

Tuesday 9 June 2026



Council to seek residents' views on local government reorganisation options

The Gore District Council will ask the community for its views on five options for how local government could be run across the south.

The move comes after an extraordinary meeting today to discuss taking part in the Government's Head Start reform process.

The reform is part of a wider shake-up of local government being driven by central Government. In May, the Government opened a short, time-limited Head Start window for councils that want to put forward their own reform proposals.

Councils that don't take part, or can't reach an agreement, face a compulsory amalgamation process after the 2028 local elections. It is known as the "backstop", which would largely take any decisions out of councils' hands.

Gore District Mayor Ben Bell stressed that the Head Start process was coming from Wellington, not the council.

"The Government has set the clock, set the rules and set the deadline. Our choice is whether we sit back and have a future handed to us or get to the table and help shape it."

To be clear, no decision has been made to amalgamate, and no final structure has been settled, Mr Bell said.

The steps agreed by councillors keep Gore's options open and allow the community to have its say before the Council decides whether or not to lodge a Head Start proposal by the Government's deadline of 9 August.

Southland's two reform processes

Mr Bell acknowledged that the two reform processes running side by side in Southland at present were causing confusion.

The first process is an independent investigation by the Local Government Commission into how local government in Southland is organised. It began at the request of the Southland District Council.

The first phase, released on 25 May, found there was enough reason to look at reorganisation in more detail. The second phase is now underway, with all four Southland councils due to workshop a long list of options on 17 June in Invercargill.

The second process is the Government's national "Head Start" pathway. It offers councils a faster route and the chance to consider options beyond those the Commission is looking at.

Any proposal has to see councils become a unitary authority and will be assessed against five Government criteria, including whether it maintains local voice.

"The thing I'll be fighting hardest for is local representation," Mayor Bell said.

"There's a genuine worry that a smaller district like ours could get drowned out in a bigger organisation.

"That concern is fair, and exactly why we want to be in the room – to make sure the Gore District has a say in decisions that affect us."

Have your say

In the coming weeks, the Council will ask residents for their views on four options:

- **Option one — No Head Start:** remain involved in the Local Government Commissions review of Southland and not submit a Head Start proposal.
- **Option two — One unitary authority for Southland:** a single organisation, but with local rural representation built into how it's governed.
- **Option three — A rural unitary across Southland and Otago:** Gore, Southland, Clutha, Waitaki and Central Otago districts join up as one unitary authority.
- **Option four — Other:** an open option for any other ideas residents want to put forward.
- **Option five – Two unitary authorities for Southland:** Two councils (Invercargill and Southland –Gore), each delivering both regional and territorial functions within their area, with coordination on cross-boundary issues.

Mr Bell said this early conversation is a first step, not the final word.

“Because the Government's timeframe is tight, it is deliberately fast and high-level.”

If the Council submits a proposal and the Government accepts it, much more detail would follow, he said

Under the Government's own guidance, a detailed design phase runs from October 2026 to March 2027, during which in-depth work, such as financial modelling, governance, and local representation arrangements, will be undertaken.

The Council will keep residents informed as the process develops, Mr Bell said.

Council has also agreed to appoint Cr Paul McPhail and Mel Cupit to a joint working group with Invercargill City Council and any other council to explore governance options, so that Gore's interests, and rural Southland's, are represented.

Details on how to take part, including drop-in sessions and an online feedback form, will be shared shortly through the Council's website, local media and social channels.

ENDS

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