

Report

Date : 15 August 2025

To : Mayor and Councillors

Tararua District Council

From : Peter Wimsett

Chief Advisor

Subject : Local Waters Done Well - Water Services Delivery Plan

Wairarapa + Tararua

Item No : 4.1

1. Recommendation

- 1.1 That the report from the Chief Advisor dated 26 July 2025 concerning the Local Waters Done Well Water Services Delivery Plan Wairarapa + Tararua be received.
- 1.2 That Council approves the Water Services Delivery Plan for Tararua District Council and a Wairarapa Tararua Water Services Organisation to be submitted to the Department of Internal Affairs.
- 1.3 That the Commitment Agreement be submitted to the Department of Internal Affairs as an appendix to the Water Services Delivery Plan.
- 1.4 That Council delegates to the Chief Executive the authority to make minor, final changes to the Water Services Delivery Plan, as required, prior to Chief Executive certification of the plan and submission to the Department of Internal Affairs.
- 1.5 That Council delegates to the Chief Executive the authority to prepare the Water Services Organisation Constitution and Shareholders' Agreement in line with the commercial agreements appended to the Commitment Agreement.
- 1.6 That Council notes that final form versions of the Constitution and Shareholders' Agreement will be brought back to the Council for approval in September 2025.
- 1.7 That Council approves \$1.25m of unbudgeted expenditure to meet Tararua District Council's share of the Water Services Organisation establishment costs as set out in the Commitment Agreement, and as included in the public consultation on this matter.
- 1.8 That Council authorises that the unbudgeted expenditure be capitalised and borrowed and transferred to the Water Services Organisation at go live as part of the Council's transfer of water-related debt.
- 1.9 That Council approves that the Water Services Organisation be legally established on or before 1 July 2026 and operational on or before 1 July 2027.

Executive Summary

The Council is required to submit a Water Services Delivery Plan (WSDP) to the Department of Internal Affairs (DIA) by 3 September 2025. The WSDP sets out how the Council will deliver safe, compliant, financially sustainable water services into the future.

The Minister of Local Government has indicated that the sector has had sufficient time to develop their plans to be financially sustainable and there is a high probability that a ministerial advisor will be deployed to any councils that fail to comply with the sustainability requirements.

Following community consultation, Tararua District Council (TDC) determined to work with Carterton, Masterton and South Wairarapa District councils on a regional water services delivery model, and since then the councils and iwi have worked together to prepare the attached WSDP and Commitment Agreement and agree governance and commercial arrangements for the new organisation.

The arrangement to develop a joint water service delivery plan was underpinned by the alternative stand-alone option being a high risk to council and is not considered sustainable in respect of the requirements set out in new legislation.

The new statutory obligation to ring-fence water activities from the rest of council activities and meet other new regulatory measures would obligate council for a higher cost above that set out in the Long-Term Plan. Furthermore, the level of capital expenditure forecast in the Long-Term Plan was on the edge of Council's borrowing capacity without incurring new additional financing costs, such as requiring an agency rating. In four of the ten years, Council water activities would exceed its ring-fenced borrowing Local Government Funding Agency covenant.

The new model used in the Water Services Delivery Plan, strips out potential savings in favour of a conservative approach. All internal borrowings have been agreed to transfer to the new WSO and there is no smoothing of capital works (efficiency of timing projects with others) has been provided for. This "raw state" will allow the new WSO the opportunity to seek out those savings and achieve a better outcome as it will be a legal requirement on the new WSO to deliver a Water Strategy to DIA for approval.

The affordability of a large capital works programme to meet level of service, renewals and growth, forecast at \$150m over the ten years of the Long-Term Plan contrasts with less than \$50m over the previous 18 years.

The attached plan confirms the councils' and iwi intent to legally establish the Water Service Organisation (WSO) on or before 1 July 2026 and complete transition on or before 1 July 2027 and confirms that the WSO is financially sustainable and will meet DIA's financial sustainability requirements.

Each council's financial position within the WSO varies given their relative starting debt positions, capital programmes, and the decision to ring-fence pricing for nine years. The attached plan confirms that TDC within the WSO can meet the three financial sustainability tests.

The attached plan is in near final form and is currently being reviewed by DIA to ensure it will meet key requirements, ahead of it being formally submitted with the Carterton, Masterton and South Wairarapa Plans. Following any feedback from DIA, officers will finalise the plan and it will be certified by the Chief Executive prior to being officially submitted.

All plans from councils around New Zealand need to be submitted to DIA by 3 September 2025. DIA has indicated that it would seek to assess and approve plans by the end of the year.

2. Reason for the Report

- This paper seeks the Council's approval of the attached Water Services Delivery Plan (WSDP) and agreement to formally submit it to the Department of Internal Affairs (DIA).
- 2.2 It also seeks approval of unbudgeted expenditure to meet the establishment costs of the WSO and delegation to the Chief Executive to prepare the WSO constitution and shareholder agreement for approval by Council in September.
- 2.3 This report is being brought to Council at this stage to enable Council to meet the deadline for submission of the WSDP by 3 September 2025.

3. Background

- 3.1 During March and April 2025, the Council consulted with the community on options for the future of water services delivery in the district. The Council consulted on two options the establishment of a Wairarapa Tararua Water Services Organisation (WSO) or a form of the status quo delivery model.
- **3.2** Community feedback supported the Wairarapa Tararua model, with 65% of submitters indicating a preference for this option.
- On the basis of this feedback, Council resolved on 11 June 2025 to enter into a Commitment Agreement with Carterton, South Wairarapa and Masterton councils to progress work on a Wairarapa Tararua water services delivery model and develop a Wairarapa Tararua Water Services Delivery Plan. It was noted that a report would be brought back to Council once the WSDP had been developed and was in a position to be approved for submission to DIA.
- 3.4 It was resolved at that meeting that should any of the Wairarapa councils subsequently decide to exit from the joint WSO, a further report would be brought back to Council outlining the next steps. This has not been necessary, as the councils reflectively understand that change is being required by Government.
- 3.5 That Tararua has put forward a capital works programme that reflects extensive advice and analysis to manage future renewal, development and level of service requirements. It is one view of a worse-case scenario and honest. It is based on the best information we have had at the time of developing the Long-Term Plan.
 - The task at hand will be to bring affordability, while remaining compliant. There is no illusion that affordability is a huge consideration, despite the apparent disconnection with compliance. This will be the challenge to who-ever is entrusted to deliver the water services in the coming years.
- 3.6 Following work by the councils and iwi on the water services delivery model and key governance and commercial terms in June and July, the Council was briefed on foundation principles and key terms for a Wairarapa Tararua Water Services Council

Controlled Organisation on 30 July 2025 to be included in a Wairarapa Tararua WSDP.

3.7 Officers have confirmed that the numbers being used for financial analysis in the WSDP are based on Council's Long-Term Plan 2024-2034 figures and are consistent with those consulted on in March and April.

3.8 Key Modelling Differences

There are some significant differences between the consultation and WSDP models. However, all base numbers remain unchanged and based on the adopted Long-Term Plan. The major changes in between models are:

Price presentation: Consultation figures used real numbers (unadjusted for inflation but including GST). This is more meaningful for people to understand it in terms of today's dollar value. However, the DIA require the WSDP uses nominal (inflated) figures. This has been the format requested by DIA, resulting in higher numbers in the WSDP of over 27.8% by the end of ten years. When adjusted for inflation on a like-for-like basis, the differences are significantly reduced.

Efficiency assumptions: Consultation modelling assumed approximately 17% efficiency gains, while the WSDP assumes 4-6% efficiency gains based on research into similar international water sector reforms.

Tararua debt: Tararua internal borrowing is fully funded, meaning that all debt will be transferred to the new WSO and ring fenced to Tararua pricing.

Tararua connections: The number of connections used has been reduced from 5,787 from the earlier model to 5,398 average in the latest model. This has been done to better reflect the effect of full targeted charges for our bespoke charging system, such as where, scaled wastewater charges and school wastewater connections attract remissions. Half charges have been ignored. One property may have many meters with each meter counted as a connection. The value has only ever been indicative to give a basis of comparison between councils.

Financial assumptions: The WSDP assumes a 6% interest rate, while consultation modelling used rates varying between 5.2-5.8% annually. The WSDP interest rate assumption has been verified with the Local Government Funding Agency.

Capital programme timing: The consultation model smoothed capital expenditure over a longer timeframe, while the WSDP reflects current Long Term Plan timing, resulting in a more concentrated programme with larger, earlier price increases. Smoothing will be the decision of the WSO once it develops its water strategy.

3.9 The WSDP is in near final form and Tararua District Council has submitted it to DIA for a preliminary review to ensure it meets key requirements before it is formally submitted. DIA has been reviewing an earlier draft and so we may be required to make adjustments or further explanations from there review, that we have not yet made.

3.10 Council has worked successfully with the Wairarapa councils to develop this WSDP and all four councils are bringing an adoption report to their respective Council on 20 August 2025. All councils remain committed to forming a WSO and submitting a joint WSDP to DIA.

4. Description

4.1 Water Services Delivery Plan

- 4.2 Under the Local Government (Water Services Preliminary Arrangements) Act 2024, all councils are required to prepare a WSDP regardless of the operating model (i.e., standalone WSO, multi-Council WSO, or in-house delivery) they have chosen.
- 4.3 The WSDP is a reference document for how the Council plans to deliver water services that are safe, compliant and financially sustainable over the next 10 years and demonstrates to DIA that there is a clear plan for future delivery of water services.
- 4.4 The WSDP must be adopted by resolution by each council and certified by Chief Executives that it complies with legislative requirements and that the information in the WSDP is true and accurate. This paper seeks the Council's approval to adopt the attached plan for TDC within the Wairarapa Tararua WSO, which will be finalised and certified by the Chief Executive prior to submitting it to DIA.
- **4.5** The attached plan has the following parts:
 - PART A delivery model and implementation plan (common part) this section summarises the agreements the four councils and iwi have reached on the WSO's operating model and commercial terms and sets out how the councils and iwi will work together to establish the WSO and transfer water services to the new entity.
 - PART B network performance (TDC part) this section summarises the scope and service area of the Council's water services, the water assets and their condition, planned capital investment in the network over the next 10 years, and a statement of regulatory compliance that confirms the Council meets current and anticipated regulatory standards for water services.
 - PART C revenue and financing (TDC part) this section summarises current and future charging arrangements for customers, financing arrangements, and future revenue requirements.
 - PART D financial sustainability assessment (TDC part) this section summarises how TDC within the WSO will meet DIA's three key financial sustainability measures and confirms that the WSO will be financially sustainable by 30 June 2028.

- PART E projected financial statements for the Council (TDC part) this section shows TDC's financial position within the WSO and demonstrates that the Council can meet the relevant financial sustainability requirements.
- ADDITIONAL INFORMATION (TDC part) this section summarises the Council's major capital projects and the risks to their delivery.
- PART F: Integrated/combined financial projections for the water entity (common part) – this section provides the financial statements for the WSO and demonstrates that the WSO can meet the relevant financial sustainability requirements.
- Appendices (common part) the Commitment Agreement with key agreements reached between councils and iwi is attached as an Appendix to the WSDP.

4.6 Operating model and implementation

Part A of the WSDP sets out that the four councils, together with iwi, intend to establish a Water Services Council-Controlled Organisation providing three waters services to their districts. The plan confirms the councils' commitment to legally establish the Water Services Organisation (WSO) on or before 1 July 2026 and have it operational on or before 1 July 2027.

The WSO will be overseen by a Stakeholders' Forum comprising shareholding council and iwi representatives and governed by a Board of between five to seven independent Directors, with specified skills requirements.

Pricing will be ring-fenced/non-standardised for nine years and subject to a review and decision by shareholding councils at that time. Any decision contrary to this would require a unanimous decision by all shareholding councils, unless change is mandated by Ministerial /regulatory process. This means that pricing will not be merged for the districts and will remain along district boundaries for the period. The WSO will borrow from the LGFA under new covenants and councils' water services related debt will be transferred to the WSO progressively as existing Council debt matures.

4.7 WSO and TDC financial sustainability

A critical objective of the WSDP is the confirmation that water services are financially sustainable by 30 June 2028. To assess whether a council's water services delivery is financially sustainable, the WSDP templates ask councils to provide information about the following three components:

- Investment sufficiency is the projected level of investment sufficient to meet regulatory requirements and provide for growth?
- Revenue sufficiency is there sufficient revenue to cover costs (including servicing debt) of water services delivery?

• Financing sufficiency – are funding and financing arrangements sufficient to meet investment requirements?

4.8 Wairarapa Tararua WSO financial sustainability

The attached WSDP demonstrates that the Wairarapa Tararua WSO is financially sustainable and will meet DIA's three financial requirements.

Revenue sufficiency – revenue is sufficient to cover the costs of water services delivery, including meeting necessary infrastructure investment across the four councils' investment programmes and servicing debt. With the decision to ring-fence prices, per connection revenue requirements and charges vary between councils (refer Figure 1).

Investment sufficiency — levels of investment are sufficient to meet levels of service requirements, regulatory requirements, and increased levels of demand as required by the councils' investment programmes (refer Figure 2). There is sufficient borrowing capacity for Councils to deliver on the investment programmes.

Financing sufficiency – the WSO can meet the new LGFA borrowing covenants, which require a minimum 9% Free Funds from Operations (FFO) to Debt ratio for a WSO with 25,000 connections. The Wairarapa-Tararua WSDP modelling has targeted a 10% FFO to debt target which is more conservative, and the plan shows that the WSO reaches this 10% target by FY32 (refer Figure 3).

Figure 1: WSO revenue and expenses

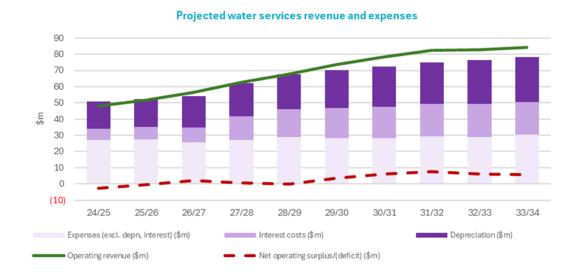


Figure 2: WSO investment requirements

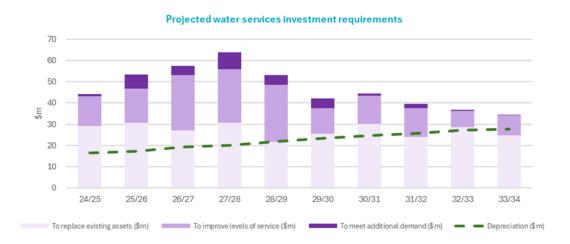
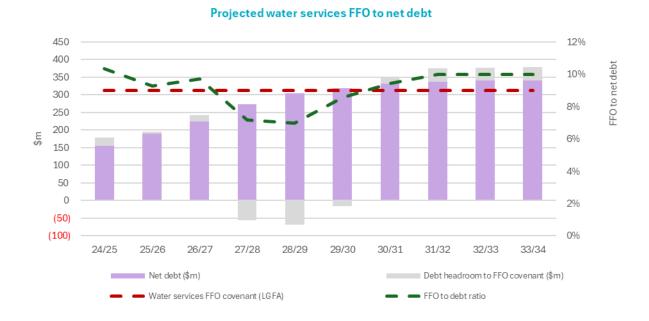


Figure 3: FFO to debt target



Within the overall WSO, each council has a different transition path and financial picture, based on their respective starting debt positions, capital programmes, and the councils' agreement to maintain non-standardised prices for at least nine years. The plan must provide a statement that each council's position, within the overall WSO, is financially sustainable.

4.9 Tararua Assessment of Sustainability

The TDC part of the WSDP confirms that:

Revenue sufficiency – TDC within the WSC (from FY28) is projected to generate sufficient revenue to meet the full cost of water services delivery, including operating expenditure, asset renewals, and debt servicing. This is underpinned by a shift to a WSO with a target capital structure generating sufficient revenues over the forecast period (Figure 4).

Operating surpluses over the 10-year period are forecast at \$22.8m. TDC has an operating deficit in year 1 of the WSDP period and year 1 of the WSO operation, with surpluses from year 2 of the WSO onwards. Operating cashflow surpluses over the period are forecast at \$133.9m, underpinned by necessary price increases.

For the Council, average water charges per connection are forecast to increase from \$2,398 in FY25 to \$4,956 in FY34 (in nominal terms, inflated), which represents around 4.8% of median household income in the district.

This is an acknowledged affordability challenge and the WSDP recommends assessment of the capital programme through transition to determine opportunities to manage costs.

Investment sufficiency – the WSDP includes \$150m in forecast capital investment for TDC over the 10-year period, including renewals to maintain existing levels of service and asset reliability, upgrades to achieve compliance with drinking water standards and to improve network resilience, and growth-related projects to service projected increases in demand (Figure 5).

The proposed investment meets the investment sufficiency test and is fully funded by forecast revenues and access to finance. Over the WSDP period, the \$150 million of capital investment forecast, has approximately \$54.8 million of this expected to be debt funded, with total debt reaching around \$107.3 million in FY34.

Financing sufficiency – the Council within the WSO, can manage the borrowing required within LGFA covenants. TDC will meet the targeted 10% FFO to debt ratio by FY30 and the Interest Cover Ratio (ability to meet interest costs on debt) requirement from FY28 (Figure 6 further below).

Figure 4: TDC within WSO revenue and expenses

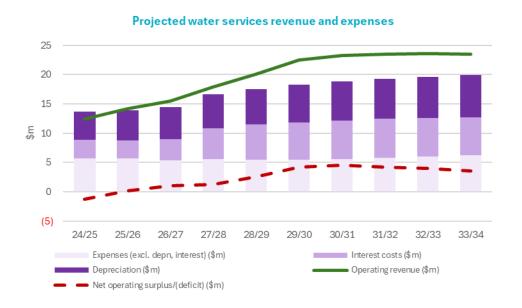


Figure 5: TDC within WSO water services investment

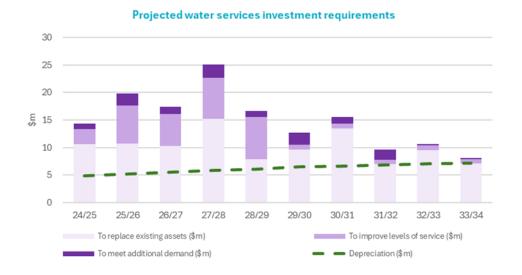
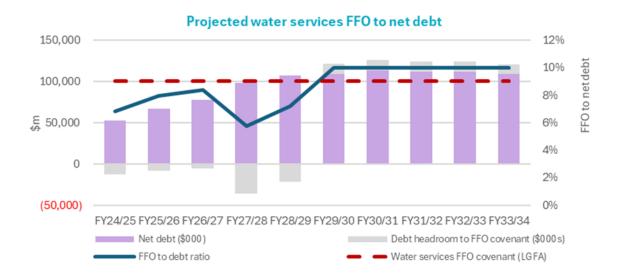


Figure 6: TDC within WSO FFO to debt



4.10 WSDP modelling

The modelling underpinning this WSDP is based on councils' existing investment programmes as set out in their respective Long-Term Plans and Annual Plans. The model also makes key assumptions about levels of operational efficiency that the WSO will achieve, financing costs, Free Funds from Operations "FFO" to debt target, and additional overhead costs incurred by the WSO. These assumptions are included in the appendix to the WSDP.

In general terms, the model takes a conservative approach in its assumptions, which is appropriate given the need to demonstrate financial sustainability and gain regulatory approval. This does result in a higher modelled price path than what may occur in practice. It is important to note that the underlying drivers for costs to increase remain the need to undertake investment across the network, the starting positions of the councils, and the need

to meet new financial requirements, and these are not driven by the assumptions in the model.

The WSO will have choices about how it manages itself which will influence the costs paid by customers. For example, it may review the combined regional capital programme and change the phasing and priorities of works to manage costs, achieve efficiencies through bundling of work, or to better reflect a regional view of necessary investment. It may make other operational decisions that result in higher levels of efficiency than have been modelled, it may choose to target a lower FFO to debt ratio, or it may achieve a credit rating which would be expected to reduce its costs of borrowing.

TDC and South Wairarapa have particularly challenging price paths, and the WSDP notes that councils will recommend to the WSO to consider the capital programme as an important way to manage costs.

Please note the WSDP prices are nominal (inflated) numbers, and the prices used in consultation were real (uninflated) numbers. The DIA template requires the numbers to be presented as nominal numbers. This results in numbers that are higher than the ones presented in the consultation.

4.11 Finalisation of the WSDP

The attached WSDP is in near final form and is currently being reviewed by DIA to ensure it will meet key requirements, ahead of it being formally submitted with the Carterton, Tararua and South Wairarapa WSDPs.

Following any feedback from DIA, officers will finalise the plan and it will be certified by the Chief Executive prior to being formally submitted. This paper is seeking the Council's approval to provide the Chief Executive with delegation to make any final changes to the plan, including those that may be required by DIA, prior to certification.

All plans from councils around New Zealand need to be submitted to DIA by 3 September. DIA has indicated that they would seek to assess and approve plans by the end of the year.

4.12 Commitment Agreement

The Wairarapa and Tararua councils have agreed to submit a Commitment Agreement to DIA with the WSDP to further demonstrate the regional commitment to delivering on the WSDP and establishing the WSO. The Agreement confirms that the councils and iwi will work together to legally establish the WSO on or before 1 July 2026 and be operational on or before 1 July 2027.

Appended to the Agreement is a terms sheet that contains the agreements of the four councils and iwi to governance, shareholding and commercial arrangements for the WSO. These arrangements include:

Principles to guide the establishment and transition to the WSO;

- Establishment of a Stakeholder Forum, with representation for each council and iwi, to oversee the WSO and enable councils to exercise their shareholding rights;
- Details on the size and composition of the WSO Board, terms of appointment, and Board member skills requirements;
- Approach to shareholding and share allocation between the councils;
- Decision making framework for key decisions (e.g., Board appointments, issuing Statement of Expectations, new shareholder entry etc.);
- Principles for future shareholder entry and/or exit, including effect of amalgamation, if any;
- Approach to price standardisation and pricing principles for inclusion in the Constitution; and
- Principles for debt transfer and dividend payments.

Subject to the four councils' approval of this Agreement on 13 and 20 August, nominated representatives of each council will sign this Agreement prior to it being submitted to DIA.

5. Significance Assessment

- **5.1** Council's three waters networks are strategic assets under Council's Significance and Engagement Policy.
- **5.2** Under the Significance and Engagement Policy, changes to ownership or transfer of strategic assets require consultation.
- This matter is considered significant under our Significance and Engagement Policy and has been consulted on as required.
- This decision is consistent with previous Council decisions to form a WSO and aligns with Council's strategic direction and our community consultation.
- Furthermore, the adopted Long-Term Plan 2024-2034 was consulted on and is the basis for the financial assessments informing this WSDP. This LTP received a clear audit opinion by Audit New as auditors of Council on behalf of the Office of the Auditor General.

6. Options

- 6.1 Council has previously considered all reasonably practicable options and has resolved to form a joint WSO with the Wairarapa councils.
- 6.2 Whilst Council reserved the option to reconsider its next steps in the event that any of the Wairarapa councils chose to withdraw from the WSO, it was identified in the consultation documents as well as in reports to Council that a standalone option

(and withdrawing from the WSO) was not a financially sustainable option for Council.

- 6.3 All four councils have actively participated in developing the Commitment Agreement and WSDP and are bringing the WSDP to their respective Council for adoption on 20 August 2025.
- 6.4 Set out below are the advantages and disadvantages of the recommended approach to approve the WSDP for submission.

| Option | Advantages | Disadvantages |
|---|---|--|
| 1 Approve the attached WSDP for submission to DIA | Aligns with the decisions Council has made to date. Will achieve the submission deadline for DIA. Meets agreements reached with other councils and iwi. Service delivery model is lower cost for customers and more regionally efficient than a standalone model. | No known disadvantages |
| 2 Do not approve the attached WSDP | No known advantages | Does not align with the decisions Council has made to date. Would require a new plan to be developed and will not meet the submission deadline for DIA. There is a strong indication that a Ministerial appointment would be made to oversee Council, at Council's cost. A change in strategic direction would require new consultation with the community. Does not meet agreements reached with other councils and iwi. Service delivery model would be higher cost for customers and less regionally efficient than a Wairarapa Tararua model. This would involve significant delays and cost to Council. |

7. Recommended option

7.1 It is recommended that Council approves the WSDP for submission to DIA. This ensures that Council will meet the external deadline for submission of a WSDP and that the Council will progress a future water services delivery model that has demonstrated advantages for the district, and wider Wairarapa Tararua areas. It also aligns with Council's prior decisions and is consistent with Council's position following consultation with the community.

8. Summary of Considerations

8.1 Strategic, Policy and Legislative Implications

The attached plan has been prepared in line with the requirements for WSDPs as set out in the Local Government (Water Services Preliminary Arrangements) Act 2024.

8.2 Legal and risk

The Commitment Agreement and the Terms Sheet have been subject to external legal advice and review by Bell Gully.

The Minister of Local Government has indicated that failure to comply and submit a sustainable plan by 3 September 2025, would likely result in appointment of a water- services expert, at the cost of the individual council.

8.3 Consultation

Council has consulted with the community on the future service delivery model in line with provisions in the Local Government (Water Services Preliminary Arrangements) Act 2024, its Significance and Engagement Policy and the Local Government Act 2002.

The decisions sought in this report do not require further consultation with the community.

8.4 Financial Considerations

This paper seeks the Council's approval of \$1.25m of unbudgeted expenditure to meet Tararua District Council's share of the \$5m establishment costs of the WSO. This funding would be borrowed by the Council and transferred to the new WSO on transition, as part of the transfer of the Council's water services-related debt.

Council has previously consulted with the community on the required contribution as part of the Local Water Done Well consultation. The expenditure has however not yet been including in Council's Annual Plan and therefore approval is sought for it outside of the planning cycle in order for Council to meet its commitment to the next stage of the establishment of the WSO.

Each of the four councils is seeking the same approval for establishment funding.

The four councils have received a financial contribution of \$250,000 by the Minister to complete this review and these funds will be applied first.

9. Implications for Māori

- 9.1 The four councils and iwi have worked together on the details of the WSO arrangements included in the Terms Sheet of the Commitment Agreement. The implementation section of the WSDP sets out how councils and iwi will work together to establish the WSO by 1 July 2027.
- **9.2** This work is consistent with our Memoranda of Partnership with iwi and internal policies.

10. Environmental/Climate Change Impact and Considerations

- 10.1 There are no climate change impacts as a result of the decisions sought in this report. Some submitters indicated that the proposed option (Wairarapa Tararua) may deliver improved water management, including water security and resilience.
- 10.2 Reducing emissions from water services will need to be considered as part of the renewal and upgrade of the network. This will form part of the Asset Management Plans and Strategy of the entity delivering water services in the future.

11. Communications/Engagement Plan

- 11.1 No further community consultation or engagement is required to make the decisions in this paper.
- 11.2 Following all four councils' adoption of their respective WSDPs, officers will prepare a joint media statement on behalf of the four councils.

12. Next Steps

- **12.1** Following approval by the four councils to adopt the WSDP, this will be prepared for submission to DIA, prior to the 3 September 2025 deadline.
- **12.2** Following delegation to the Chief Executive, the Shareholder Agreement and Constitution will be prepared in consultation with the Wairarapa councils and will be brought back to Council for approval in September 2025.

13. Conclusion

- **13.1** Council has been working through the process set out by Government.
- **13.2** Council's relationship with the Wairarapa councils remains positive and constructive.

