

13 February 2026

Committee Secretariat  
Environment Committee  
Parliament Buildings  
WELLINGTON

en@parliament.govt.nz

Tēnā koutou

## Canterbury Mayoral Forum Submission on Natural Environment Bill and Planning Bill

---

### Introduction

1. The Canterbury Mayoral Forum welcomes the opportunity to provide this submission on the Natural Environment and Planning Bills.
2. The Canterbury Mayoral Forum comprises the mayors of the ten territorial authorities in Canterbury and the Chair of the Canterbury Regional Council, supported by our Chief Executives. The purpose of the Forum is to promote collaboration across the region and increase the effectiveness of local government in meeting the needs of Canterbury's communities.
3. All Canterbury councils actively participate in the Forum: the Kaikōura, Hurunui, Waimakariri, Selwyn, Ashburton, Timaru, Mackenzie, Waimate, and Waitaki District Councils, the Christchurch City Council, and the Canterbury Regional Council.
4. The following submission on the Natural Environment and Planning Bills has been developed with input from across Canterbury councils and focusses on matters of general agreement, noting that Canterbury councils are each making individual submissions on the Bills.
5. The Mayoral Forum does wish to appear before the Committee in support of this submission.

### *Mayors standing together for Canterbury.*

Secretariat, E: [secretariat@canterburymayors.org.nz](mailto:secretariat@canterburymayors.org.nz) W: [www.canterburymayors.org.nz](http://www.canterburymayors.org.nz)  
C/- Environment Canterbury, PO Box 345, Christchurch 8140 T: 03 345 9323

## General comments

6. The Mayoral Forum recognises and is supportive of the Government's objectives to improve system performance, strengthen accountability, lift economic productivity, and deliver better long-term outcomes for communities. The Mayoral Forum acknowledges that aspects of the current systems are under pressure and that change is required to address long-standing economic, environmental, and funding challenges.
7. The scale and pace of change across the reform programme will require careful management, and significant investment from communities and councils to transition to new statutory responsibilities. While this submission is focussed on the Planning and Natural Environment Bills it should be read alongside the Mayoral Forum's submissions on the Simplifying Local Government proposal, Rates Target Model and combined Mayoral Forum and Civil Defence Joint Committee submission on the Emergency Management Bill.
8. For reform to be successful, it must work for the communities it serves by establishing an enduring framework that meets the needs of current and future generations.

## Case for change

9. The Mayoral Forum agrees reform of the resource management system is necessary and over-due, and that the Resource Management Act (RMA) is no longer fit for today's challenges.
10. The current resource management system has not adequately protected the natural environment nor provided the necessary outcomes for the built environment.
11. Reforming the resource management system represents a once-in-a-generation opportunity, and with the Simplifying Local Government proposal, the changes that are being proposed at this time need to be robust and well thought through in their implementation to ensure local governance and government systems are fit for purpose for the long term.
12. The importance of securing a stable and enduring resource management system for the future cannot be overstated. The resource management system has been subject to significant amendments and reforms as priorities change, each of which come at significant cost to taxpayers, ratepayers, communities and resource users. The Government's own economic analysis<sup>1</sup> showing implementation costs for the RMA have reached \$10 billion, with ~\$9 billion borne by ratepayers.

## Central and local government relationship

13. The Mayoral Forum supports a strong partnership between central and local government and appreciates opportunities to work proactively and collaboratively for the benefit of our communities and New Zealand. A more deliberate partnership can support greater understanding of the impacts on

---

<sup>1</sup> Castalia Report – Economic impact analysis of proposed resource management reform, page 20, para 2.1 <https://environment.govt.nz/assets/publications/26.2-Final-Report-economic-impact-analysis-of-proposed-Resource-Management-Act-reforms-1.pdf>

funding and delivery of services and reduce the challenges that come with the u-turning of each new government, and the subsequent funding and resourcing requirements of implementing new policy.

14. The Mayoral Forum, however, is concerned that a shift towards centralised decision-making will lead to a loss of voice for communities, environmental frameworks that don't provide for the outcomes sought by our communities, and loss of partnership at place. This shift is evident in most central government reforms currently being considered (e.g. simplifying local government, emergency management legislation and rate-capping and the resource management bills).
15. The Mayoral Forum believes that local and central government need to work collaboratively in partnership for the communities we serve, noting the critical part each plays in providing safe, healthy, and productive environments.
16. Whether our funding comes from taxes or rates, we are supporting the same people and the same communities.

## **Mana Whenua and Treaty Settings**

17. The Mayoral Forum is concerned about the Bills' exclusion of consideration for the principles of the Te Tiriti o Waitangi, broader cultural landscapes, ancestral relationships, kaitiakitanga, tikanga principles, and customary rights. We are not supportive of the change from a general Te Tiriti Principles provision to a descriptive provision.
18. Both Bills should uphold Te Tiriti o Waitangi to enable meaningful iwi and hapu participation through the resource management system. Transitional arrangements should not inadvertently weaken existing Canterbury settings including current Ngāi Tahu representation arrangements and established partnership mechanisms.
19. Failure to honour Te Tiriti could lead to litigation and undermine trust and compliance. Furthermore, the term Māori 'interests' is ambiguous and lacks clarity, leaving it open to varied interpretation depending on context, which again could undermine certainty and result in litigation.
20. The proposed provisions shift the nature of our relationship with mana whenua and risks limiting the voice of local mana whenua and represent a significant weakening of the protections, rights and interests afforded to iwi and hapū.
21. The Mayoral Forum recognises and supports the Government's desire for cost-effective and efficient system. Partnering with Iwi offers substantial benefits that extend across cultural, social, environmental, economic, and legal spheres and the experience of our Canterbury councils of working with Ngāi Tahu is that outcomes are delivered faster, and at lower cost, with reduced risks of litigation when partnership approaches are implemented.
22. These partnerships, founded on the principles of Te Tiriti, foster better outcomes for all parties and the wider community. This includes access to unique knowledge and perspectives, stronger community support and social licence, enhanced outcomes, environmental stewardship, cultural respect and preservation, and economic opportunity and growth.
23. This is unique to New Zealand and goes to the heart of our national identity.

## **Link with other government reforms**

24. The Mayoral Forum would like to see stronger alignment between the multiple changes that are either in process or being mooted. The significance of the resource management system reform cannot be understated, nor easily separated from the wider local government reform agenda of central Government.
25. The two Resource Management bills, the Emergency Management bill, the Rates Target Model and Simplifying Local Government proposals will all change how things operate at a local government level. These reforms are also happening at the same time as mergers of Government ministries, and the implementation of Local Water Well Done.
26. The result of all the reforms is a complex set of parallel and interconnected system changes, with risks for financial sustainability and the continuity of services.
27. Without appropriate alignment there are a number of high risks for our communities, such as changes that quickly become redundant, uncertainty of outcomes, and the associated costs to our communities that will inevitably continue to rise.
28. The implementation of a new resource management system relies on a well-resourced and stable local government. Reform of local government including rates capping and simplifying local government has the potential to impact on this implementation.

## **Implementation and Transition**

29. The timeline for transitioning to the new resource management system is extremely ambitious and poses a significant risk to the quality of decision-making and plan development. A critical measure of success will be how well the legislation supports a smooth transition to the new system.
30. The RMA has suffered from poor and inconsistent implementation. Most notably, the lack of or slowness of national direction being created and implemented has led to lengthy and costly planning processes that have had to relitigate issues from region to region and district to district. Limited system oversight and guidance on the application of national direction, has seen inconsistent implementation of the RMA through planning processes nationally.
31. To support transition into the new system, we consider it will be important for national direction to be stable, and responsive to different regional and urban contexts. Understanding how the various parts of the new system interact will help avoid confusion and ensure consistent implementation across the region, as well as the wider country.
32. Managing transition risk must be a core focus of the Government's implementation strategy, with decisions on timeframes for implementation that take into account cost, capability and capacity.
33. The truncated process places considerable pressure on councils to deliver system-wide change within an extremely short period, increasing the risk of unintended consequences and poorly integrated outcomes. The timeframes also create substantial resourcing and capacity challenges for councils. These pressures are compounded by other major reforms occurring simultaneously, as previously noted, which also demand significant staff attention.

34. We only get once chance for a successful transition.

## **Transition Costs**

35. The proposed changes represent a significant undertaking for the local government sector. To support successful implementation adequate resourcing will be essential.

36. The reforms will require significant investment in people, capability, and time.

37. It is important that central government recognises these demands and share the costs with those charged with implementing the new requirements introduced through the legislation.

38. At a time when councils are exercising financial discipline in response to community signals and rate-capping proposals, while also facing climbing costs for infrastructure and service delivery, it is expected that central Government would in part fund set-up costs to alleviate a cost burden on local government.

## **National Policy Direction**

39. It is positive to see the system that is the mandatory development of concise and consistent national policy direction and extensive use of mandatory planning standards ahead of planning processes being undertaken by Councils. This overarching direction of the reform is supported by the Mayoral Forum.

40. We consider that these aspects of the system are as equally important to successful implementation as the bills themselves.

41. We would encourage meaningful consultation and analysis alongside local government as these responses are being prepared, and that the Minister specifically considers the costs of implementing future regulations before decisions are made.

42. There are potential conflicts that the national direction will need to reconcile. The same tensions that exist in the RMA framework exist in the goals in the Bills. Clear national direction on how these tensions are to be reconciled will be important to avoid ambiguity and uncertainty in implementation.

43. Climate change is an existential issue facing the country and the world. The absence of explicit goals related to its effects and mitigation of it is a significant gap in the Bills. We seek changes to the goals to reflect the importance of climate change issues.

## **Spatial planning**

44. The Mayoral Forum supports the requirement for the proposed spatial planning framework. Regional spatial planning (RSP) will be critical in navigating the trade-offs required between enabling development and protecting environmental values.

45. We do have some concerns with respect to requiring the spatial planning processes to commence before national direction has been finalised. This will likely increase uncertainty for resource users, businesses and communities, with the risk that spatial plans may need to be reworked if the content of national instruments changes through the policy development process.

46. The Mayoral Forum supports planning processes being sequenced, commenced and completed in a logical order, with decisions on higher order instruments (e.g. national direction) completed first, before the development of spatial plans commences.
47. In principle, the Mayoral Forum generally agrees with the proposed governance arrangements set out in the Bill for regional spatial plan-making. While Spatial Planning Committees are formed to prepare and deliver the plans, local authorities retain decision-making on these plans. In a more centralised system, we see it as important that local authorities remain the final decision-makers to ensure accountability and responsiveness to local needs and requirements.
48. We do note that the discretion afforded to councils within a region to determine how they will participate in the Spatial Planning Committee, and ultimately jointly approve the plan, means that achieving consensus may require considerable effort and collaboration.
49. The Mayoral Forum recommends establishing decision-making principles in the legislation to guide the agreements between councils on decision making rules for the Spatial Plans. This approach could streamline decision-making and ensure that localised issues are addressed efficiently – while still ensuring collaboration on region wide matters.
50. If councils in a region are unable to reach consensus and no decision is achievable, the Mayoral Forum does not support the proposal in the Planning Bill that the Minister be the decision maker on that regional policy dispute. The Mayoral Forum recommends that it is more appropriate that the dispute be adjudicated and decided by planning and legal professionals through a quasi-judicial process such as arbitration or the Planning Tribunal.
51. The proposed timeline (RSPs by September 2027, decisions by March 2028, plans by December 2028) presents significant challenges without adequate funding support. Realistically, timeframes need to be doubled if local authorities are to have any chance of a successful transition to the new system, whilst meeting existing commitments, and navigating other change proposals.
52. We strongly support a co-ordinated approach to infrastructure funding and investment by Central Government, local government and other infrastructure providers. A coordinated approach is required to achieve the goals of the Bills, which needs to be supported by companion legislation enabling growth to be funded by growth.
53. Spatial planning is inherently strategic, place-based, and sensitive to scale. In Canterbury, many of the most complex and consequential planning challenges, including housing supply, infrastructure coordination, transport integration, climate adaptation, and economic development, operate at metropolitan scale and cut across existing administrative boundaries. These challenges will all need to be carefully considered with a region-wide decision-making model as proposed.
54. If resource management reform proceeds ahead of local government reform, there must be flexibility to amend regional spatial plans to reflect any new governance or boundary arrangements.
55. We note that with a regional spatial plan needing to be notified by September 2027 that local authorities would have needed to allocate funding within annual plans that have already been prepared for consultation or are in effect (noting that this is also prior to the enactment of the bills). While this is now unavoidable, we consider it would be appropriate for consideration to be given to the timing of long-term plan updates across the 2027 – 2037 Long Term Plan period.

## Regulatory Relief

56. The Mayoral Forum has serious concerns about the proposed mandatory regulatory relief framework and considers that, as drafted, it will have a number of adverse impacts for both councils, our ratepayers and community.
57. With the possibility of a rates cap being introduced, there is potential that mandatory relief will deter Councils from protecting important areas because they are not in a position to provide suitable relief. Without seeing the national instruments and understanding the standardised zoning, it is difficult to fully quantify what this means in a Canterbury context, however, we see that there is potential that this could lead to worse outcomes for the region.
58. It is of concern that the test for when a regulatory relief framework is required is not defined in the Bill. It is not clear what a “significant” impact on the “reasonable use” of the land is. We request that this be clarified in the legislation, together with more direction about how councils decide which relief mechanisms to use and what adequate relief constitutes.
59. The Mayoral Forum has concerns around the eligibility criteria. If the Government intends on progressing with the regulatory relief framework, the eligibility criteria must be clear and unambiguous.
60. Along with clear eligibility criteria, a framework for how compensation for such protections is to be worked out should be included in the prescribed provisions. This would provide certainty to councils and public as to how this is to be done.
61. The absence of a prescribed framework for calculating compensation for protection means the potential cost implications are unclear and could lead to councils simply not including protections in land use plans, resulting in significant special environments not being protected for present and future generations.
62. Long-established RMA case law recognises that landowners do not possess an absolute right to develop their land in any particular way. Planning controls serve the public interest and sound resource management principles rather than guaranteeing specific development outcomes for private property. The regulatory relief provisions risk undermining this fundamental planning framework.
63. The Mayoral Forum is also concerned about the double standard that is evident in the Bills where local authorities are subject to ‘regulatory relief’ provisions, but the Crown is not. Where national standards impose controls on land use that significantly impact on a landowner’s reasonable use of land, the Crown is not required to provide regulatory relief. This creates a double standard, with local authorities subject to higher financial risk and cost, despite having less capacity to pay.
64. If significant fiscal compensation becomes associated with regulatory protection methods, councils may rationally retreat from these methods, resulting in diminished protection of environmental and heritage values. This outcome would undermine the Bill's stated objectives.
65. Under the Bill, spatial plan committees not local authorities, are responsible for preparing, consulting and notifying the draft spatial plan. Mandatory matters to be provided for through spatial plans include “constraints on the use and development of land ... including significant natural areas”. Councils will be statutorily required to implement the direction set by the spatial plan. In some instances, this will require controls to be placed on land use, with the compensatory costs of these decisions falling to

ratepayers. If councils and ratepayers are required to fund the costs of a decision, they should have a role in decision-making.

66. Many councils may be unlikely to include protections for significant special environments due to potential cost implications of regulatory relief, especially if in a rate capped environment and instead encourage voluntary protections.

## **Community**

67. The shift towards greater centralised decision-making is one of particular concern to the Mayoral Forum. This is reflected in the design of the proposed planning system, with more decisions made by Government Ministers, and fewer decisions made locally by communities or elected members. As a result, the system dilutes the role of elected members as advocates and decision-makers for their communities and results in a loss of community voice.
68. The proposed system is intended to be more directive – driven from the top down. While this aims to provide greater certainty and consistency through nationally set goals and direction, which can be beneficial, it inevitably reduces opportunities for local decision-making and public participation at each level of the new system.
69. Public participation is highly valuable to understand and to take into account local context, the appropriate management of adverse effects, and maximise opportunities to achieve well-functioning urban and rural environments.
70. We acknowledge the Government’s objective to provide for a more enabling system, premised on the enjoyment of private property rights. While we recognise the benefits that can be gained, particularly with unlocking housing and business development and facilitating infrastructure delivery, these must not come at the expense of achieving well-functioning environments, delivering good environmental outcomes alongside development, and ensuring appropriate public involvement and local voice in the planning process.
71. However, under the proposed ‘funnel approach’, with key decisions being made earlier in the process, there are fewer opportunities for the public to revisit them at a local level. In our experience, people are far more likely to engage in the planning process when a proposed activity is tangible and directly affects them, such as a development on a neighbouring site.
72. National instruments will likely be disconnected from local context making it challenging for the public to engage and fully comprehend the impacts on them. We question whether this proposed approach enables public participation at an appropriate level, specifically where the notification threshold for affected parties is changing to more than minor and the scope of effects that can be considered is limited.
73. A community’s sense of place and identity, for urban and rural, is fundamental to its ongoing success, delivering multiple benefits – economic, social and environmental. Successful planning for communities requires holistic understanding of local context, which may not be best served through standardisation. It should be within the remit of the system to identify where and when this is the case, and the Bills must provide appropriate scope for bespoke provisions which are not significantly or unduly restricted. Regulation, when thresholds are set appropriately (and tested through robust evidence), promotes

growth, enabling and shaping great cities, townships and neighbourhoods – all set within an environment which complements and enhances their identity.

## **Conclusion**

74. The Canterbury Mayoral Forum thanks you for the opportunity to submit on the Natural Environment and Planning Bills.
75. The Canterbury Mayoral Forum does want to be heard in support of this submission.
76. If you have any questions please contact our secretariat, Maree McNeilly at [secretariat@canterburymayors.org.nz](mailto:secretariat@canterburymayors.org.nz) or on 027 381 8924.

Nāku iti noa, nā



**Nigel Bowen**  
**Chair Canterbury Mayoral Forum**  
Mayor Timaru District Council