



# The New Planning System

## *Delivering the infrastructure we need*

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### A simpler, faster way to get infrastructure built

New Zealand's new planning system will make it easier to build the houses and infrastructure our country needs, let farmers and growers get on with doing what they do best, and boost our primary sector while protecting the environment.

#### Two new Bills with clear roles

The new planning system is set out in two new Bills. Once passed, these will replace the current Resource Management Act 1991 (RMA):

- **The Planning Bill** lays out the framework for how land can be used and developed.
- **The Natural Environment Bill** is focused on managing the use of natural resources and protecting the environment.

**The new planning system is made up of more than just new Bills.** National instruments – including national policy directions and standards – will provide specific requirements for councils to develop their plans and make consenting decisions. The new planning system will include helpful changes made under recent changes to the RMA.

Stronger national policy instruments, which prioritises infrastructure, combined with more standardised rules will make it easier and quicker to build and maintain infrastructure – like roads, energy networks and water systems.

### More certainty for faster infrastructure

The new planning system is designed to speed up all development, including infrastructure, providing more certainty about what can be built and where. It will provide more certainty for the people building the roads, pipes, rail and energy systems that keep New Zealand moving. This will help unlock investment and support growth across New Zealand.

Decisions in the new planning system work like a funnel. Clear goals at the top, then national direction and standards narrow what's up for debate from there. This means decisions stick, and investors, communities and developers have certainty. Key changes include:

- **A clear national goal and instrument for infrastructure**

For the first time, the law will set a clear national goal for New Zealand infrastructure, like roads, energy and water networks, making it a national priority that's actively planned for.

Government then sets national direction and standards for infrastructure, including renewable energy, which councils follow in their regional spatial plans and land-use plans, ensuring current and future infrastructure needs are met.

- **Less duplication, more certainty**

Regional spatial plans remove the need for infrastructure providers to navigate multiple council plans when planning for the future. Landowners can't claim compensation from infrastructure providers when infrastructure crosses their land, except where the Public Works Act applies.

Long-lived infrastructure projects will benefit from longer duration permits (up to 50 years). The RMA only allows a maximum duration of 35 years. This provides more certainty for infrastructure operators.

- **Simpler approvals, less barriers and fewer consents in the future**

Large projects may still need permits, but standardised rules and a streamlined consenting process mean less paperwork and fewer delays. National standards for common activities mean less need for ongoing approvals.

- **Councils must deliver infrastructure**

Councils can't block development because of a lack of infrastructure but must deliver it in a timely way. National standards will set rules about when councils are allowed to consider if there is enough infrastructure (like roads, pipes or power) to support a development.

- **Clear environmental limits**

These will set the maximum amount of impact any activities, whether its farming, building or infrastructure, can have on things like air, water, land and biodiversity. This gives providers certainty about what's allowed. When a limit is exceeded, the council must set out how it will get the resource use back within the limit.

- **A focus on real effects**

Approvals and consents will only be needed for activities that have a 'minor or more than minor' impact on the environment or others. Lower-impact projects will face fewer requirements.

## **Longer term planning for future needs**

The new planning system takes a forward-looking approach to infrastructure by making long-term planning a core part of how decisions are made. There will be early corridor protection and strong national instruments so long-term infrastructure can be planned and delivered with

confidence. Instead of reacting to immediate needs, the new planning system helps regions plan for growth and infrastructure decades in advance. It does this through:

- **Regional spatial plans**

These guide how regions can grow over the next 30 years, setting out what infrastructure is needed where and when. This is critical for delivering more housing and electrifying New Zealand at the scale and pace the Government wants. It also provides earlier protection of corridors and sites.

- **Securing land for public infrastructure**

Designations are special planning tools that identify and secure land for public infrastructure like roads, schools or electricity networks. Once land is designated, projects can go ahead without needing extra consents or following all council planning rules.

Only specific authorities, like ministers, councils or approved network providers, can designate land for public infrastructure. There will be two main ways to do this:

1. **Through spatial planning** – an independent hearings panel determines regionally significant designations as part of the draft regional spatial plan. These will be included in land-use plans after public consultation.
2. **Improved designations process** – for other projects a faster and less complex process is available, based on the current process.

The Minister for Land Information will also be able to approve compulsory land acquisition to give effect to a designation.

## Easier and faster approvals

The new planning system will deliver faster decisions and fewer avoidable hurdles so major projects can get underway sooner and deliver benefits earlier. Large infrastructure projects may still need permits under the Natural Environment Bill and consents under the Planning Bill, but the process will be faster and simpler due to:

- standardised rules in land-use and natural environment plans
- fewer effects (things like noise and pollution that are caused by an activity) being regulated
- a streamlined consenting process will reduce paperwork and delays.

Consistent rules across the country will reduce cost, support innovation and give investors the certainty they need.

Recent changes to the Resource Management Act 1991 (RMA) that make it easier to get renewable energy and long-lived infrastructure built will continue, including a default one-year consenting timeframe for certain energy projects.

## Special pathways for essential infrastructure

In rare cases, critical projects that exceed environmental limits and can't be located elsewhere (like ports, airports, or major transport and energy networks) may qualify for an exemption under the Natural Environment Bill. In these cases, the limit will still apply, and an action plan will still need to address it.

National instruments (rules) will provide ways for essential infrastructure to be approved in areas that are normally protected so nationally important infrastructure can still go ahead when it's truly necessary.

### What happens next?

Before they become law, the public gets to have a say about the new Bills through select committee hearings in early 2026 – this is an opportunity to make improvements.

Once the Bills are in place, the next step is to confirm the national instruments needed to guide spatial planning. People will also get a chance to submit on this. There will be transitional arrangements for existing resource consent holders:

1. All consents under the RMA will be extended until at least mid-2031.
2. You can obtain a new consent under the transitional system from mid-2026.
3. A new National Policy Statement – Freshwater will be introduced by mid-2026, which will assist anyone who wishes to obtain a new consent early.

The first spatial plans are expected within a set period after the law is enacted. Government hopes to have the transitional system up and running in the middle of 2026, and the full system working by 2029.

For more information, visit [environment.govt.nz](https://environment.govt.nz).

