



Regional and
Unitary Councils
Aotearoa

RESOURCE MANAGEMENT REFORM

Enactment Explainer

What the Planning and Natural
Environment Acts mean for regional
and unitary councils

2 OCTOBER 2026



About this pack

The Planning Act and Natural Environment Act are now law, and our focus turns to implementation. This pack brings together the regional sector's messages, an early view of what the Acts mean for our councils, and answers to practical questions about the transition. It is for people working across regional and unitary councils as we continue delivering for our communities and prepare for the new system.

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Mayor Tim King

“No one part of government can implement this in isolation. Regional councils, territorial authorities and unitary councils all have important roles, alongside central government, as the new system takes shape.

“National policy direction, standards, digital tools and the practical implementation decisions that follow will have a huge bearing on whether the system is simpler, cheaper, and delivers better outcomes on the ground.

“The science, data, knowledge and relationships across local government will also be critical to the new system. We need to protect that capability while making the most of opportunities to work differently and reduce unnecessary duplication.”

- Tim King, Te Uru Kahika Reform Sponsor and Mayor of Tasman District Council.

Chair Dr Deon Swiggs

“Regional and unitary councils have long supported the goal of a more efficient and effective system that works better for communities, regional economies and the environment.

“The challenge now is to manage the transition well. For the next few years, councils will need to keep the existing RMA system running while building the new one.

“Regional government provides the expertise and delivery capability needed for locally responsive, regionally scaled solutions.”

- Dr Deon Swiggs, Te Uru Kahika Reform Sponsor and Canterbury Regional Council Chair.

>> [Read more](#)

Regional and unitary council roles

The Planning Act and Natural Environment Act are now law. Thank you to everyone across who has contributed evidence, technical advice and practical experience through the law-making process. We acknowledge the uncertain and complex operating environment for you all.

Councils now enter a multi-year, sequenced transition in which existing RMA functions continue while the structures, plans, systems and processes required under the new Acts are developed. National direction comes first, followed by regional spatial planning and then land-use and natural-environment planning. Getting that sequencing and timing right will be critical.

We must keep delivering our responsibilities well, stay connected to the transition, and start identifying implementation risks and opportunities. Where several councils are likely to face the same issue raise it through Te Uru Kahika and the SIG network so we can work through it once as a sector.

Our focus now shifts from the legislation itself to implementation, while continuing to influence the substantial detail that is still to come with better outcomes for communities and environments as our guiding star. National Policy Direction, national standards, regulations and implementation guidance will determine most of how the new system will operate in practice. Te Uru Kahika is preparing regional sector feedback on the illustrative National Policy Direction and will continue coordinating sector input as further parts of the system are developed.

Te Uru Kahika will continue to raise constructive concerns and practical solutions where implementation risks poor community, environmental, fiscal or operational outcomes. This includes environmental limits, integration between the two Acts, regulatory relief and its costs, and ensuring the framework works at regional and catchment scale.

Treaty settlement obligations and relationships with iwi and hapū remain important through transition and beyond. The new Acts change some statutory participation mechanisms, including the removal of Mana Whakahono ā Rohe and introduction of Iwi Participation Agreements. There is still work to do to understand how existing Treaty settlement obligations, agreements and trusted relationships carry into the new framework.

Our catchment and place-based programmes continue alongside the statutory transition. They remain a major part of regional delivery and should increasingly connect with spatial planning and the new planning framework to support better outcomes for communities and the environment.

The pause in decisions on local government reform does not pause implementation of the new resource management system. Te Uru Kahika will continue working with government to advocate for the two reforms to be managed as a connected transition, so our people, science, data, systems and relationships are well supported through structural change.

Our people

The core role of regional entities remains substantial and broadly familiar. We retain responsibilities around water quality and quantity, air, the coast, indigenous biodiversity, soil conservation, resource allocation, environmental monitoring, permitting and compliance and enforcement. We also pick up additional functions for indigenous biodiversity and for aspects of environmental monitoring.

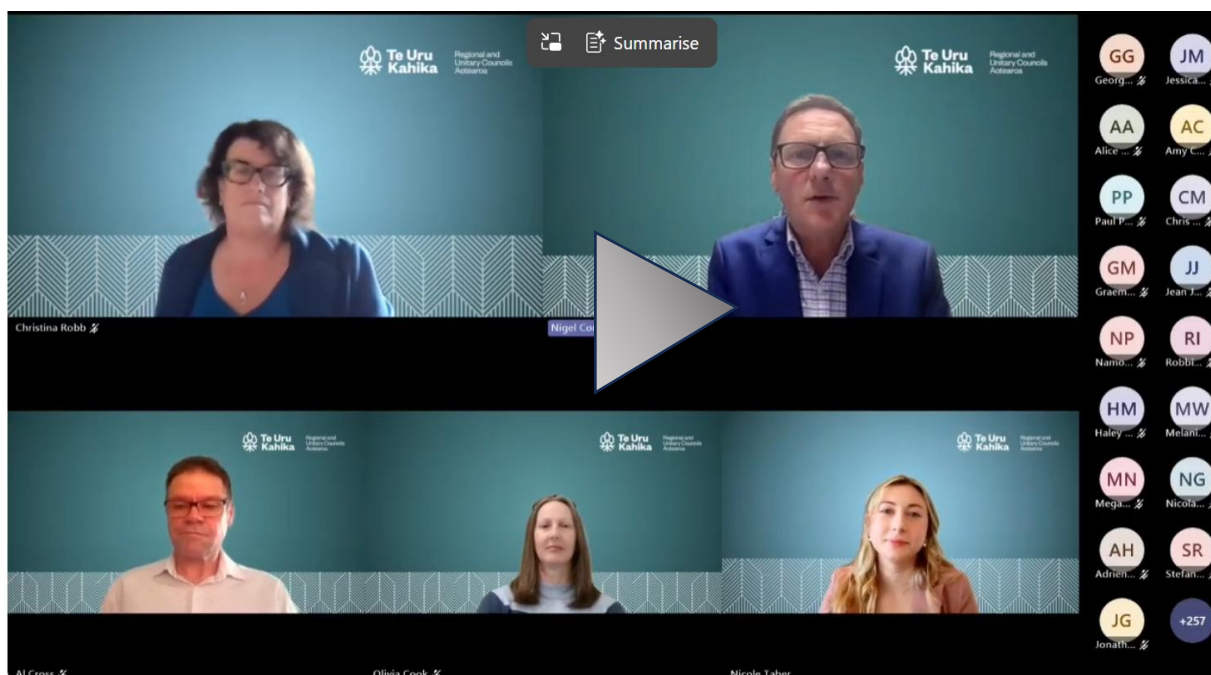
Regional and unitary councils also have important roles in regional spatial planning, preparing natural environment and land use plans and setting ecosystem health limits.

Protecting specialist capability should be an active transition priority. Councils will need people who understand both the RMA and the emerging system while current services continue and the first generation of new plans is built. Science and monitoring capability, environmental data, regulatory expertise, institutional knowledge and relationships are critical infrastructure.

Te Uru Kahika are also working with MCERT, Taituarā, NZPI, the SIG network and council practitioners to identify common issues early and work through them collectively. Increasingly, we'll ask other stakeholders and partners to work with us as we work through common issues. Councils do not have to solve the same implementation problems on their own. We're in this together!

Watch the sector webinar

[Beyond legislation: What the new RM Acts mean for regional and unitary councils](#), was held on 28 September 2026. Hear from regional chief executives and sector subject experts about the framework, the transition, and the transition ahead.



Central Government direction

In letters dated 30 September 2026 to regional and unitary councils, Minister Responsible for RMA Reform Hon Chris Bishop set out the role of councils and the immediate priorities for implementation.

The points below summarise those letters.

- Regional and unitary councils are central to maintaining continuity through the transition and implementing the new system. The Minister explicitly recognises that council capability and functions will remain critical.
- 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 have key roles in regional spatial and natural environment planning. Unitary councils have roles across all three, reflecting their regional and territorial authority functions.
- Regional spatial plans are an early priority. They will guide how regions grow and change over the next 30 years and beyond, bringing housing, business growth, infrastructure, natural hazards, environmental constraints and long-term investment choices together.
- Existing plans, consents, designations and council processes continue during the staged transition. Transitional consenting begins on 30 October 2026, with councils continuing to process applications under the RMA while applying targeted changes.
- Councils should brief elected members, keep delivering statutory functions, identify implementation risks and capability needs, and consider the data, systems and investment needed. Unitary councils also continue their land-use and infrastructure planning responsibilities.
- Over the next one to two years, councils need to maintain core services while preparing for spatial planning, natural environment planning and the first package of National Policy Direction.
- Councils hold critical environmental, hazard, spatial, monitoring and planning data. Unitary councils also hold infrastructure and consenting data. Essential work to maintain services, meet statutory responsibilities and improve data quality and accessibility should continue. New digital and data investments should consider alignment with the national arrangements being developed.
- MCERT will work alongside councils and sector partners. Its immediate support priorities are transitional consenting and readiness for spatial planning. Councils are encouraged to raise questions and support needs early.
- Council experience is important to shaping National Policy Direction. Feedback on the illustrative NPD is open until 16 October 2026; it is an early, non-statutory opportunity before formal statutory consultation.

[MCERT implementation guidance and practitioner information](#)

Understanding the new Planning and Natural Environment Acts

The Natural Environment Act 2026 and Planning Act 2026 were enacted on 30 September 2026 and will replace the Resource Management Act 1991, following a transition phase that begins on 30 October. This document provides an early view of the new Acts, summarising key elements of the legislation that are most relevant to the regional sector, some most recent changes made as the legislation progressed through Parliament, and implications for local government reform. A webinar was held on 28 September, and more topic-specific information will be provided through our Special Interest Group network.

A look at the new legislation

- Regional and unitary councils have strongly supported the need for resource management reform as an opportunity to create a more efficient and cost-effective system that delivers strong outcomes for our communities across regional economies and the natural environment, and reinforces service delivery at the right scale.
- As the Acts come into force, Councils must turn their attention to transitional consenting, implementation of the new Acts, and how to achieve those outcomes.
- Most changes recommended by the Select Committee were carried forward by Parliament, and some new changes were also introduced and passed at the Committee of the Whole House stage.
- The overall architecture of the system remains largely as proposed. Over time, these two Acts replace the RMA. Integration of land-use planning and natural resource management remains a concern for the sector and will need to be managed carefully during implementation as these are not well-integrated between the Acts. National direction and Regional Spatial Plans will play important integrating functions.
- The new system architecture is based on a 'funnel' concept (attached), with the goals of the two Acts underpinning new national policy direction, which will direct decision-making on national standards, regional spatial plans, and the natural environment plans and land use plans that follow. National policy direction will play a larger role in shaping planning outcomes. Sector engagement with both national policy development and implementation in local communities will be equally important.
- Future national policy direction and national standards will strongly direct the scope of Council decision-making and content of future plans, meaning a good deal of uncertainty remains until those are gazetted. While illustrative National Policy Direction has been released for public feedback, this is still subject to substantial change, and the content of national standards (to be delivered in tranches from mid- 2027 to mid-2028) is not yet available. Separate updates will be provided on the illustrative National Policy Direction, via the SIG network.

- Core regional functions and duties remain largely as proposed. Regional and unitary councils will establish spatial plan committees to prepare regional spatial plans (the adoption of which is then decided upon by each Council), set ecosystem health limits, develop action plans and prepare natural environment plans¹, monitor the state of the natural environment, issue natural resource permits, and carry out compliance and enforcement. An additional duty to deliver land use plans for the coastal marine area has been added under the Planning Act. This will be new type of plan with tricky interfaces with the Natural Environment Plan and Land Use Plans to work through.
- Strategic spatial planning and delivery across regions remains central to the new system. Regional and unitary councils will need to focus on connecting and integrating decisions about land, water, the coast, air, biodiversity, ecosystems, infrastructure and development, natural hazards, and climate resilience at the scale at which these issues need to be managed. A region is defined by current regional council boundaries.
- The immediate priority for spatial planning in each region now is establishing a spatial planning committee and process agreements so that spatial planning work programmes can be established and launched. It's also important for all policy and planning teams to familiarise themselves with the Acts.
- Transitional changes to the way consenting is delivered under the RMA start on 30 October, and continue until the conclusion of the transition period in approximately 3 to 4 years.
- Overall, changes made to the legislation through the parliamentary process have provided a more enabling framework for the use of land, housing, growth, infrastructure and natural resource use, and reduced environmental protections. While this may not be the outcome sought by regional and unitary councils, we will now need to adjust and prepare to implement our duties and functions under this new framework to the best of our abilities.
- Successful implementation will rely on the stability and expertise of our regional and unitary council teams. Our people provide the specialist capability, science, data, operational experience and regional knowledge needed to translate legislation into workable and locally important outcomes.
- The new planning system is being introduced now, ahead of future decisions being made on reform of local government. The two reforms need to be carefully aligned so that organisational change does not disrupt development of the first generation of new plans, weaken regional and catchment scale delivery, or result in the loss of essential people, knowledge, systems and relationships. Transition to the new planning and environmental management system will remain complex and demanding so councils must be well-supported throughout.

New planning and environmental management system – some recent changes and implications for our sector

- The goal of no net loss of indigenous biodiversity is amended to protect significant indigenous biodiversity.
- “Within Environmental Limits” has been removed from the goal that enables use and development of natural resources. Environmental limits remain as a method within the NEA to achieve the two goals of safeguarding life supporting capacity and protecting human health.

¹ Unitary Councils will also prepare land use plans.

- Changes that clarify requirements upon the Minister to seek compatibility between goals within and between the two Acts, and to consider various factors before prioritising goals in National Policy Direction have been added. These are welcome, as will be National Policy Direction to assist compatibility between goals and resolve conflicts between them.
- The overall timeframe for transition has been extended from 30 to 39 months, a welcome change that provides additional time for development and delivery of the new system. Meeting this timeline relies on gazettal of first national policy and standards, and notifying and adopting regional spatial plans in accordance with timeframes set. Any delays would affect the ability to deliver Natural Environment Plans and Land Use Plans.

Māori participation, Treaty settlement arrangements and relationships

- The new planning system continues to recognise Māori interests but does so through a different framework than the RMA, without an equivalent to Part 2 or an overarching Treaty clause. Greater reliance is placed on national direction, targeted Māori-interest provisions, and Treaty settlement arrangements.
- Existing Treaty settlement obligations, iwi and hapū planning documents, and statutory acknowledgements continue to be recognised. There is particularly strong recognition provided to the primacy of Te Ture Whaimana for the Waikato and Waipā Rivers. A requirement remains in the Acts for councils and government to endeavour to give the same or equivalent effect as a Treaty settlement redress or arrangement as under the RMA when they implement the new Acts, until new agreements have been reached between the Crown and post settlement entities. Recent changes enable future national standards to specify how councils must do this. This requirement remains a significant concern for Councils as it appears to push Crown obligations down to Councils, potentially indefinitely.
- Mana Whakahono ā Rohe arrangements cease. Iwi and councils may enter into new, more narrowly scoped iwi participation agreements. While other statutory participation mechanisms have narrowed or been removed, the importance of council-iwi relationships has not diminished.

Spatial Planning

- In addition to changes recommended by the Select Committee (including changes that ensure each local authority has the ability to appoint a representative to the Spatial Plan Committees and changes that require the Committee to have a person with knowledge of te ao Māori), further changes include the ability for national standards to set compulsory content for spatial plans, and indicative future designations (such as for future infrastructure or transport networks).
- Other requirements relate to relevant water services strategies, and restrictions that apply in relation to certain wāhi tapu.

Environmental Limits

- Environmental limits are a key part of the new system although a number of questions remain about how this part of the system will work. Changes have been made with the expressed intent to make the framework more workable. However, this includes widening the circumstances in which Ministers can allow activities to proceed that will cause or contribute to breaching limits. Amendments to the National Standards framework provide the Minister powers to issue standards that allow specified activities that may breach environmental limits.
- Provisions relating to resource use caps have been removed.

Regulatory Relief

- The regulatory relief framework remains largely unchanged and there remains considerable uncertainty surrounding the fiscal and decision-making implications until the framework is specified nationally.
- Costs may fall unevenly, particularly on regions with significant indigenous biodiversity and are required by law to protect them, sites of significance and/or relatively small rating populations.

Natural Environment Plans and Land Use Plans

- The ability for councils to reject all or part of a plan change request is removed. Plan change requests must be adopted, processed, or processed as planning consent or natural resource permit.
- Controlled activities have been reinstated for Natural Environment Plans.

Consenting, permitting, compliance, monitoring and enforcement

- Proposed improvements and tools for compliance monitoring and enforcement are retained, including adverse publicity orders and minor changes in search warrant execution and powers of entry.
- Councils will only be able to charge for monitoring compliance with national standards if the national standard authorises it, and ability to impose infringement regulations for non-compliance with stock exclusion regulations has been added.
- Consents under the Natural Environment Act will be called natural resource permits and district/city council consents under the Planning Act will be called planning consents. The threshold for public notification will rise from more than minor under the RMA to significant adverse effects and the threshold for limited notification (to be called targeted notification) will be more than minor adverse effects; and only qualifying persons will be able to make submissions on publicly notified applications. Further provisions are expected to be provided in future regulations.

Transitional consenting and compliance, monitoring and enforcement

- These functions will continue under the RMA for the next three to four years. Changes to the RMA will be in force by 30 October 2026 and will:
 - Extend the duration of almost all consents to at least 24 months beyond the end of the transition period (with the ability to extend durations out to 48 months through regulations)
 - Remove special circumstances from the reasons for public notification
 - Prevent the consideration of various matters when processing an application under a district plan and provides an associated permitted activity pathway.
 - Allow councils to amend existing provisions in a district plan regarding the out-of-scope matters.
 - Prevent private plan changes unless an exemption is provided by the Minister.
 - Introduce the ability for the Environment Court to issue an adverse publicity order.

Freshwater Farm Plans

- The relevant RMA provisions were largely carried over into Schedule 5 of the proposed Natural Environment Bill. Recent amendments introduced limited certification. This means that if a farm undertakes one or more activities specified in regulations, only the parts of the farm plan relating to those activities need to be certified, rather than the entire plan. The amendments also remove the requirement for uncertified plans to be audited.
- Most recently, a recommended change to the Natural Environment Bill allows the Minister to adjust thresholds for when a Freshwater Farm Plan is required.
- It appears that regulations can prescribe catchments within which all farm plans must be certified. It is unclear whether councils will still be able to specify the same. Regulations will follow after elections, likely in early 2027.

Implications for Local Government reform

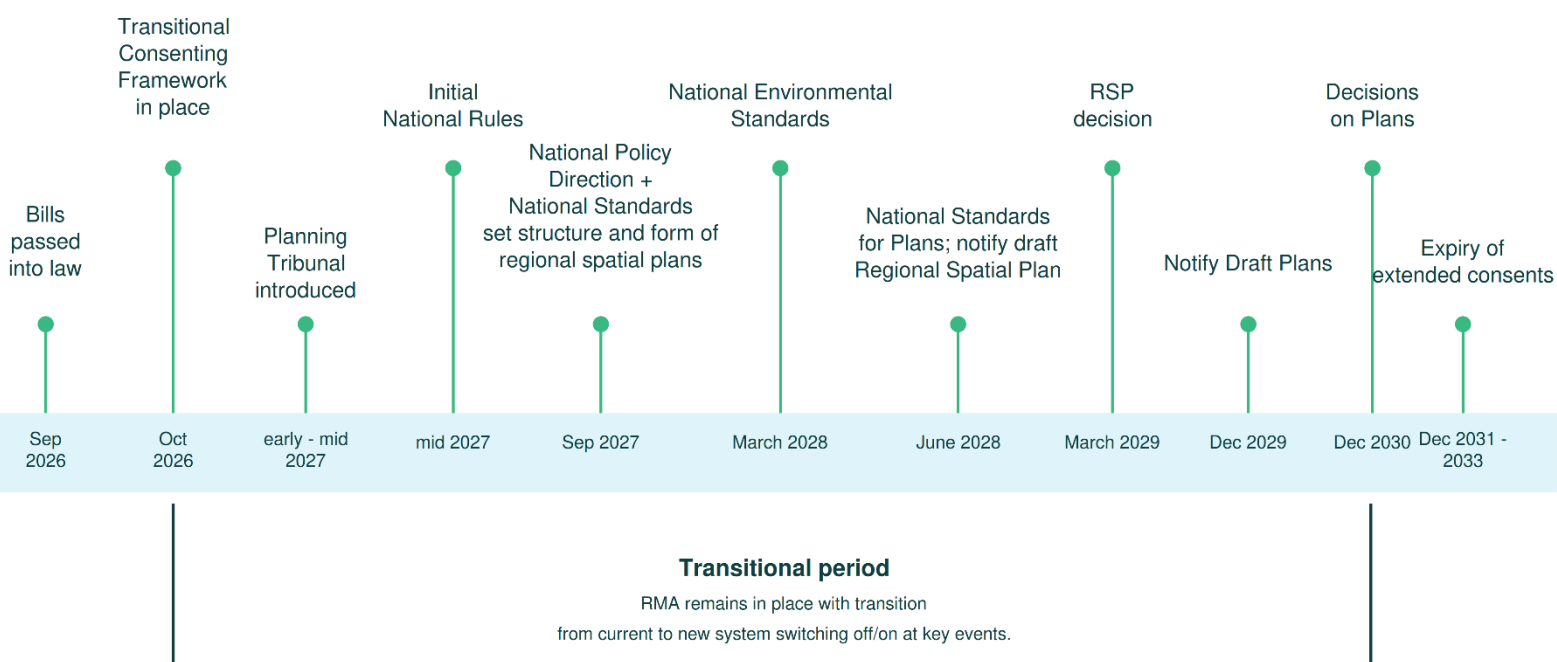
- The new planning system will be implemented at the same time as significant changes to local government structures and regional governance are being considered. These reforms need to be treated as one connected transition, with clear sequencing, aligned decision-making and a shared focus on continuity of delivery.
- Regional spatial planning particularly depends on effective coordination across territorial boundaries. Any changes to governance, organisational boundaries or responsibilities will need to support, rather than disrupt, the development and implementation of the first regional spatial plans and natural environment and land use plans.
- The sector has advised that local government reform needs to enable effective management of natural environments and the ability to plan and act across whole catchments.
- Successful transition will require the stewarding of regional government's specialist people, science, monitoring networks, data, systems, assets, funding arrangements, institutional knowledge and relationships with iwi, communities and delivery partners. These should be identified and actively protected through reorganisation processes.

- The transition also needs clear accountability. Future arrangements should make it easy to understand who decides, who pays, who delivers and how regulatory independence will be protected, particularly where planning, infrastructure investment, service delivery and environmental regulation sit within the same organisation or governance structure.

Next steps

- Regional and unitary councils are continuing to work through the detail of the new Acts to understand their implications for communities, the environment, regional infrastructure and implementation. Further analysis may be prepared by Te Uru Kahika or the Special Interest Group network and will be made available to our sector.
- The regional sector will continue to advocate for resource management and Local Government reforms to be sequenced and designed together, with clear transition responsibilities and active protection of critical services, specialist capability, key sector assets and valuable relationships and partnerships. This will be essential to maintain services while councils develop and implement the first generation of plans under the new system.
- We will continue to engage constructively with central government as implementation of the new planning and environmental management system progresses through the development of national instruments, spatial plans, regulatory plan development and catchment action. Te Uru Kahika, and regional and unitary councils are currently working through the implications of the Illustrative National Policy Direction prior to preparing feedback. Analyses will be shared with our sector.

RM Reform Implementation Timelines



Guidance and legislation

MCERT's planning website brings together information about the new system, practitioner guidance and implementation support. It will be updated as implementation progresses.

Visit planning.govt.nz

[Transitional consenting guidance](#)

[Practitioner publications and checklists](#)

For transition questions and support needs, contact planning@mcert.govt.nz.

Read the legislation

[Natural Environment Act 2026](#)

[Planning Act 2026](#)

Have your say on illustrative National Policy Direction

Feedback closes on 16 October 2026. Te Uru Kahika is coordinating regional sector feedback. Council practitioners should continue feeding practical questions and implementation issues through the SIG network and sector channels.

[Read the illustrative NPD and provide feedback](#)

