

Approached from overseas?

A red-flags checklist

Overseas approaches are a normal part of council life: a sister-city proposal, an investor who wants to meet the mayor, an invitation to send a delegation. Most are genuine, and many lead to good things for your community. This checklist helps you look carefully before you commit. The same checks apply whichever country the approach comes from.

How to use it. Work through each section before anyone replies or commits. Tick each box once you've checked it. A "no" or "not sure" doesn't mean walk away. It means look harder, write down what you find, and use the traffic-light guide on page 4 to decide what happens next.

1 Before you reply

The first reply sets the tone. Buy yourself time to check.

- ☐ Has the approach come through a channel you can verify, such as an official email domain, an embassy or consulate, or an introduction from someone you know and trust?
- ☐ Is one person in council responsible for the reply, and do the mayor's and chief executive's offices know about the approach?
- ☐ Have you written down what is being proposed, who proposed it, how they made contact and when?
- ☐ Is there pressure to answer quickly, keep things confidential, or deal with one person only? If so, slow down.
- ☐ Do you know what council wants from its international relationships, and does this approach fit?
- ☐ Have you checked council's own policies: international relations, gifts and hospitality, conflicts of interest, sensitive expenditure and procurement?
- ☐ Is your first reply a short, polite acknowledgement that commits council to nothing? For example: "Thank you for your interest. We'll consider it and come back to you."

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2 Who is really behind it?

Check the organisation, not just the person who contacted you.

- ☐ **Does the organisation exist?** For New Zealand entities, search the Companies Office register. For an overseas organisation, ask for its registration documents and check them against the official company registry in its home country.
- ☐ Do names, titles, addresses and logos match across emails, business cards, websites and official records?
- ☐ **Who owns or funds it?** Find the beneficial owners: the people who ultimately own or control it. Look for ownership held through other companies or trusts, and for directors or office-holders who appear across several related organisations.
- ☐ Is it linked to any foreign government, political party, military or state-owned body, directly or through its owners, directors or funders? If so, which one, and in what way? A link isn't automatically a reason to say no, but council should know about it and decide with its eyes open.
- ☐ **Intermediaries.** Is the person who contacted you the party you would actually be dealing with, or an intermediary such as an agent, consultant or association? If an intermediary, who do they act for, and who pays them?
- ☐ Have they worked with other New Zealand councils or organisations? Ask, and then check with those councils directly.

3 What are they asking for?

Be clear about what council would give, and what it would get.

- ☐ **MOUs and agreements.** Ask for the text early, in both languages, and have an independent translator confirm they say the same thing. Watch for political statements, exclusivity and open-ended commitments.
- ☐ **Data and information.** Are they asking for information about residents, ratepayers, council systems, infrastructure or plans that aren't public?
- ☐ **Land and infrastructure.** Does the interest involve land, water, ports, airports, energy, telecommunications or other critical sites? Get specialist advice, including on overseas investment rules.
- ☐ **Delegations.** Who would come, who do they want to meet, and what do they want to see? Is there a clear benefit for your community? It's fine to say no to a visit that doesn't serve council's interests.
- ☐ **Paid trips.** Is council being invited to send elected members or staff overseas at the other party's expense?
- ☐ **Events and photos.** Will council people be photographed at events or signings? Ask how the photos will be used before they're published.
- ☐ Does anything they're asking for go beyond what the relationship actually needs?

4 Money, gifts and hospitality

Generosity is part of many cultures. Recording it protects everyone.

- ☐ Is anyone offering gifts, meals, accommodation, travel or entertainment? Record each one in council's gifts and hospitality register, in line with your policy.
- ☐ **Sponsored travel.** Who is paying for flights, accommodation and in-country costs? Get it in writing, declare it, and consider whether council should pay its own way so it stays independent.
- ☐ Is the hospitality in proportion to the relationship? Lavish treatment early on is worth noting.
- ☐ Are there offers of donations, sponsorship or funding, to council, a council-controlled organisation, a community group or an elected member?
- ☐ Is any money moving through an intermediary or a third party?
- ☐ Would council's spending, and anything it accepts, stand up against the Auditor-General's guidance on sensitive expenditure?
- ☐ Would you be comfortable reading about it in the local paper tomorrow?

5 Elected members and staff

Interference usually works through people, often without them realising.

- ☐ Has everyone involved declared any conflicts of interest, including business, family or community ties to the other party?
- ☐ Have elected members and staff read the NZSIS and Protective Security Requirements (PSR) guidance, including the PSR's advice on espionage and foreign interference threats for elected representatives?
- ☐ Is one person being singled out for flattery, favours or repeated invitations, or being asked to become the relationship's "friend" inside council?
- ☐ Is anyone being asked for information that isn't public, even informally?
- ☐ **Travelling.** Does everyone travelling know how to protect their phones, laptops and information? The PSR has guidance on travelling overseas on business.
- ☐ Is there a written record of each meeting: who was there, what was discussed and what was agreed?
- ☐ Does everyone know who to tell if something feels wrong?

Since November 2025 the Crimes Act has included offences for improper conduct for, or on behalf of, a foreign state that compromises New Zealand's interests (NZSIS, Security Threat Environment 2026).

6 Traffic-light decision guide

Use your answers to decide what happens next. Most amber items are resolved by asking a few good questions.



Green Go ahead with care

YOU SEE

- You can confirm who they are and who's behind them
- The request is clear and in writing
- Gifts and hospitality are modest and recorded
- No conflicts of interest

YOU DO

- Proceed, keeping good records
- Brief elected members on the relationship
- Review it each year



Amber Pause and look harder

YOU SEE

- Ownership or funding you can't confirm
- A link to a foreign government, political party, military or state-owned body that you didn't know about
- Pressure for speed or confidentiality
- An MOU, signing, delegation or sponsored trip is proposed

YOU DO

- Ask for more information, in writing
- Brief the mayor and chief executive
- Get independent advice
- Decide before anyone commits



Red Stop and get advice

YOU SEE

- They won't say who they are or who's behind them
- Requests for non-public information or access to critical sites
- Pressure on one person, or money through third parties
- Anything that looks deceptive, corrupt or coercive

YOU DO

- Don't commit or sign anything
- Keep records of every contact
- Talk to your chief executive and legal advisers
- Report your concern to the NZSIS (guidance 2 below)

When to call Eastern Bridge

Call us when you can't confirm who is behind an approach, when an MOU, visit or signing is on the table, or when something just doesn't feel right. We help councils check overseas approaches, read what an agreement really says in both languages, and respond respectfully.

The first conversation is free and confidential. We won't contact the other party unless you ask us to.

We don't take payment from an overseas party we're checking for a council.

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New Zealand's trusted bridge to China and Asia.

Official guidance

1. NZSIS, New Zealand's Security Threat Environment 2026: nzs.govt.nz/our-work/new-zealands-security-threat-environment/security-threat-environment-2026
2. NZSIS, Report a national security concern (online form, or 0800 747 224): nzs.govt.nz/contact-us/reporting-a-national-security-concern. In an emergency, call 111.
3. Protective Security Requirements, resources including Espionage and foreign interference threats for elected representatives, and Travelling overseas on business: protectivesecurity.govt.nz/resources
4. PSR, Managing inward visits: protectivesecurity.govt.nz/assets/psr/managing-inward-visits.pdf
5. PSR, Due diligence assessments: protectivesecurity.govt.nz/assets/psr/due-diligence-assessments.pdf
6. DPMC, Countering foreign interference: dpmc.govt.nz/our-programmes/national-security/countering-foreign-interference
7. Office of the Auditor-General, Controlling sensitive expenditure: oag.parliament.nz/2020/sensitive-expenditure
8. New Zealand Companies Office: companiesoffice.govt.nz