



RUAPEHU DISTRICT COUNCIL

Private Bag 1001, Taumarunui 3946, New Zealand
Telephone +64 7 895 8188 • Fax +64 7 895 3256
Email info@ruapehudc.govt.nz
Website www.ruapehudc.govt.nz

8 August 2026

Hon Simon Watts
Minister of Local Government

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

Tēnā koe Minister Watts

Ruapehu District Council: the future of our district

At its meeting on 29 July 2026, Ruapehu District Council resolved not to submit an outline proposal under the Head Start pathway by 9 August, and to write to you separately about the future of our district. We are a party to the Manawatū-Whanganui joint letter and remain committed to that regional work, which does not pre-determine Ruapehu's own position. It speaks for the region. This letter is about Ruapehu's relationships beyond it.

Council is grateful to the people of Ruapehu, to our iwi partners and to our neighbouring councils, within the region and beyond, for the way they have engaged with us. We examined a range of options, including with our iwi partners, held public meetings across the district, and met with other councils around us. Like us, our communities have engaged constructively with this process. Their direction to us was that Ruapehu should take an active role in shaping the future of local government in the district, rather than have it decided for us.

Our iwi partners have put their own approach to Council, and their proposal is attached. It is grounded in nga Maunga o te rohe, the maunga that give this part of the country its identity, together with the awa that flow from them and the Treaty settlements that sit across them. Its starting point is the relationship between people and place, not council boundaries.

Council welcomes this approach, and it is one of the options we would like to give serious consideration to. Whatever structure follows, it must be built on Te Tiriti, on Council's partnership agreements with iwi, and on the settlement obligations that apply across this rohe.

Our community of interest extends beyond the current regional boundary. Council's position is that we are open to change, guided by evidence and community direction, and willing to keep exploring options for the district's future within the current regional grouping and beyond. That work continues with our iwi partners, our community and our neighbouring councils, so that a well-founded case is ready as the next stage of the reform is designed. Council intends to consult our communities formally before any preferred option is settled.

We would be glad to discuss this with you or your officials.

Nāku noa, nā

Weston Kirton

**Mayor
Ruapehu District Council**

Clive Manley

**Chief Executive
Ruapehu District Council**

Attachment: Affinity Proposal – Iwi Approach for Simplifying Local Government, August 2026

The Ruapehu District ... where adventure begins!



Affinity Proposal

**Iwi Approach for Simplifying Local Government
August 2026**





Authors note: The Affinity Proposal is based on the conceptual ideas presented to the Ruapehu District Council on 11 June 2026 by Ngāti Hāua: Te Whiringa Kākaho Trust, Ngāti Rangī: Te Tōtarahoe o Paerangi Trust, Ngāti Tamakana, Ngāti Tamahaki and Ngāti Uenuku: Te Korowai-o-Wainuiārua Trust, Ngā Iwi me Ngā hapū o Te Awa Tupua: Ngā Tangata Tiaki o Whanganui Trust.

Executive Summary

The Government have set out on an agenda of significant reform pertaining to local government, resource management and planning. Those reforms have wide ranging impacts on communities across the motu, with uncertainty now a central theme associated with them.

One of these reforms seeks to “simplify” local government, by directing current councils to provide a proposal about how they will amalgamate and what an amalgamation might look like.

For iwi, reforms come and go. The local and central government landscapes are always changing, but iwi/hapū remain constant. It is from that standpoint – one of consistency – that iwi/hapū can ground their respective council(s) and remove the angst that exists as a naturally western response to change.

In that sense, iwi/hapū point councils to the already established directive, and influential frameworks that permeate, in a legal sense, from many Treaty Settlements. Iwi/hapū direct council to appropriately anchor council’s responses to these reforms in those so that we can move the dial along the spectrum of progress achieved to date.

Iwi/hapū propose that a foundational approach be taken to determining the nature, scale and degree of any new local government authority, by focusing on the things that connect us – Mai Te Kāhui Maunga ki Tangaroa / from the Mountains to the Sea.

For us, the central commonality between the iwi/hapū and therefore between their respective Treaty Settlements, as well as that of the wider community, is Ngā Maunga o Te Rohe. This serves as a cornerstone for the affinity that the people living under those Maunga have to the land/place.

From Ngā Maunga o Te Rohe, flow many awa/waterways, on whose banks live many iwi, hapū, whānau, and communities. Those people collectively relate to their respective places and although they take on and live in different contexts, remain connected through that naturally occurring flow of wai.

By using that simple “hierarchy” or relationship view, the question can then be asked – which councils serve the people that are connected in this way? The answer:

- Ruapehu District Council
- Whanganui District Council
- Taupō District Council
- Rangitikei District Council

When viewed in this way, we push aside conversations about money, pitting each council against the other, the baggage each council brings to a new entity (if amalgamated), and triangulating around fear. That said, we are realists and see this as a fitting combination that brings the local government context further along the journey, and a step closer to the long-term vision held by iwi/hapū as promoted by respective Treaty Settlement arrangements.

Background and Context

Treaty Partnership

As Treaty partners, iwi/hapū are acknowledged as having a unique role, status and function within the context of New Zealand's constitutional/legal system. Separate to that, iwi/hapū fundamentally exist as iwi/hapū, and regulate their interactions with the world through their kawa and tikanga established over thousands of years.

While one system (kawa and tikanga) exists, and is practiced to regulate the relationship iwi/hapū have with the world, the other (constitutional/legal) operates in stark contrast. The tension created by the Crown side of the Treaty partnership between the two systems nearly always has detrimental impacts on iwi/hapū, especially in a reform context.

Treaty Settlements (in part) are aimed at creating a protective mechanism in the constitutional/legal system so that the negative actions of the Crown (which create tension), are able to be avoided or resolved by reference back to the settlement mechanisms established to act as a "check in balance". Treaty Settlements (in part) also set up the starting place for reforming other legislative frameworks (like local government). How, when and why any reforms are done can then better align to a values-based approach, and remove historical/colonial tensions.

Treaty Settlements are hard-fought pieces of legislation that contribute to the constitutional framework within which society functions, noting they also record movement for one or more iwi/hapū in their Treaty partnership journey with the Crown (and therefore with local government).

For the purposes of this process, the below settlements exist and serve Ngā Maunga o Te Rohe me Ngā Awa, me Ngā Hāpori hoki (as described later on in this proposal). These would require specific provision in any amalgamation:

- | | | |
|---|---|---|
| • Te Awa Tupua (Whanganui River Claims Settlement) Act 2017 | • Waikato-Tainui Raupatu Claims (Waikato River) Settlement Act 2010 | • Ngāti Maniāpoto Claims Settlement Act 2022. |
| • Ngāti Tūwharetoa Claims Settlement Act 2017 | • Raukawa Claims Settlement Act 2014 | • Ngāti Tūrangitukua Claims Settlement Act 1999 |
| • Ngāti Rangi Claims Settlement Act 2019 | • Ngāti Tūwharetoa, Raukawa and Te Arawa River Iwi Waikato River Act 2010 | • Mōkai Patea Nui Tonu Agreement in Principle 6 November 2025 |
| • Te Korowai o Wainuiārua Claims Settlement Act 2025 | • Ngā Hapū o Te Iwi o Whanganui Claims Settlement Bill (to be enacted in 2026). | |
| • Ngāti Hāua Claims Settlement Act 2026 | | |

Each settlement provides redress that changes the way decision-making is exercised. This is not just decision making related to those settlements or to the iwi/hapū whom they are for, but decision making in general. There is also, behind every settlement, a long-term vision of continual, consistent progression aimed at facilitating an uplift for iwi/hapū but also for the communities that live within the respective rohe of those iwi/hapū. Each of these settlements provide mechanisms for contextual application that relate back to the foundational pillars we all have an affinity with. This is important, as the whakapapa between each iwi/hapū is able to then transact with the pakeha world, through these settlements.

The Reforms

The reforms have not been repeated in full nor the details of what the Government have directed Councils to do. More about that can be read here [Head-Start-pathway-policy-document-simplifying-local-government.pdf](#).

Councils have until August to put in an amalgamation proposal. This is called the head start process. If no proposal is given in that timeframe, those councils will be forced into a default “back stop” process whereby they may be dictated to about their futures. Together those councils must represent a majority of either directly affected territorial authorities or a majority of the population across directly affected districts.

Any amalgamated group of councils must show how they could meet five (5) high-level eligibility criteria. Those are (in no particular order):

1. **Maintains local voice:** Proposals must demonstrate fair and effective representation for communities of interest and how decisions will be made at the local level.
2. **Deliverability:** Proposals need to be realistic and demonstrate how new arrangements can be implemented in a timely manner, including in relation to Treaty Settlements.
3. **Support the New Planning System:** Proposals must support the new planning system including progress on spatial and natural environment plan development – and avoid or minimise disruption to that work.
4. **Simplifies Local Governance:** Proposals must show more efficient regional governance arrangements, consolidate decision-making and improving alignment between a region’s councils.
5. **Economies of Scale:** Proposals must supports regional strategic planning and effective delivery of key regional functions and demonstrates responsible and affordable asset management, infrastructure investment, and service delivery.

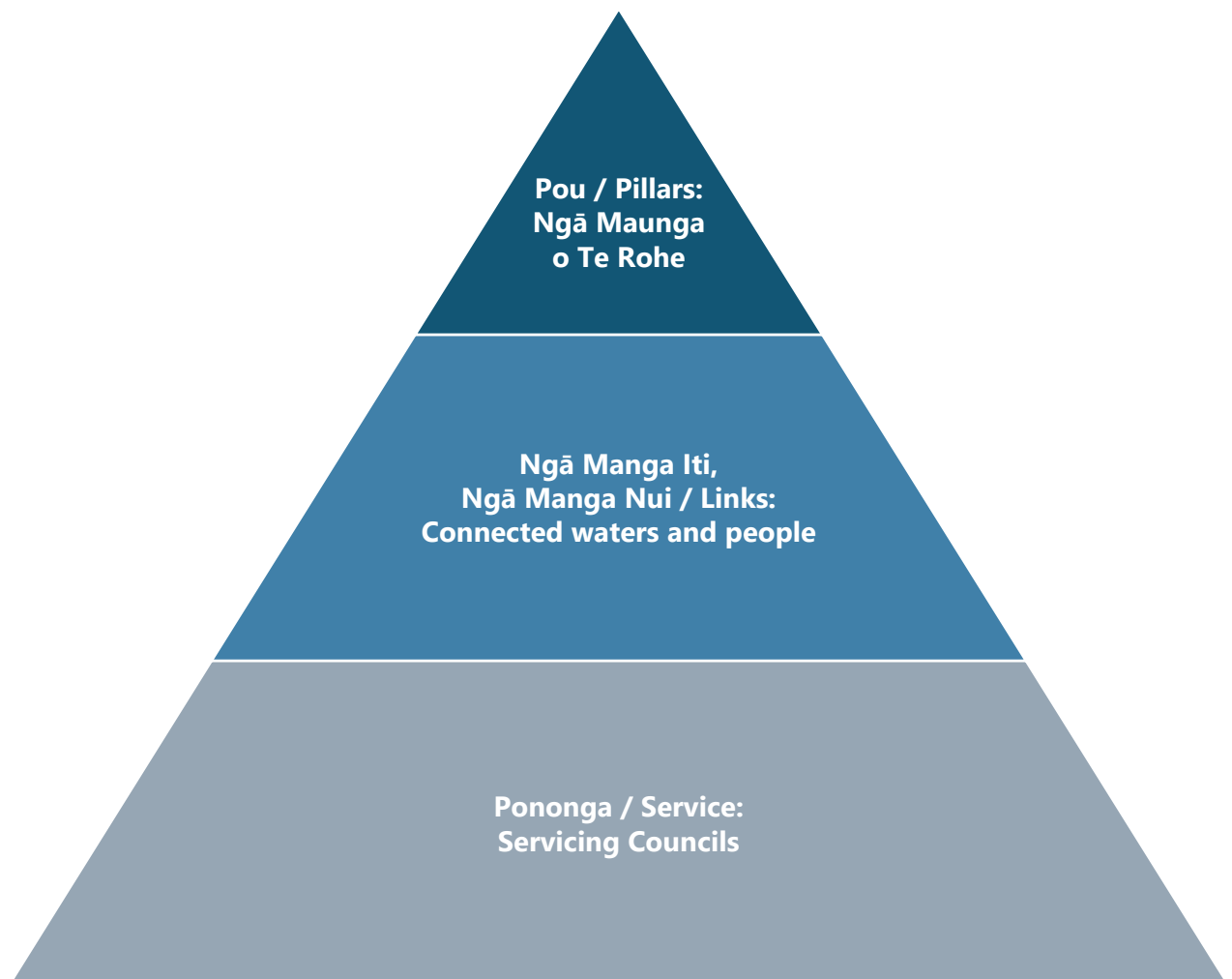
At a higher level, proposals must show how a unitary authority can honour and uphold Treaty Settlements. Treaty settlement arrangements will continue to be provided for and therefore need to be given effect too. Council is expected to show how existing Treaty settlement arrangements could be transferred to new unitary authorities with equivalent effect. The conversation around Treaty Settlements also goes to the deliverability question of any

proposal, noting that Treaty Settlements in this part of the country have significant legal implications on decision making by any local authority.

Treaty Settlement should not be viewed as something to tick off and comply with but rather, be the driving force behind any new entity.

The Proposal

The affinity proposal is a lens that council should use to decide which territorial authorities to amalgamate with. The affinity proposal removes competing views, and focuses on the things that connect us as people. This lens is constructed as follows:



Pou / Pillars: Ngā Maunga o Te Rohe

Ngā Maunga o Te Rohe have been referred to as the Pou / Pillars. In this context, these include:

- Tongariro Maunga
- Ngauruhoe Maunga
- Maunga
- Ruapehu Maunga
- Hauhungatahi
- Pihanga Maunga

- Hikurangi Maunga
- Tuhua Maunga
- Tauhara Maunga
- Te Kāhui Kaimanawa
- Titiraupenga Maunga
- Aoraki Maunga

Ngā Manga Iti, Ngā Manga Nui / Links: Connected Waters and People

From Ngā Maunga o Te Rohe, flow Ngā Manga iti, Ngā Manga Nui. These are the links and have been referred to as the connected waters and people. The significant waterways are:

- Waikato Iti Awa
- Taupō-nui-a-Tia (Lake Taupō)
- Rotoaira (Lake Rotoaira)
- Waikato Awa
- Whanganui Awa
- Whangaehu Awa
- Whakapapa iti Awa
- Whakapapa nui Awa
- Whakapapa Awa
- Ōngāaruhe Awa
- Taringamotu Awa
- Ōhura Awa
- Mangawhero Awa
- Waimarino Awa
- Hautapu Awa

The following are the relevant iwi and entities that administer Treaty Partnerships and/or Treaty Settlements connected to the Pillars and Links above:

- Ngāti Tūwharetoa: Te Kapua Whakapipi (office of the Ariki), Te Kotahitanga Trust (PSGE), Tūwharetoa Settlement Trust, Tūwharetoa Māori Trust Board, Tūwharetoa Fisheries Trust, and Ngāti Tūrangitukua Charitable Trust.
- Ngāti Maniapoto: Te Nehenehenui Trust.
- Ngāti Hāua: Te Whiringa Kākaho Trust.
- Ngāti Rangī: Te Tōtarahoe o Paerangi Trust.
- Ngāti Tamakana, Ngāti Tamahaki and Ngāti Uenuku: Te Korowai-o-Wainuiārua Trust.
- Ngā Hapū o Te Iwi o Whanganui: Takapau Whāriki Trust.
- Ngā Iwi me Ngā hapū o Te Awa Tupua: Ngā Tangata Tiaki o Whanganui Trust.
- Ngā Iwi me Ngā Hapū o Te Waiū-o-te-ika: Ngā Wai Tōtā.
- Mōkai Patea Nui Tonu (including Ngāti Whitikaupeka, Ngāti Tamakopiri): Mōkai Patea Waitangi Claims Trust.

Within each of the rohe of the above iwi/hapū, live many rural and urban communities. These all benefit from the redress mechanisms within the above Treaty Settlements.

Pononga/ Service: Servicing Councils

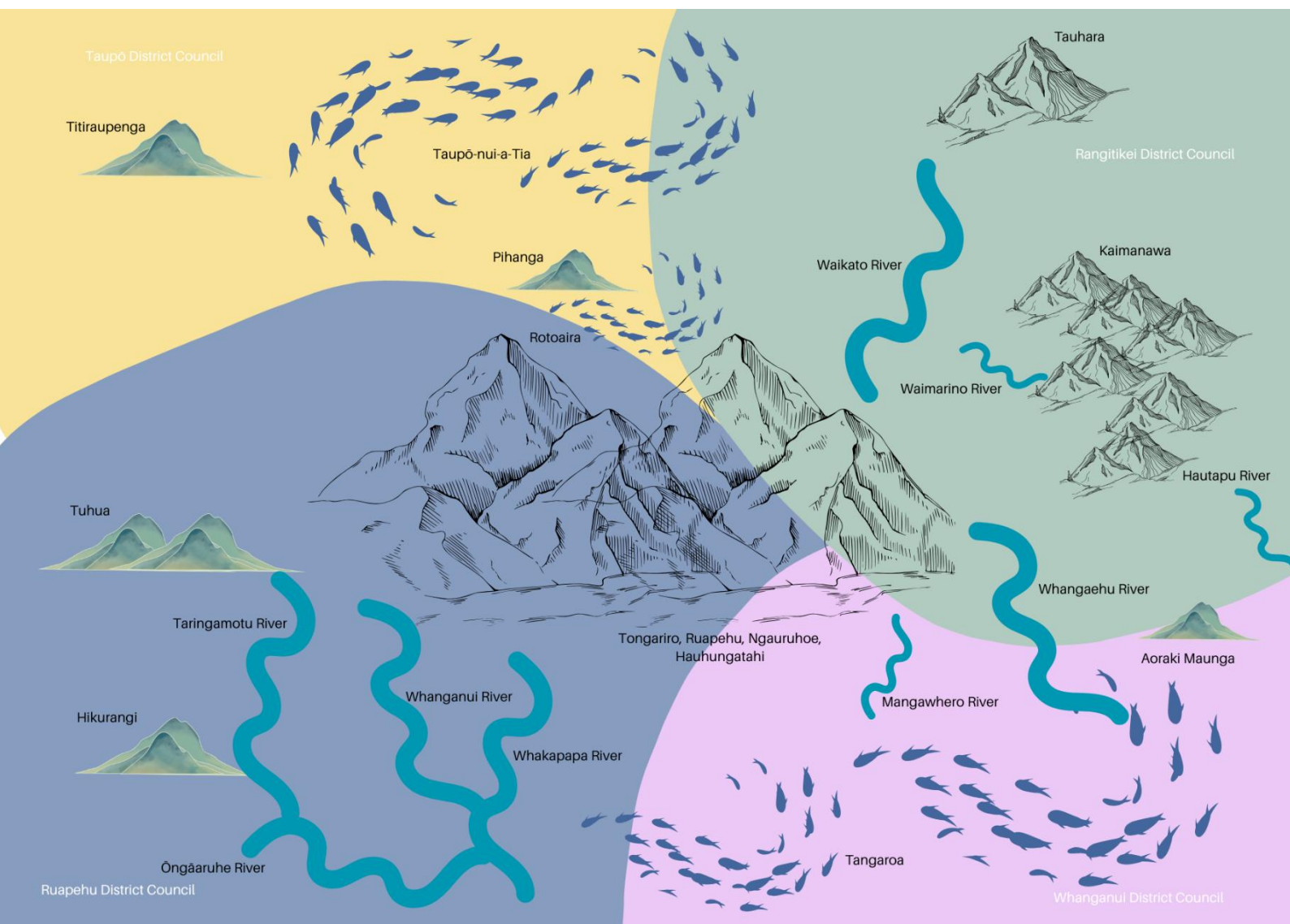
The following are the councils that serve the above:

- Ruapehu District Council
- Whanganui District Council
- Taupō District Council
- Rangitikei District Council

Again, we have stayed away from focusing on the council amalgamation from the bottom up. The approach is better served and our collective objectives met by taking a relationship-based approach and understanding the world from a natural viewpoint.

This avoids picking and choosing who to amalgamate with based on a list of pros and cons against each council profile, and more pulls in the appropriate councils based on whether they serve those who contribute and participate in foundational relationships and identify with the same.

We have presented this in the diagram below.



Brief Analysis

This analysis is an attempt at addressing how this approach and the subsequent outcome can meet the eligibility criteria set by the Government.

Maintains local voice

Iwi/hapū are central players in the amalgamation proposal. They are the only constant of localism and contextual continuity that apply and influence the region within and outside of a local government context. The political influence, legal power and decision-making effect of Treaty Settlements, all change the way local government work, but also how social transformation occurs within and outside of local government, particularly because iwi/hapū always take an “at place” approach.

Taking the iwi approach has allowed communities with historical ties, to be weaved together tighter, through focusing on relational opportunities.

Deliverability

Treaty partnerships and settlement arrangements have not been met or upheld appropriately by councils to date. It is acknowledged that this process can address that so that any new entity starts off correctly – with iwi rightfully in the drivers/partnership seat.

Naturally, given the stable nature of Treaty Settlements, the deliverability of workstreams by a new entity can only be achieved with iwi at the table. This is because the work required naturally (and legally) touches the areas of influence of those iwi and therefore their authority and legal levers embedded in their settlements.

Support the New Planning System

As above, the process to establish the new planning framework has strong requirements for engagement and decision making by iwi/hapū. Disruption to that work would only occur where iwi/hapū are not properly provided for in an amalgamation approach.

Simplifies Local Governance

The simplification of local governance occurs naturally through amalgamation, but that the exact details of this would need to be fleshed out. It is considered that the use of delegation powers and the establishment of potential statutory boards and/or committees would allow simpler governance and at place decision making in the local government context.

Economies of Scale

In many cases, regional functions are already undertaken by iwi and/or directed by iwi. Natural alignment and continuity with this work is better achieved under the approach outlined in this paper, because those councils that serve the relevant landscapes are aware and have links to iwi to do those.

Further, the related but sometimes treated as peripheral issues that impact on communities, like education, social services, deprivation and culture, are all issues iwi, and in particular iwi settlements, aim to address through embedded and preexisting frameworks. From an economy of scale perspective, the strategic partnership and ability to optimise outcomes for communities is enhanced and better provided for by taking the approach outlined above.

More Work Required

It is noted that further work is currently underway by Council to look into an amalgamation outfit that reflects the result of the approach noted here (i.e. combining the 4 councils noted earlier).

That information is welcomed, but it should also be noted that iwi/hapū have a right to revisit any proposed approach if that information, or any other new information, changes iwi/hapū views expressed to date.

It is also acknowledged that some iwi/hapū are yet to participate in this proposal and time will be required to engage them directly, and ensure their views are included/provided for going forward.