Hon Chris Bishop

Attorney-General
Minister of Housing
Minister for Infrastructure
Minister Responsible for RMA Reform
Minister of Transport
Associate Minister of Finance

30 September 2026

CB-COR3352

Dear Chairs and Chief Executives,

A better planning system for New Zealand

I am writing to update you on the Government's new planning system and set out the key next steps, following the Planning Act and Natural Environment Act passing into law today.

This represents a significant shift in how planning will work in New Zealand. I recognise the frustration councils have experienced as the Resource Management Act 1991 (the RMA) has become more complex and harder to navigate. The new system provides an exciting opportunity to reset the way we plan for our regions and communities. There is considerable work ahead to make this opportunity a reality, and regional councils will be central to both maintaining continuity during the transition and implementing the new system.

Regional planning under the new system

Each region will have a regional combined plan comprising a regional spatial plan, a natural environment plan, and land-use plans for each district. Regional councils will have a key role in preparing regional spatial plans and natural environment plans.

Regional spatial plans will be an early and important step. They will set the long-term direction for how regions grow and change over the next 30 years and beyond, including where housing, business growth and infrastructure may be needed, and how natural hazards, environmental constraints and long-term investment choices are considered together.

Transition and continuity

I know councils need certainty about what changes now and what comes later. The new system will be introduced in stages through to 2030. The RMA will not disappear overnight. Existing plans, consents, designations and council processes will continue during the transition, while national instruments, regional planning arrangements, and supporting digital services are developed.

The first practical change for councils will be transitional consenting, which will apply from **30 October 2026**, one month after the new legislation passed into law. Councils will continue to receive and process consent applications under the RMA, but with targeted changes to how some applications are considered and decided. These include additional procedural principles, new out-of-scope matters for land use consents and designations, and requirements to consider future development strategies and regional spatial plans where relevant. Training and guidance is available to support your staff to implement these changes.

These arrangements are intended to minimise disruption while allowing some benefits of the new system to begin operating before the full system is in place.

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The new Planning Tribunal will also be established in 2027 to provide a more independent and accessible way to resolve lower-level disputes, primarily about resource consents and designations. The Tribunal will replace current council-led objection processes and operate as a division of the Environment Court. Decisions made before the Tribunal's establishment will continue to be subject to objection and appeal processes under the current system.

Leadership through the transition

Making the new system work will require more than technical delivery. Elected member leadership will be important in turning the ambition of the new system into practical progress for communities, businesses and investors.

In the coming weeks, I encourage your council to:

- brief elected members on what the legislation means for your council, including what will change immediately and over time;
- continue delivering consenting, monitoring, compliance, enforcement and environmental management functions;
- identify any implementation risks or capability requirements; and
- consider the data, systems and investment needed to support the new planning system.

It may also be useful to stay connected with Te Uru Kahika, LGNZ and other sector partners as implementation planning develops.

Over the next one to two years, regional councils will need to maintain core services and statutory functions while preparing for regional spatial planning, natural environment planning and the first package of National Policy Direction (NPD). That includes continuing to process consents, meet monitoring and compliance responsibilities, support environmental and hazard management, and invest in the capability and systems needed to deliver through transition.

The capability and functions of regional councils will continue to be critical to implementing the new planning system.

Data and digital investment

The Government is investing in the data and digital foundations needed to make the new system work in practice. This includes shared digital tools, regional e-plans, trusted environmental and hazard data, and more consistent national planning information.

Digital and data transformation will be a major part of the new way of working. Regional councils hold critical environmental, hazard, spatial, monitoring and planning data. Central and local government will need to work closely together to build shared foundations, avoid duplication, and support better decisions across the system.

In the meantime, your council should continue essential work to maintain services, manage risks and meet statutory responsibilities, including improving the quality and accessibility of this information. If your council is considering new digital or data investments, I encourage you to consider their timing, scope and alignment with the national arrangements now being developed, to avoid duplication and unnecessary rework.

Implementation support

There is significant work ahead, and close collaboration between central and local government will be essential to shift practices and implement the new system with confidence. The Ministry for Cities, Environment, Regions and Transport (MCERT) will work alongside councils and sector partners, providing clear information, coordinated engagement and practical support as implementation progresses. The immediate focus will be helping councils understand and apply the transitional consenting arrangements and building readiness for spatial planning.

To assist councils through these changes, MCERT has launched a new website, *planning.govt.nz,* which provides clear and consistent information about the new planning system. The website includes guidance for planning practitioners and will be updated as implementation progresses.

Dedicated transition support is also available via *planning@mcert.govt.nz*. I encourage your council to raise questions and support needs early. Your feedback will help MCERT shape its guidance and support.

National Policy Direction

One of the first opportunities for councils to help shape implementation is through National Policy Direction (NPD), which will be one of the main building blocks of the new system. As you will be aware, the Government has released illustrative NPD for non-statutory consultation. This gives councils and other participants an early opportunity to test the intended approach before formal statutory consultation begins as required under the new legislation.

Your council's practical experience will be important in ensuring the first package of NPD can be implemented effectively. I encourage you to provide feedback by **16 October**. You can read the illustrative NPD and make a submission through the consultation website: *https://consult.environment.govt.nz/new-planning-system/testing-the-approach-illustrative-npd/.*

Key milestones

The headline milestones for implementing the new system are:

- **2026:** transitional consenting begins one month after enactment;
- **2027:** the first package of National Policy Direction and standards for regional spatial plans are finalised and Planning Tribunal is established;
- **2028:** councils notify draft regional spatial plans; and
- **2029–30:** regional spatial plans are decided, new land-use and natural environment plans are notified, and the new system takes full effect from the specified transition date.

More details on the key milestones are provided below.

Looking ahead

I acknowledge the scale of the change ahead and the important responsibilities regional councils will continue to carry throughout the transition.

Thank you for your leadership and for the work your council is doing to prepare for the new planning system. I look forward to central and local government working closely together to make the new system work well in practice.

Yours sincerely,

Hon Chris Bishop
Minister Responsible for RMA Reform

Appendix 1: Key transition milestones

2026

- The Planning Bill and Natural Environment Bill pass into law, establishing the legislative framework for the new planning system.
- The transition period begins one month after the new legislation passes into law.
- The transitional consenting framework begins to apply from 30 October 2026 with councils continuing to receive and process consent applications under the RMA.
- Existing RMA plans, consents, designations and council processes continue during the transition while new planning tools, national instruments, regional planning arrangements, digital services and implementation support are developed.
- Councils continue preparing for implementation, including through engagement with MCERT on readiness, capability, risks and support needs.
- Consultation on illustrative National Policy Direction (NPD) helps inform development of the first package of NPD under the new legislation.

2027

- NPD must be issued no later than 12 months after the new legislation passed into law. This will provide clearer national direction on matters such as housing, infrastructure, environmental management and natural hazards.
- National standards setting the structure and form of regional spatial plans must also be finalised within 12 months of the new legislation passing into law, but not before NPD is issued.

2028

- National standards relating to environmental limits must be finalised within 18 months of the new legislation passing into law.
- National standards on standardised plan provisions must be finalised within 21 months of the new legislation passing into law.
- Councils must notify draft regional spatial plans within 21 months of the new legislation passing into law. These plans will be the first major planning documents prepared under the new system and will set the long-term direction for how regions grow and change over the next 30 years and beyond.

2029

- Regional spatial plans must be decided within nine months after they are publicly notified.
- Councils must then notify proposed natural environment plans and proposed land-use plans within nine months of regional spatial plan decisions. Together with regional spatial plans, these will form the combined regional plan for each region.
- Once all proposed plans are notified, the Minister will recommend an Order in Council specifying the date the new legislation will apply (the specified transition date).

2030

- From the specified transition date, all notified plans will have legal effect, and the new planning system will be fully switched on.
- Councils must decide land-use plans and natural environment plans within 12 months of notifying them.