

Our advice

Prepared for SOLGM

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Three waters services reform MOU - no explicit triggers for consultation before territorial authorities sign

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| Background | <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. You have asked us to prepare advice to be circulated to territorial authorities with the draft memorandum of understanding for three water services reform (MOU).2. Our advice proceeds on the presumption that councils will enter into the MOU after their annual plan for 2020/21 has been adopted. |
| Question | <ol style="list-style-type: none">3. Do territorial authorities need to consult their community before entering into the MOU? |
| Answer | <ol style="list-style-type: none">4. Generally, no. There are no explicit triggers for consultation before entering into the MOU. The decision to enter into it is of course subject to the general requirements relating to decision-making in Part 6 of the Local Government Act 2002 (LGA 02). If councils consider they do not have a reasonable understanding of community views in relation to the commitments arising from the MOU then they could choose to consult their communities about the decision. We expect this will be the exception not the norm.5. Certain choices made subsequently as to what projects to advance or steps to take might trigger consultation requirements at that time. |

Our reasons

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Summary	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The obligations assumed on upon entry into the MOU do not trigger any explicit requirements to consult in the LGA 02. 	2
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The decision is subject to the general requirements relating to decision-making in Part 6 of the LGA 02, meaning local authorities may choose to consult. 	3
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Subsequent decisions relating to either the reform or projects/funding aspects may trigger consultation requirements at that time. 	3-4
The obligations assumed upon entry into the MOU have no explicit consultation triggers	6. The key commitment in the MOU is to working constructively together to support the objectives of the the three waters service delivery reform programme (page 3). The MOU contains objectives that will underpin the reform programme and inform the development of reform options/proposals and core reform design features (pages 3 and 4). We refer to this as the reform commitment.	
	7. It is fundamental to the reform commitment that there is acknowledgement by both parties to the MOU that there are challenges facing the delivery of water services and infrastructure and the communities that fund and rely on those services, that are in need of solutions. These challenges are set out in summary form in the Background section. This section also makes it clear that the reform process and stimulus funding proposed by government is designed to support economic recovery post COVID-19 and address persistent systemic issues facing the three waters sector through a combination of: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Stimulation investment, to assist economic recovery through job creation and maintain investment in water infrastructure renewals and maintenance; and Reforming current water service delivery, into larger scale providers, to realise significant economic, public health, environmental, and other benefits over the medium to long term. 	
	8. The Background refers to a shared understanding that a partnership approach will best support the wider community and ensure that the transition to any eventual new arrangements is well managed and as smooth as possible. This partnership approach is set out more fully in the section "Principles for Working Together" as a relationship based on mutual trust and respect, openness, non-adversarial dealings and constructive problem-solving, co-operation and information sharing. As principles to underpin dealings between local authorities and the Crown, these are uncontroversial.	

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9. The reform objectives which “inform the development of reform options/proposals” are similarly self-evident with the possible exception of the objective of:

“Improving the co-ordination of resources, planning, and unlocking strategic opportunities to consider New Zealand’s infrastructure and environmental needs at a larger scale.”

10. This is offset to some extent by the objective of “undertaking the reform in a manner that enables local government to further enhance the way in which it can deliver on its broader “wellbeing mandates” as set out in the Local Government Act 2002.”
11. The parties to the MOU agree to consider minimum design features which include water service delivery entities of significant scale (most likely multi-regional) to enable benefits from aggregation to be achieved over the medium to long-term, structured as statutory entities.
12. Funding from central government to councils is available in three tranches. Tranche one funding will be provided following entry into the MOU and agreement to an associated funding agreement and delivery plan. The delivery plan will need to show that the funding is to be applied to opex or capex that supports economic recovery through job creation and maintains, increases or accelerates investment in core water infrastructure renewals and maintenance (page 5). The funding cannot be applied to projects already in a council’s annual plan. We refer to this as the projects commitment.
13. The MOU is effective from the date of signing until 30 June 2021, unless terminated earlier or extended.
14. Neither the reform commitment nor projects commitments bind councils to specific three waters projects. Rather, councils are committing to participate in a reform process looking at changes to three waters delivery and identify possible projects that are eligible for funding. The obligations are exploratory/investigative in nature.
15. The MOU cannot, and does not, supplant the planning, accountability and associated consultation obligations of local authorities in the LGA 02. These continue to apply when there is a relevant trigger.
16. Decisions on three waters projects are the likely outcome of the reform process and funding provided, after participation in the process, after entry into the MOU. The consultation can be undertaken at that time.

The decision to enter the MOU is subject to the Part 6 LGA 02 decision-making obligations –

17. Whether or not to enter into the MOU will be at councils’ discretion. As a decision, the decision will be subject to the general decision-making obligations in Part 6 of the LGA 02.
18. The Part 6 LGA 02 obligations include the section 78 obligation to consider the views and preferences of interested and affected
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these do not strongly indicate that consultation is required

persons when making this decision, and determine whether consultation is needed or appropriate in order to identify those views and preferences.

19. This determination as to extent of compliance with section 78 will be a judgement for each council to make under section 79, and will depend in part on the particular council's significance and engagement policy (**SEP**), and its 2020/21 annual plan and current LTP.
20. The availability of Crown funding for core water infrastructure (at an amount disclosed before the MOU is entered into) is a unique opportunity to relieve local funding pressures that councils might reasonably expect their communities to support. The associated commitment to cooperate in a consideration of structural water reform is a subject on which councils may have limited understanding of community views. However, the exploratory/investigative nature of the reform commitment and the express provision in the MOU that it does not give rise to legally enforceable obligations, suggest the ready application of section 79(2) as a justification for not undertaking specific community engagement at this time.
21. Councils should check out of an abundance of caution that their SEP does not indicate a need to consult before entering the MOU. We expect it to be very unlikely that many policies will indicate consultation is required, including because of the nature of the obligations assumed upon entry into the MOU and that the decision is not irrevocable. Also potentially relevant is that the timeframes imposed by central government do not permit sufficient time to consult.
22. If councils enter into the MOU, they may want to consult subsequently on whether to continue their support of reform. LTP consultation in 2021 would be the obvious opportunity, and would provide timely information about whether to participate in tranche two.

Consultation triggers for decisions on three waters reform (post entry into the MOU)

23. Some specific LGA 02 consultation triggers that may be relevant to decisions on three waters reform (after participation in the reform process in the MOU) are:
 - 23.1 **Section 56** – councils must consult before becoming a shareholder in a council controlled organisation (**CCO**). If the reformed service delivery approach leads to councils being shareholders in new multi-regional providers (which seem likely to be CCOs), then section 56 may be triggered.
 - 23.2 **Section 97(1)(b)** – if the reformed delivery approach amounts to a “decision to transfer the ownership or control of a strategic asset to or from the local authority”, then it would be necessary to amend the council's LTP to explicitly provide for this decision, which requires consultation under section 93E. Water network assets are almost always listed as a strategic asset in SEPs.

23.3 **Section 137(3)(a)** – councils must consult before entering into a “joint arrangement”, which is an arrangement between a council and another party “for the purpose of providing water services or any aspect of a water service”. This trigger may be remote, particularly if central government in providing funding is not also seeking to provide any aspect of a water service.¹

Consultation triggers for decisions on three waters projects (post entry into the MOU)

24. One specific consultation trigger that needs to be considered is section 97(1)(a) of the LGA 02. If the projects being funded would significantly alter levels of service for three waters activities, then it would be necessary to amend the council's LTP to explicitly provide for this decision, which requires consultation under section 93E.
25. It will depend on particular councils' LTPs, but this trigger can likely be avoided by councils selecting appropriate projects. (This was generally achieved by councils as they responded to the impacts of COVID-19 during the annual plan process for 2020/21).
26. Leaving aside section 97(1)(a), section 78 will still be relevant. It should be reasonably safe for councils to not consult to address section 78 where projects are brought forward from future work programmes and the combined effect of these projects is not a significant or material variation from the 2020/21 annual plan or LTP.
27. As to whether the combined effect of projects brought forward is a significant or material variation from the 2020/21 annual plan or LTP will depend on the degree to which the projects are already provided for in the annual plan or LTP and what, if any, financial impact there may be on the particular council. If projects are already provided for in the infrastructure strategy (in the LTP) and they can be entirely funded from central government (meaning no negative financial impact on the council), it seems very unlikely that there will be a significant or material variation from the annual plan or LTP of any consequence to the community. On this basis, consultation is unlikely to be indicated.
28. Strictly, the provision of central government funding could create a material change to revenue commitments (even if it is downward rather than upward) that reflect in a change to financial statements included in an annual plan, that, given the degree of change, could be expected to be consulted on before being adopted. Councils encountered similar issues in preparing their annual plans to respond to COVID-19 where different funding sources (for example borrowing or reserve funds) have had to be employed from what was anticipated. These decisions tended to be made without further consultation if the council assessed that it did not affect levels of service with reference to section 97 or was within the scope of rate change consulted on. In the current circumstances, we consider that the fact that the change is not detrimental lessens the risk of not consulting and (having occurred after the annual plan has been

¹ Section 17A requires periodic reviews of service delivery, but this section in itself does not contain a trigger for consultation.

adopted) makes it something that is duly reported on in the annual report and treated as an operating surplus.

29. We note that councils are not absolutely bound by their plans or policies (under sections 96 and 80), but this does not remove the need to assess whether consultation is appropriate when departing from them. Consistency with plans and policies is often a criterion for significance in SEPs. Where consultation does not occur, relevant statutory compliance will likely include disclosure in the annual report, and perhaps resolving in accordance with section 80 (where the departure from the annual plan is significant).

**Please call or
email to discuss
any aspect of this
advice**

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