication and make better use of limited financial, organisational and workforce resources across the region.
- Strengthen regional planning, infrastructure investment and advocacy while improving the West Coast's ability to respond to future challenges.
- Create a more responsive and capable local government system that delivers better value for ratepayers and improved services, while maintaining strong local representation and accessible service centres.
- Use the reform process as an opportunity to modernise local government, improve collaboration and build a model that is better than the current arrangements rather than simply changing organisational structures.

Common concerns

While respondents recognised opportunities to improve local government, they also consistently identified a number of concerns that they believed should be carefully considered as the project progresses.

The most frequently raised concern was maintaining meaningful local voice and representation. Across all three districts, respondents wanted assurance that smaller communities would continue to influence decisions affecting their local areas and that any future governance arrangements would remain accessible, responsive and connected to the communities they serve.

Affordability and financial sustainability also featured prominently throughout the engagement. Many respondents questioned whether structural reform would deliver genuine value for ratepayers, seeking greater clarity around transition costs, long-term savings, future rating impacts and how infrastructure investment would be funded. A recurring theme was that structural change alone may not address the West Coast's underlying funding challenges.

Respondents also expressed concerns about the potential for increased centralisation, reduced access to local services and the loss of community identity. Many emphasised that regional coordination should strengthen rather than replace local decision-making and that any future governance model should continue to recognise the differing needs, geography and priorities of individual communities.

Beyond the governance model itself, many respondents questioned whether sufficient information had been provided to enable informed decision-making. Common themes included the need for more detailed financial analysis, clearer evidence of the benefits and costs of reform, greater understanding of how different governance models would operate in practice and more time for communities to consider the issues. There was a strong expectation that any future proposals should be supported by robust evidence and developed in partnership with West Coast communities rather than being perceived as externally driven.

District Perspectives

Buller

- Strong concern that Buller's unique geography, economy and community identity could be diminished within a larger governance structure.
- Significant emphasis on maintaining meaningful local representation and ensuring Buller continues to influence decisions affecting the district.
- Ongoing concerns about affordability, equitable investment, the limited rating base and the broader funding model for remote regions.
- Many respondents questioned whether the proposed reform would address the underlying financial challenges facing Buller and expressed concern about increasing centralisation and the loss of local influence.

Grey

- Strong focus on ensuring any reform is supported by robust evidence, clear financial analysis and demonstrable long-term benefits.
- Concerns about protecting local representation while maintaining the specialist environmental, regulatory and scientific expertise currently delivered at a regional level.

- Respondents questioned whether structural reform would improve affordability, governance and service delivery or simply create a larger organisation.
- Considerable emphasis on careful planning, transparency and accountability throughout any future reform process.

Westland

- Many respondents expressed concern that reform must deliver genuine improvements rather than simply changing organisational structures.
- Strong expectation that local representation, community identity and accessible local services would continue to be protected under any future model.
- Concerns focused on ensuring change delivers better value for ratepayers, stronger regional capability and improved long-term outcomes rather than creating additional bureaucracy.
- Many respondents also wanted greater certainty about implementation, costs, governance arrangements and how local communities would continue to influence decision-making.

Development West Coast, Regional Tourism and Economic Development

While only a small proportion of respondents commented specifically on Development West Coast (DWC) and the Regional Tourism Organisation (RTO),

Several respondents questioned whether the current organisational arrangements remain the most appropriate for delivering regional economic development, investment attraction and tourism promotion. Suggestions included reviewing the respective roles of Development West Coast, the Regional Tourism Organisation and local government to ensure responsibilities are clearly defined, duplication is minimised, and governance arrangements are aligned with the future needs and aspirations of the West Coast.

Overall, the feedback received, both in feedback submissions and questions at almost every drop-in session, suggests there is an expectation that the future delivery of regional economic development and destination management should form part of the broader conversation about how regional functions are organised. Respondents generally considered that any future arrangements should provide clear accountability, minimise duplication, strengthen regional coordination and ensure that organisations responsible for economic development and tourism are well positioned to support the long-term prosperity of the West Coast.

Council-Controlled Organisations and Council-Owned Entities

A recurring theme throughout the engagement was the future of council-controlled organisations (CCOs), council-owned entities and other shared delivery arrangements.

Participants sought greater clarity regarding how organisations such as Westroads, WestReef Services Limited, Destination Westland and other council-owned entities would be treated under any future governance model. Questions were raised about whether these organisations would continue to operate independently, be consolidated into a new structure or have their roles reviewed as part of any wider reform process.

Many respondents also highlighted the importance of understanding how existing assets, liabilities, commercial activities and governance arrangements would be managed. There was a clear expectation that any future investigation should examine these matters in detail and demonstrate how accountability, service delivery and community ownership would be maintained.

Overall, the feedback indicates that the future role of council-controlled organisations and council-owned entities should form part of any subsequent analysis, ensuring communities have a clear understanding of how these organisations may contribute to the delivery of local government services under any future arrangements.

Social Media Sentiment

The social media discussion reflected a broad range of opinions and, while more polarised than the formal engagement, reinforced many of the themes emerging from surveys, submissions and community drop-in sessions.

Common themes included:

- Support for reducing duplication and simplifying local government where this delivers genuine efficiencies.
- Strong concern about rates and affordability, with many questioning whether reform would reduce costs or simply redistribute them.
- Questions about fairness, particularly whether one district would become responsible for another district's debt or infrastructure liabilities.
- Support for retaining local offices and services, even where people supported a single council model.
- Concern about centralisation and ensuring local communities continue to influence decisions.
- Strong interest in staffing levels, organisational efficiency and council accountability, with many commenters questioning administrative costs.
- Repeated requests for greater transparency, particularly around financial modelling, governance arrangements and how any new model would operate.
- References to previous local government reforms, particularly the Auckland Super City, with many people expressing caution about assuming structural reform automatically delivers lower rates or improved services.
- Recognition that the West Coast's geography, small population and extensive public conservation land create unique governance challenges that require solutions tailored to the region rather than a standard national model.

Compared with the formal engagement, social media discussion placed greater emphasis on organisational size, staffing levels, management costs and perceived administrative duplication, with many commenters suggesting that any future reform should prioritise efficiency and value for money.

Overall, social media discussion suggested that many people are open to change where it improves efficiency, reduces duplication and strengthens local government. However, there was equally strong scepticism about whether structural reform alone would deliver lower rates or better services. Across the discussion, there was a consistent expectation that any future proposal should demonstrate clear financial benefits, protect local representation and maintain accessible services for all West Coast communities.

Community Drop-in Sessions – Project Team

Observations

Buller District

Discussions throughout Buller reflected a high level of community interest in the future of local government, but also considerable scepticism about whether structural reform alone will address the district's long-term challenges. While participants were willing to explore future governance options, there was a consistent view that any proposal must be supported by robust evidence, demonstrate tangible benefits and address the underlying financial sustainability of the region.

The strongest theme was the importance of local voice and representation. Participants valued the accessibility of locally elected members and expressed concern that greater centralisation could further reduce local decision-making and weaken community influence. At the same time, there was recognition that some functions are appropriately delivered at a regional level, provided local communities retain meaningful decision-making and representation.

Affordability and long-term prosperity dominated many discussions. Participants questioned whether structural reform would deliver genuine savings or simply combine the financial challenges of existing councils. Conversations frequently extended beyond council structures to the broader funding model for the West Coast, including the limited rating base, extensive Crown land, lack of mineral royalty sharing and the financial implications of supporting nationally significant infrastructure with a relatively small population.

A recurring observation from discussions was that many participants considered the reform conversation should extend beyond local government structures and include a broader discussion with central government about long-term regional funding, localism and the sustainability of remote communities. There was also interest in reviewing the future role of organisations such as Development West Coast as part of that wider conversation.

Many participants expressed frustration with the pace of the Head Start process and felt communities would benefit from more time and information before reaching conclusions. While there was support for continuing the conversation, there was a clear expectation that future work should provide the evidence needed to enable informed community discussion.

Grey District

Community discussions across the Grey District reflected a pragmatic and considered approach to the future of local government. While many participants were open to investigating opportunities to improve governance arrangements, there was a consistent expectation that any future proposal should be supported by robust evidence and demonstrate clear benefits for communities and ratepayers.

The strongest themes centred on improving efficiency, reducing duplication and strengthening regional coordination where this would result in better service delivery, infrastructure planning and advocacy. However, participants consistently emphasised that efficiencies should not come at the expense of local representation, community identity or the ability for decisions affecting local communities to continue being made locally.

Financial sustainability featured prominently throughout discussions. Participants sought greater clarity regarding rates, council debt, infrastructure funding and the costs associated with both reform and ongoing service delivery. There was considerable interest in understanding whether structural change would deliver genuine long-term savings and how existing debt, assets and infrastructure responsibilities would be managed across the region.

Maintaining accessible council services and protecting local communities remained important considerations. Participants recognised that some functions may be more effectively delivered at a regional level, while expressing a clear expectation that local service centres, local knowledge and meaningful community representation should be retained.

Overall, the Grey discussions reflected a willingness to explore change, provided it is supported by comprehensive evidence, transparent financial information and clear explanations of how governance, representation and service delivery would improve under any future model.

Westland District

Community discussions across the Westland District reflected a pragmatic and forward-looking approach to the future of local government. Many participants recognised that increasing financial pressures, infrastructure demands and the small scale of local government on the West Coast provide an opportunity to consider whether different governance arrangements could better support the region into the future.

There was broad recognition that greater regional coordination could reduce duplication, strengthen strategic planning and improve the West Coast's ability to advocate to central government. Participants acknowledged the potential benefits of a more integrated approach, particularly where this could improve efficiency and better support infrastructure planning and investment.

At the same time, there was a clear expectation that any future governance model must continue to reflect Westland's unique geography and dispersed communities. Participants consistently emphasised the importance of retaining meaningful local representation, accessible council services and local decision-making. There was little support for a model that simply centralised services or decision-making without maintaining a strong local presence.

Infrastructure and affordability were recurring themes throughout discussions. Participants highlighted the challenges associated with a small rating base, significant visitor numbers, extensive public conservation land and the ongoing cost of maintaining infrastructure across a geographically large district. Many questioned whether structural reform alone would address these underlying funding pressures and considered that further work would be required to better understand the financial implications of any future model.

Several participants also reflected that discussions about local government reform are not new for the West Coast. While there was interest in exploring opportunities for change, there was a strong expectation that this process should clearly demonstrate how it differs from previous reform discussions and be supported by credible evidence before communities are asked to support any preferred model.

Overall, discussions reflected a willingness to continue exploring future governance options, provided they deliver demonstrable benefits, strengthen regional capability and protect the local representation, accessibility and community identity that Westland communities value.

Conclusions

Phase One engagement has helped clarify what participants want the next stage of the West Coast Head Start Project to test. Feedback from Buller, Grey and Westland showed interest in exploring change, but only if future arrangements can demonstrate clear improvements over the current system.

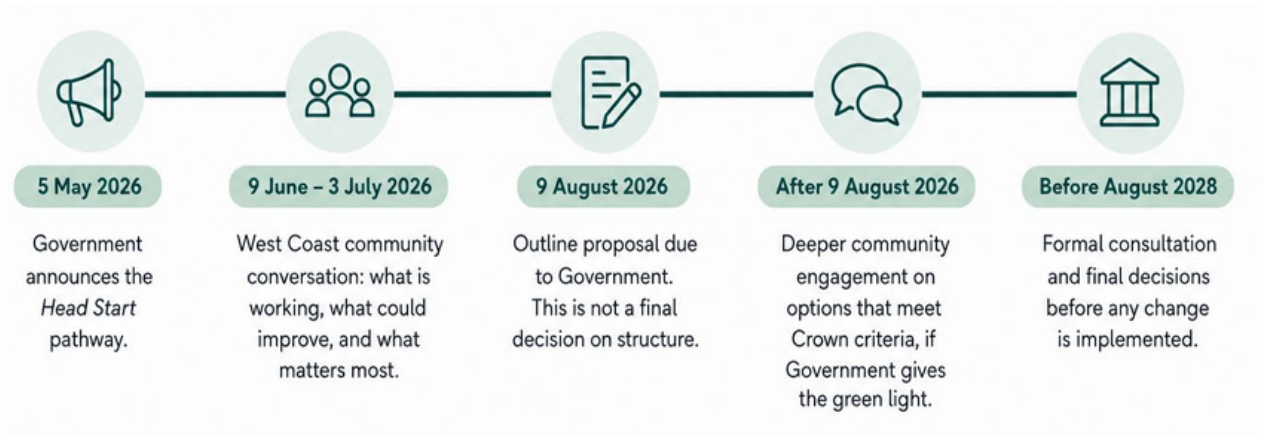
The strongest priorities were affordability, financial sustainability, resilient infrastructure, effective services, meaningful local representation and governance arrangements that reflect the different needs of West Coast communities. Participants also wanted local identity, accessible services and community-level influence to be protected in any future model.

The engagement does not provide a mandate for a specific governance structure. It identifies the issues that require further analysis, including financial impacts, representation, service delivery, regional functions, transition costs and local voice. These findings will inform the West Coast Outline Proposal. If the proposal progresses, further evidence gathering, option development, engagement and formal consultation would be required before final decisions are made.

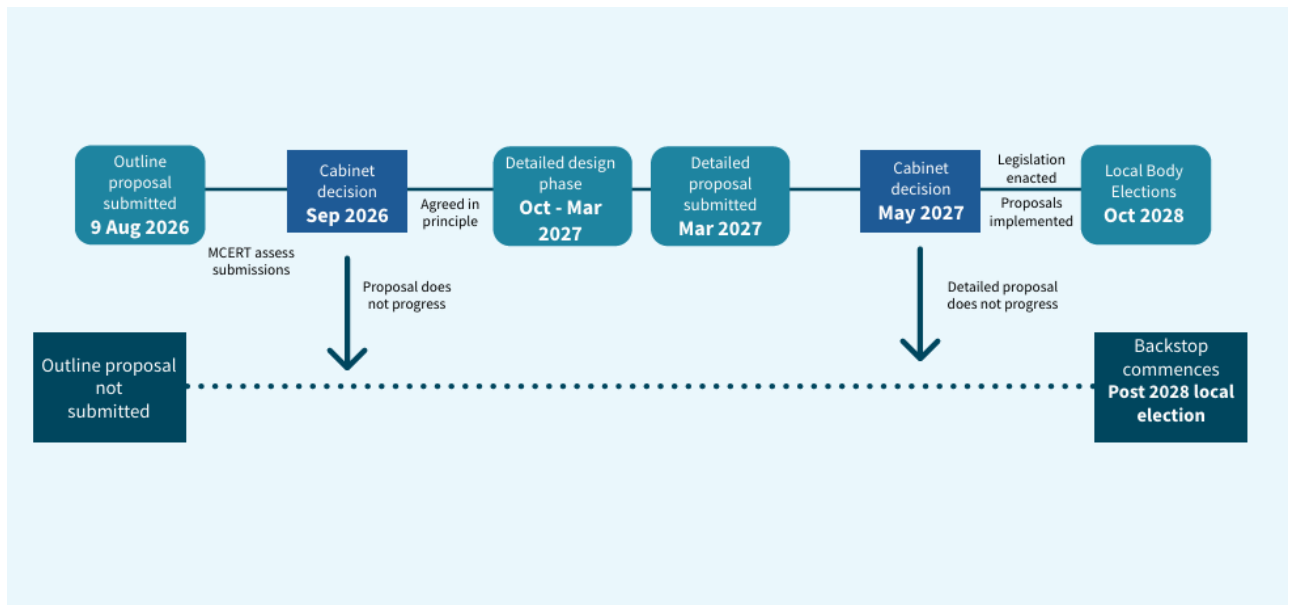
Appendices

Appendix 1 Timelines

West Coast Engagement timeline



Government Head Start Pathway Timeline



Appendix 2 Feedback Form

West Coast Local Government Reform - Starting the Conversation

This feedback form is part of the first phase of community conversations on the future of local government on the West Coast. No final decisions have been made. This is not formal consultation on a preferred model. Your feedback will help inform the West Coast's outline proposal to Government and shape the options that may need to be tested in more detail.

1. About you

Name:

Email:

Address: (include town or settlement)

Phone Number:

Which district do you reside in?

☐ Buller

☐ Grey

☐ Westland

2. What is working well now?

What do you think is working well in local government on the West Coast?

What do communities value most about local government on the Coast?

3. What could improve?

What could be improved about how local government currently works on the West Coast?

What challenges or frustrations do you see with the current arrangements?

4. What outcomes matter most?

If local government arrangements change in the future, what outcomes matter most to you?

Please select up to three.

- ☐ Affordability and rates
- ☐ Local representation
- ☐ Access to services
- ☐ Infrastructure and resilience
- ☐ Regional coordination
- ☐ Future opportunities for the Coast
- ☐ Other: _____

Why are these most important to you?

5. What concerns you most?

What concerns you most about possible changes to local government on the West Coast?

Please select up to three.

- ☐ Loss of local voice
- ☐ Centralisation
- ☐ Reduced access to services
- ☐ Rates impacts
- ☐ Loss of community identity
- ☐ Other: _____

Please tell us more about your concerns.

6. Future local government scenarios

The following scenarios are starting points for discussion. They are not recommendations or final decisions.

Scenario A: One West Coast unitary authority

A single unitary authority is established across the West Coast, combining Buller, Grey, Westland and current regional council functions into one organisation.

Scenario B: Grey-Westland unitary authority with separate Buller arrangement

Grey and Westland combine into a single unitary authority, while Buller remains as a separate district or alternative arrangement such as an alignment with Nelson/Tasman.

Scenario C: Alternative options / what are we missing?

There may be other ways local government could be structured on the West Coast.

7. What do you think of these scenarios?

Which scenario do you think should be tested further?

You can choose more than one.

- ☐ Scenario A: One West Coast unitary authority
- ☐ Scenario B: Grey-Westland unitary authority with separate Buller arrangement
- ☐ Scenario C: Alternative scenario not mentioned above
- ☐ I am unsure at this stage

Why?

Are there any scenarios you think should not be taken further?

- ☐ Scenario A
- ☐ Scenario B
- ☐ None
- ☐ I am unsure

Why?

8. What are we missing?

Are there any alternative options, local arrangements, or ideas you think should be considered?

What would need to be protected in any future model for the West Coast?

9. Local voice

How should local voice and local decision-making be protected if council structures become larger or more regional?

Please select any that you think should be considered.

- ☐ Wards to ensure different parts of the Coast elect councillors
- ☐ Community boards for local advocacy and input
- ☐ Local boards or local leadership bodies with defined responsibilities
- ☐ Local service centres or council offices in each district
- ☐ Regular local meetings with elected members
- ☐ Other: _____

What should be decided locally, rather than regionally?

10. Final comments

Is there anything else you would like to tell us about the future of local government on the West Coast?

Thank you for taking the time to provide feedback.

Your views will help shape the next phase of work and ensure future options are tested against what matters most to West Coast communities. If you are completing a paper copy of this feedback form you can drop it to your local District Council or Regional Council office.

Appendix 3 – Data Tables

1. Which district do you reside in?

Buller	89
Grey	65
Westland	42

4. What outcomes matter most?

If local government arrangements change in the future, what outcomes matter most to you? Please select up to three.

	Affordability and rates	Local representation	Access to services	Infrastructure and resilience	Regional coordination	Future opportunities for the Coast	Other
Buller	54	44	35	42	17	28	21
Grey	39	17	17	42	26	16	13
Westland	31	15	13	28	12	4	15
Total	124	76	65	112	55	48	49

5. What concerns you most?

What concerns you most about possible changes to local government on the West Coast?
Please select up to three.

	Loss of local voice	Centralisation	Reduced access to services	Rates impacts	Loss of community identity	Other
Buller	52	41	35	31	30	18
Grey	19	9	7	24	13	19
Westland	16	8	9	16	9	10
Total	87	58	51	71	52	47

7. What do you think of these scenarios?

Which scenario do you think should be tested further?

	Scenario A: One West Coast unitary authority	Scenario B: Grey-Westland unitary authority with separate Buller arrangement	Scenario C: Alternative scenario not mentioned above	I am unsure at this stage
Buller	37	33	16	10
Grey	51	8	7	3
Westland	30	9	2	2
Total	118	50	25	15

Note: Some respondents selected more than one option.

Are there any scenarios you think should not be taken further?

	Scenario A: One West Coast unitary authority	Scenario B: Grey-Westland unitary authority with separate Buller arrangement	None	Unsure
Buller	22	30	9	14
Grey	7	30	10	7
Westland	5	12	5	7
Total	34	72	24	28

Note: Some respondents did not answer the question

9. Local voice

How should local voice and local decision-making be protected if council structures become larger or more regional?

Please select any that you think should be considered.

	Community boards for local advocacy and input	Wards to ensure different parts of the Coast elect councillors	Local boards or local leadership bodies with defined responsibilities	Local service centres or council offices in each district	Regular local meetings with elected members	Other
Buller	40	40	38	44	32	7
Grey	18	36	22	36	22	7
Westland	11	19	15	15	20	2
Total	69	95	75	95	74	16