



**Planning
New Zealand**

Guidance for Initial Stages of Regional Spatial Planning



**Ministry for Cities, Environment,
Regions & Transport**

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Te Kāwanatanga o Aotearoa

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The opportunity of spatial planning

The new planning system is designed to help local authorities and their communities make decisions for the long term about growth, change, infrastructure and environmental outcomes.

Regional spatial plans are critical as they set the long-term strategic direction for how regions grow and change over the next 30 years and beyond. They are intended to help regions respond to key drivers of growth and change and are an early opportunity to bring councils and communities together to agree an aspirational but feasible and achievable future for their region.

Spatial plans can then identify broad patterns of housing and business growth, where and when infrastructure may be needed and how natural hazards, environmental constraints and long-term investment choices are considered together. By resolving these issues strategically, spatial plans will provide a clear framework for local planning, consenting and permitting decisions.

Regional spatial plans serve a different purpose from regulatory plans. Local regulatory planning, including rules and consenting processes, will be done through land use and natural environment plans. These plans will implement regional spatial plans. They will use the strategic direction of spatial plans to make decisions on zones, rules, designations, limits and overlays.

A new framework to support regional spatial plans

This is the first time all regions will be required to deliver spatial plans. The process will involve all councils within the region, central government, iwi authorities, infrastructure providers and the development sector, other sector groups and communities.

Many regions will already have elements of spatial plans and strategies, often applying to a part of the region. These plans and strategies may contain useful lessons, relationships and inputs into the regional spatial planning process. However, these plans were developed under a different legal framework and scope. The new system, through the Planning Act and Natural Environment Act, and associated secondary legislation, introduces a new approach to spatial planning. Existing content will need to be reviewed and adapted, including through pre-notification consultation, to align with the requirements of the new system.

National instruments, developed as secondary legislation, will support greater consistency across spatial plans, while still allowing plans to respond to regional circumstances and opportunities. National Policy Direction (NPD) will provide clear guidance on growth, change and infrastructure and national priorities, including how to manage trade-offs and conflicts. National standards will provide a common foundation for spatial planning processes, reducing unnecessary duplication and supporting greater consistency and efficiency across regions.

Central government is gearing up to support spatial planning through initiatives such as providing national data and evidence, developing best practice templates, mapping conventions and technical methods. Some of these may become national standards if needed.

Some regulations may be introduced to support procedural matters as needed, covering matters such as dispute resolution procedures and designating authority processes.

NPD and national standards to support spatial planning are due to be issued by 30 September 2027. Each draft spatial plan is to be notified by 30 June 2028, with decisions on any changes to the draft after hearings of submissions due within 9 months of the notification date. Figure 1 sets out the critical path from now until notification of the first spatial plans in June 2028.

Figure 1: Critical path to spatial plan notification



Development stage also includes designation applications and appointment of the independent hearing panel.

Pre-notification consultation includes Ministers, neighbouring councils, iwi, customary marine title groups, water organisations, infrastructure providers and sector/community representatives. Share the draft with iwi and relevant parts with customary marine title groups.

* Notify within 21 months of Royal Assent or nine months after National Policy Direction is issued, whichever is later. Royal Assent on 30 September 2026.

Regional Spatial Planning

What local government should focus on now

The guidance below sets out practical actions that local authorities can undertake now to prepare for their regional spatial planning processes.

The focus at this stage should be on building the relationships and establishing governance arrangements, building the evidence base, developing a regional shared vision and assessing the capability needed to support spatial planning. This is a window of opportunity for councils to build their understanding of the future of their region and the risks, opportunities and challenges it faces over the next 30 to 50 years and beyond.

1. Build the relationships

Local authorities are encouraged to ensure that the relationships needed for regional spatial planning are well founded and functioning effectively. In many regions these relationships already exist and should be built upon with a spatial planning lens.

This includes relationships between local authorities, iwi authorities, Post Settlement Governance Entities (PSGEs), infrastructure providers, central government agencies, representatives from other sector groups and the wider communities.

Local authorities should identify who may need to be involved in future spatial planning discussions and establish appropriate engagement arrangements (see guidance on [process agreements](#)). Earlier engagement is likely to support a smoother transition into the formal process.

Where formal arrangements already exist, such as Treaty settlement arrangements, these provide a useful starting point. Existing engagement undertaken through long-term plans, growth strategies, spatial plans and other regional processes can also provide a strong foundation.

Regions are also encouraged to consider any cross-regional matters that will need to be worked through with surrounding regions or local authorities.

2. Build the evidence base

The new system will place significant importance on the use of robust, consistent and transparent evidence and data.

Over time, central government is expected to provide a range of national instruments to direct spatial plan development.

The development of any spatial plan standards and related guidance is dependent on the NPD development. At this stage we plan to provide:

- a template for regional spatial plans, including mapping conventions and definitions
- a limited range of matter specific methodologies (eg natural hazards identification, how to identify priority areas for climate change adaptation planning)
- how spatial plan committees assess where growth and change will occur within their region (eg options assessment)
- components of a common evidence base, including nationally consistent datasets (eg population projections) to support the development of regional spatial plans.

Statutory consultation on national standards for spatial planning will be carried out through the first half of 2027.

An immediate priority for local authorities is to assemble, organise and review the evidence already available within the region and to assess its quality, consistency and coverage. This should include an assessment of how fit for purpose the information is in relation to the objectives of the new system, including the purpose and goals of the legislation, and the purpose and scope of a regional spatial plan.

For example, local authorities may wish to identify and document:

- key demographic, environmental and economic trends
- other significant long-term 'drivers of change' (eg climate and technological change)
- important environmental and natural hazard constraints
- existing infrastructure capacity and constraints, focused on large-scale strategic infrastructure (eg transport and water)
- strategic regional advantages, opportunities and challenges
- important places, assets and environments that may require consideration through spatial planning processes
- major existing and planned projects, programmes and development of regional significance
- areas where evidence gaps, inconsistencies or limitations exist.

The purpose of this work is to ensure regions have, as far as practicable, appropriate and up-to-date information to support future decision-making once the NPD and national standards are available.

3. Start developing the shared regional vision

The evidence can then inform a conversation about what kind of region the partners collectively want to create.

Regional spatial plans will help shape decisions about growth, infrastructure and investment across a region. They will also be a key mechanism for achieving the goals of the new planning system, including economic growth, well-functioning urban and

rural communities, the use and development of natural resources and the enhancement of the natural environment.

Councils can now start developing a shared view of the region's future and the outcomes they want to achieve. That early vision-building should involve the likely membership of the spatial plan committee.

4. Explore spatial planning capability and readiness

Local authorities may also wish to start investigating the capability, capacity and organisational readiness that will be required to support spatial planning processes. Spatial planning will require a different set of skills and expertise than regulatory planning may have required.

To support the set-up of the secretariat, the local authorities in each region should determine the skills and resources needed to prepare a regional spatial plan and check this against the capability already available as part of developing the process agreement.

The assessment can identify:

- core functions
- who is responsible for each function
- what resources are required
- whether those resources are confirmed
- where external support may be needed
- risks where capability is missing, only nominally available or likely to be moved to other work.

Specific capabilities that could be needed to support spatial planning may include:

- programme office, governance and administration
- core spatial planning, strategy and policy content
- evidence, modelling and digital
- system and technical inputs – depending on the regional context (eg economics, te Ao Māori, climate/adaptation, infrastructure, housing, development/property, transport, community, natural environment/biodiversity, marine)
- engagement, partnership, implementation and risk (Treaty settlements, communications and engagement, implementation and delivery, link to regulatory planning, finance, legal).

5. Establish governance and coordination arrangements

Local authorities can now work together to set up governance and coordination arrangements required for their regional spatial plan. This will include a process agreement detailing how the local authorities will work together and with others to

develop the regional spatial plan, and establishment of a spatial plan committee and a secretariat. A terms of reference is also required to provide for the appointment and operation of the spatial plan committee.¹

Setting these up well will be a key action for local authorities over the coming months. Well-structured governance arrangements will provide the foundation for the spatial plan drafting and finalisation process. This guidance provides more detail on each of these components.

To complement this guidance, Taituarā are developing templates to support the drafting of the process agreement and a terms of reference for the spatial plan committee. These will be provided on the Taituarā website.

Central government involvement in regional spatial plans

The new planning system establishes an important role for central government in regional spatial planning. This reflects the fact that many of the issues that spatial planning seeks to address, such as infrastructure investment, natural hazards, transport, housing, economic development and environmental management, require coordination between local and central government.

The legislation provides for central government participation in regional spatial planning processes, including through representation on spatial plan committees where appropriate and participation in secretariat arrangements. These roles will be funded by central government. Central government will play an important role in providing information, evidence, expertise and investment perspectives to support the development of regional spatial plans.

The Ministry for Cities, Environment, Regions and Transport (MCERT) will work with regions to understand emerging governance arrangements and how central government can best participate in and support regional spatial planning processes.

MCERT's Local Government Partnership Directors are available to support local authorities over the coming months as they shape up their regional spatial planning process. In most cases, this is likely to be the Partnership Director already working with local authorities in the region. Their role will include providing information and guidance, helping committees access relevant expertise from across MCERT and wider central government, as required.

1 Section 3 of the Planning Act 2026 defines a 'spatial plan committee' as a committee whose terms of reference are provided by one or more local authorities and include performing or exercising the functions, powers and duties of a spatial plan committee under the Act.

Laying the foundations for regional spatial planning

Local authorities do not need to wait until every element of the new planning system is in place before getting started. Preparatory work can be undertaken now to build the foundations for successful regional spatial planning.

This early work should focus on:

- strengthening relationships
- reviewing existing evidence and strategies
- developing a shared understanding of the region's long-term opportunities, challenges and drivers of change
- identifying capability and capacity needs
- establishing governance and coordination arrangements.

However, decisions on regional strategic direction, preferred spatial outcomes and other major spatial choices should generally wait until national policy direction, national standards and central government participation arrangements are in place. This will help ensure decisions are informed by the full framework established under the new system and reduce the risk of rework.

The key message is to use this period to build readiness and lay the foundations for successful spatial planning, while avoiding major strategic decisions before preparing and notifying the draft regional spatial plan.

Process agreements for regional spatial plans

What are process agreements

Process agreements are the mechanism through which local authorities agree how they will work together to prepare a regional spatial plan. They establish the governance arrangements, decision-making processes, resourcing and consultation approach needed to support the spatial planning process.

Developing a process agreement is an important early step. It provides an opportunity for local authorities to build a shared understanding of roles, responsibilities and expectations before work begins on preparing the draft regional spatial plan.

While the Act provides for regulations to be developed for the process for developing process agreements, this is not a requirement. At this stage, local authorities should proceed with these matters on the basis of what is in the Act and this guidance.

Taituarā are developing a template process agreement which will be available on their website.

What local government should focus on now

There is no legislated timeframe for completing a process agreement, but the intention is that they are in place to support the regional spatial plan drafting process. This provides time now for regions to have the conversations needed to support effective regional spatial planning.

Some early discussions that may help inform the development of a process agreement include:

- establishing ways of working between councils within a region, and with neighbouring regions, including any cost sharing arrangements
- identifying what matters are dealt with regionally, and which ones may be managed by one or more councils
- agreeing how issues will be raised by the committee to councils, including any dispute resolution processes
- ways of working and reporting process councils expect to have with the spatial plan committee, including which decisions should remain with individual councils and which are delegated to the committee
- identifying existing iwi participation arrangements and Treaty settlement redress
- assessing the capability and capacity likely to be needed for the spatial planning process, including any gaps

- beginning conversations with key groups that are likely to be consulted to help ensure the consultation plan is effective and fit for purpose.

The process agreement may consider any city and regional deals, including the potential relevance of existing governance arrangements, strategic priorities and outcomes that are intended to inform regional growth and change decisions.

What the legislation requires

Local authorities within a region must work together to prepare a process agreement before developing a draft regional spatial plan.

The Planning Act requires the process agreement to address several matters that are fundamental to preparing a regional spatial plan. These include:

- how local authorities will work together and work with the spatial plan committee
- whether there will be any division of responsibilities between the local authorities for making decisions on certain matters or parts of the draft regional spatial plan
- how the spatial plan committee will carry out consultation, including identifying specific individuals or groups to be consulted
- how the secretariat for the draft regional spatial plan will be established and managed
- processes to ensure that each local authority complies with any obligations arising from Resource Management Act 1991 (RMA) or Planning Act joint management agreements or transfers of power
- processes to ensure that each local authority complies with any obligations under iwi participation legislation (including any agreements under that legislation)
- any processes required to give the same or equivalent effect to Treaty settlement redress or arrangements as it had under the RMA, under section 10 of the Planning Act.

Both the local authorities and the spatial plan committee must comply with the process agreement. The level of detail prescribed in the process agreement will differ depending on the regional context. While the information below provides some guidance for the development of the process agreement, each region will need to ascertain the extent to which it is relevant for their regional situation, and where some sections may have more importance than others. The process agreement can be amended by agreement as required.

Setting out how local authorities will work together and with the spatial plan committee

While local authorities participate in the spatial plan committee through appointment of members, they also retain responsibilities for key decisions throughout the regional spatial planning process, including:

- agreeing to a process agreement

- appointing members to the spatial plan committee and providing its terms of reference
- approving the draft regional spatial plan for public notification for submissions
- making decisions on independent hearings panel recommendations
- adopting the regional spatial plan.

Local authorities within each region will have to work together to undertake their responsibilities for the draft regional spatial plan. The process agreement should clearly set out the role of local authorities, their intended ways of working together, decision-making arrangements, any cost-sharing and funding contribution arrangements, how they will manage disagreements and their expectations of the committee and secretariat. A key component of working together should be agreeing on how the preparation of the draft regional spatial plan will be resourced.

Managing cross-regional matters

Some spatial plan-related matters do not stop at a regional boundary, so these may need to be addressed in multiple regional spatial plans. The Planning Act sets out a process for developing inter-regional content to include in each relevant spatial plan in clause 5 of Schedule 2. This is separate from the option for two or more regions to prepare a joint spatial plan. The process agreement should identify what the cross-regional matters are and how local authorities in neighbouring regions will work together to address them, consistent with the legislative requirements.

The process agreement could consider:

- where responsibilities sit
- how work will be resourced
- whether existing technical work or data could be shared, or if new work could be resourced together
- whether joint engagement (such as with iwi with rohe in each jurisdiction) may be appropriate and/or efficient.

Working with the spatial plan committee

Local authorities remain accountable to their communities for the regional spatial plan. The committee provides the primary forum for regional coordination and governance during plan development.

The committee is subject to any direction and requirements within the process agreement, and it will also have terms of reference. The terms of reference will need to be consistent with Planning Act requirements related to the form and role of the committee, and the process agreement.

Spatial planning requires regional agreement on issues that can be politically sensitive, including growth areas, infrastructure priorities, climate adaptation and investment sequencing. Effective escalation processes help avoid delays and provide clarity about who is responsible for making decisions when consensus cannot be reached.

Local authorities should distinguish between matters within the authority of the committee and matters requiring escalation back to local authorities and document these, as appropriate, in the process agreement and/or committee terms of reference.

The process agreement should outline the following details relevant to the spatial plan committee:

- process for appointing a member (or members) with knowledge, skill and experience in te ao Māori and Māori development
- core expectations (or principles) for how the spatial plan committee will keep the local authorities informed and seek their direction during development of the draft spatial plan
- a high-level plan for delivering the spatial plan, including resourcing, proposed timeframes for any workshops and the proposed approach to pre-notification consultation.

Local authorities may wish to include other matters in the process agreement (or the spatial plan committee's terms of reference), such as:

- other process or procedural matters relating to the appointment of committee members (including any process requirements for changes or reviews of committee membership)
- reporting and communication requirements between the committee and local authorities, including any requirement for progress updates and decision-making escalation process throughout the development of the draft regional spatial plan.

Funding and resourcing

A key component of how local authorities will work together and with the spatial plan committee will be how they agree to resource and fund the development of the regional spatial plan through to adoption.

The process agreement can cover any process for reviewing funding arrangements, financial delegations and reporting requirements for the spatial plan committee. These can be agreed in the process agreement and then, if needed, can be set out in the terms of reference for the spatial plan committee.

Establishment and management of the secretariat

The secretariat will provide the spatial plan committee with transparent advice, as well as evidence, options, process support and draft material needed to inform their decisions. Exactly what this looks like will differ by region depending on the particular work, capability and relationships required.

The process agreement will need to include aspects of the operational requirements for the secretariat, such as hosting and funding arrangements and the overall structure.

The process agreement can also cover any process for reviewing funding arrangements, financial delegations and reporting requirements for the spatial plan

committee. These can be agreed in the process agreement and then, if needed, can be set out in the terms of reference for the spatial plan committee.

Information and data management

The process agreement may detail how information and data will be managed and shared between participating authorities. This includes arrangements for sharing existing data, identifying information gaps and determining how any new evidence or data collection will be funded. This may also outline data protocols for sensitive information, such as sites of significance to Māori, subject to any relevant direction in national standards.

Division of decision-making responsibilities

The Planning Act requires the process agreement to set out any division of responsibilities between the local authorities. The process agreement should clearly identify which decisions are made collectively across the region, which decisions may be made jointly by affected authorities and which decisions will be made by individual local authorities.

Regional spatial plans are intended to provide a single strategic framework for an entire region. As a result, core decisions relating to regional growth patterns, infrastructure priorities, strategic land use direction and other matters of regional significance should generally be considered by the whole spatial plan committee and by all local authorities in the region.

Sub-regional analysis, engagement and technical work will often play an important role, particularly in larger or more diverse regions. A sub-regional approach to decision-making should be reserved for matters that would only impact a part of the region (such as a large metro area) and require specific attention to address the issue or opportunity. The key principle is that sub-regional aspects must contribute to the overall strategic direction of the regional spatial plan, not replace it. The intention is that most issues and opportunities should be assessed through a whole-of-region lens, recognising that many of the opportunities and challenges the planning system seeks to address extend beyond individual districts or sub-regions.

Consensus decision-making and disputes resolution

Reaching regional agreement is a central feature of the spatial planning system. The process agreement should support consensus-based decision-making by establishing clear governance, escalation and dispute-resolution arrangements from the outset.

What the legislation requires

The Planning Act requires local authorities and spatial plan committee members to do all things reasonably practicable to achieve consensus when making decisions related to preparing, changing and implementing a regional spatial plan.

The Act defines consensus as unanimity or general agreement characterised by the absence of sustained opposition on any substantial issue. Local authorities are responsible for identifying whether there is consensus between local authorities. The chairperson of the spatial plan committee is responsible for deciding whether consensus is reached within the committee.

The obligation to do all things reasonably practicable to achieve consensus is an overarching requirement that applies to local authorities and committee members when making decisions. Decision-making arrangements should be designed and exercised in a way that supports consensus being achieved.

The consensus requirement should influence how the draft regional spatial plan is prepared and will act as a gateway at key decision points. These include a spatial plan committee's decision to recommend the draft spatial plan to the local authorities for approval to notify, local authority decisions to approve the draft spatial plan for notification and local authority decisions on independent hearings panel's recommendations, but will also apply to other decisions needed along the way.

If consensus cannot be achieved, the Planning Act requires the spatial plan committee members or local authorities (as the case requires) to follow a dispute resolution process set out in regulations. This could include instances where one or more local authorities does not agree to proceed to notifying the draft regional spatial plan or does not agree on some matters included within the plan.

If the dispute resolution process fails, the Planning Act provides that the responsible Minister can make the decision or appoint an independent person to make the decision.

What should be included in the process agreement

Local authorities should consider including details in the process agreement and/or committee terms of reference about how the consensus requirement will operate in practice and how decisions are made.

Regulations for dispute resolution processes will be developed in 2027. In the meantime, regions may record dispute resolution processes within their process agreements, and these may need to be adapted once regulations are released.

Local authorities should consider including a framework for resolving disputes between committee members during the preparation of the draft regional spatial plan in the process agreement or terms of reference. A framework may cover the following stages:

- **Stage 1: Voting identifies whether there is consensus**

The committee votes to test whether consensus has been achieved on an issue.

- **Stage 2: Committee resolution**

If consensus is not achieved, the committee attempts to resolve the issue through discussion and negotiation.

- **Stage 3: Chair-led resolution**

If the committee is unable to reach consensus, the chair works with affected members and the secretariat to identify alternative options and potential compromises.

- **Stage 4: Local authority engagement**

Where required, affected local authorities are consulted or asked to provide further direction to their representatives on the committee.

- **Stage 5: Formal dispute resolution**

If the chair concludes the committee is unable to achieve consensus, the dispute resolution process must be initiated.

Quorum and voting

The consensus requirement has implications for spatial plan committee quorum and voting rights. For example:

- **Quorum:** under clause 23(3)(b) of Schedule 7 to the Local Government Act 2002, the region's local authorities can determine the quorum (who must be present) for spatial plan committee meetings but it must be at least two members. However, spatial plan committee quorum arrangements should support the achievement of consensus between committee members.
- **Voting rights:** voting will be less about determining outcomes by majority and more about testing or recording whether consensus has been achieved, identifying where concerns remain and whether further discussion is needed so that general agreement can be reached (or dispute resolution commenced).

Quorum and voting requirements for decisions made by an individual local authority are determined by that local authority's usual governance procedures. The consensus requirement applies between local authorities, rather than to elected members within a local authority. If the relevant local authorities make different decisions about, for example, whether the draft regional spatial plan is ready for notification, they will need to resolve the issue between themselves or trigger the dispute resolution process.

Consultation ahead of spatial plan notification

A key purpose of the process agreement is to establish a clear and coordinated approach to consultation during the development of the draft regional spatial plan. The spatial planning process is intended to be collaborative. This requires early consultation with a range of stakeholders as set out below.

The approach outlined in the process agreement must comply with the Planning Act's requirements related to pre-notification consultation on the draft regional spatial plan and should provide detail about how consultation will be carried out.

Consultation should provide meaningful opportunities for stakeholders to contribute evidence, identify implementation challenges and inform strategic planning decisions

before the draft regional spatial plan is notified. Early and ongoing consultation is critical to developing spatial plans that are well-informed, broadly supported and enduring. The consultation approach should be designed to support timely plan development while still meeting the requirements of the Planning Act.

Where local authorities have recently undertaken relevant engagement or consultation activities, these may be identified and considered as inputs into the development of the spatial plan, where appropriate.

What the legislation requires

The Planning Act (Schedule 2, clause 8) requires the spatial plan committee to undertake consultation on the subject matter of the draft regional spatial plan before it is notified with:

- relevant ministers
- neighbouring local authorities
- iwi authorities
- water organisations under the Local Government (Water Services) Act 2025
- relevant infrastructure providers
- representatives of the development sector
- representatives of other sector groups
- representatives of the wider community
- customary marine title groups.

This requirement for pre-notification consultation does not mean that all the parties must be provided with the full draft regional spatial plan for feedback ahead of notification (only iwi authorities and customary marine title groups must be provided with the draft spatial plan for feedback ahead of notification). For example, the parties could be consulted on early ideas and options and early drafts of parts of the plan. The intention is that, where appropriate, parties have an ability to input into and review early thinking on the spatial plan.

The Planning Act provides further detail on the consultation required with iwi authorities and customary marine title groups. Consultation with iwi authorities on the content of the draft regional spatial plan must enable the iwi authorities to identify relevant issues of concern and the spatial plan committee must indicate how those issues have been or are able to be addressed (Schedule 2, clause 9).

Both iwi authorities and customary marine title groups must be provided with the draft spatial plan before it is notified (Schedule 2, clause 11). In the case of customary marine title groups, it only needs to be the parts of the draft that relate to the coastal marine area which the group holds customary marine title over. The spatial plan committee must allow sufficient time for those iwi authorities and customary marine title groups to provide advice and have regard to any advice they provide.

There is also a requirement in the Planning Act for the relevant local authorities to consult with ngā hapū o Ngāti Porou and any relevant customary marine title hapū if the draft spatial plan applies to or directly affects ngā rohe moana o ngā hapū o Ngāti Porou (Schedule 2, clause 8).

The Planning Act also requires spatial plan committees to invite designating authorities to apply to have:

- an indicative location of a future designation included in the draft regional spatial plan; or
- a proposed designation notified with the draft spatial plan and considered through the spatial planning process.

The committee must decide whether to accept any applications received from designating authorities (Schedule 2, clauses 12–14 and Schedule 5, clauses 34–37).

What should be included in the process agreement

The process agreement should set out how the spatial plan committee will carry out consultation, including identifying specific individuals or groups to be consulted.

The process agreement needs to identify who the local authorities consider to be the relevant infrastructure providers, representatives of the development sector, representatives of other sector groups and representatives of the wider community for the purposes of pre-notification consultation. Those identified groups are then groups that the spatial plan committee must consult under clause 8 of Schedule 2.

Local authorities should consider what a workable plan for this consultation would look like. For example, the need to have some information on proposed designations and indicative locations for future designations to support useful discussions with iwi authorities and other groups.

It will be beneficial for local authorities to have discussions with stakeholders during the development of the process agreement to ensure the consultation plan is fit for purpose. In particular, local authorities should discuss with iwi, hapū and customary marine title groups to ensure that the consultation plan is fit for purpose, reflects how they want to participate and is in line with existing arrangements and obligations.

Consultation should provide meaningful opportunities for stakeholders to contribute evidence, identify implementation challenges and inform strategic planning decisions before the draft regional spatial plan is notified. Early and ongoing consultation is critical to developing spatial plans that are well-informed, broadly supported and enduring.

Iwi authorities

The Planning Act goals include providing for Māori interests through Māori participation in the development of regional spatial plans (and other key instruments). Committees are expected to consult with iwi authorities throughout plan development and must consider relevant Māori planning documents. There are specific

requirements related to statutory acknowledgements, identified Māori land, sites of significance to Māori and other specified areas.

The Planning Act provides for iwi participation agreements between local authorities and iwi authorities and associated hapū. These agreements will set out how iwi authorities participate in planning processes, where required by the Planning Act or Natural Environment Act, or to give effect to Treaty settlement redress. The process agreement may need to be amended subject to iwi participation agreements being put in place.

The process agreement must set out how tangata whenua will participate during the development of the spatial plan and how relevant statutory obligations, existing arrangements and established relationships will be recognised. The process agreement must also clearly set out how the spatial plan committee will carry out the consultation with iwi authorities under Schedule 2, clauses 8 and 9, and comply with any statutory obligations or existing arrangements with iwi or hapū.

Some local authorities may also have existing arrangements for working with tangata whenua within their district or region. These arrangements may relate to independent agreements between the local authorities and iwi or hapū, or they may arise from statutory arrangements with an iwi authority. Examples include memoranda of understanding, joint management agreements made under the RMA, or Local Government Act 2002 governance arrangements.

Local authorities may need to go beyond the minimum requirements to uphold these existing arrangements and established relationships with tangata whenua. A more collaborative approach may also be required to ensure tangata whenua can participate in the mapping and/or otherwise recording of sites of significance to Māori as this information is held by iwi and hapū. Early and ongoing engagement helps ensure that matters of significance are identified and addressed throughout the scoping, preparation, review and amendment of the regional spatial plan.

When developing the process agreement, participating authorities should identify these arrangements and clearly set out how they will be recognised and applied throughout the preparation of the regional spatial plan. This will help ensure a shared understanding across participating authorities and support effective, coordinated engagement with tangata whenua.

The process agreement must clearly set out how the spatial plan committee will carry out the consultation with iwi authorities under Schedule 2, clauses 8 and 9, and comply with any statutory obligations or existing arrangements with iwi or hapū.

Central government involvement

Central government has a formal role in regional spatial planning through the Minister's ability to appoint one member to the regional spatial plan committee (or more with the agreement of local authority members; see guidance on [spatial plan committees](#)). A secretariat must also include at least one technical expert or advisor appointed by the Chief Executive of MCERT, whose work for the secretariat is funded by the Crown.

The Act does not require central government to be a signatory to the process agreement. Where regions see a need to discuss their process agreement with central government agencies (eg New Zealand Transport Agency, Ministry of Health, Ministry of Education), they can do so but this is not required.

MCERT will be working with other central government agencies to consider how they might be able to best contribute to spatial planning processes, including through working groups that regions may set up.

Formalising and publishing your process agreement

The agreement should be formally approved by each participating local authority and must be made publicly available. Regulations for publishing the process agreement may be introduced in 2027.

As a public-facing governance document, the process agreement should be clear, accessible and written in a manner that can be readily understood by participating local authorities, stakeholders, tangata whenua and the wider community.

Reviews or updates of the process agreement

The Act allows for process agreements to be amended by agreement. Process agreements should include clear review and amendment provisions so they can adapt to changing circumstances. This may include the ability to make minor amendments on some issues without requiring a formal process. Any proposed review amendments should be agreed collectively by participating local authorities and documented and published in a transparent manner.

Review triggers could include:

- changes to legislation, regulations or national instruments
- changes to governance or political representation
- significant funding or programme changes.

Spatial plan committees

Overview of spatial plan committees

The spatial plan committee is the primary governance body responsible for leading the preparation and review of a regional spatial plan and monitoring and reporting on implementation. It provides the forum through which councils work together on the strategic direction for the region. The committee will recommend the draft spatial plan to local authorities for approval to notify.

Local authorities retain accountability to their communities and continue to exercise formal decision-making powers where required by legislation. Local authorities will decide whether the draft regional spatial plan is ready to be publicly notified for submissions. They will also make decisions on most of the independent hearings panel's recommendations on the draft spatial plan (except for recommendations on proposed designations and certain national interest matters) and adopt the final spatial plan once any appeals have been resolved.

What the legislation requires

The Planning Act requires the local authorities in a region to appoint a spatial plan committee for their region (section 82). They can choose to establish a new joint committee or use an existing committee with a regional planning function.

Every local authority may appoint one or more members, or can choose not to appoint a member (this must be agreed in the process agreement). The Minister may also appoint one member and may appoint additional members with the agreement of the local authorities. The committee must appoint a chairperson and a secretariat.

Spatial plan committees must include at least one member with knowledge, skill and experience of te ao Māori and Māori development. This is to help decision-makers recognise Māori interests when making long-term decisions about land use, infrastructure, natural hazards, development and environmental management.

In carrying out its responsibilities, the committee must comply with the local authorities' process agreement and the committee's terms of reference.

While the committee holds responsibility for many parts of the spatial planning process, it will be supported by a secretariat to action and deliver these requirements. See guidance on the [establishment of a secretariat](#).

Terms of Reference

The spatial plan committee's detailed operating arrangements should be set out in its terms of reference. These should be agreed by local authorities in the region. Taituarā is developing a terms of reference template to support this process which will be available on its website.

The terms of reference may include the committee's:

- purpose
- functions and responsibilities
- membership, including appointment of chair
- decision-making and voting arrangements
- dispute resolution and escalation
- resourcing and funding envelopes
- meeting procedures
- reporting requirements
- review arrangements.

The use of existing committees for spatial plan committees

The Planning Act anticipates that a spatial plan committee may either:

- be established specifically for spatial planning purposes, or
- build on an existing legally established committee where that committee has a regional planning function and can appropriately undertake the required functions.

The Planning Act does not replace the underlying Local Government Act 2002 framework for committee operations and decision-making. Rather, it establishes additional requirements (for example, ministerial appointments and consensus obligations) that sit alongside and modify the ordinary committee governance arrangements where necessary.

When considering whether an existing committee is suitable to be the spatial plan committee, local authorities should assess whether its purpose, membership, delegations, reporting arrangements, Māori participation arrangements and statutory responsibilities are aligned with the Planning Act's requirements, and the complexity of any modifications that would be needed to the committee to comply with the Act.

Membership of the spatial plan committee

Committee membership should provide an appropriate mix of capabilities, perspectives and relationships. Committee members bring knowledge, governance perspectives and established relationships that support coordinated decision-making across the region.

The Planning Act provides for local authority and ministerial appointments and requires at least one committee member to have knowledge, skills and experience relating to te ao Māori and Māori development. This requirement can be approached on a case-by-case basis and local authorities in each region should seek the views of tangata whenua to assist with the appointment.

Members of the committee may be elected members of local authorities or other people considered to have skills, attributes or knowledge that would be useful for the committee. However, local authority employees cannot be appointed as members of the committee unless it is a subcommittee (the Local Government Act 2002 does not allow this).

Appointment of the chair

While the Act provides for regulations to be developed for appointment of the chair, this is not a requirement. At this stage, local authorities should proceed with these matters on the basis of what is in the Act and this guidance.

The chair plays an important role in providing leadership to the committee, supporting consensus-based decision-making and maintaining effective relationships between participating organisations.

The committee must appoint a chair through a transparent process that considers governance experience, sector knowledge, stakeholder management capability and leadership skills.

The chair does not necessarily have to be an elected member of a local authority. Independent chairs have been used in previous spatial planning processes, such as Urban Growth Partnerships.

Central government appointee

The Minister may choose to appoint one member of a spatial plan committee (and additional members with agreement from the local authorities in the region). This person has the same voting rights as other members unless the Minister directs otherwise.

Where a central government appointee is a full voting member, they may participate in committee decisions in the same way as other members.

Further information on the role and appointment of central government representatives will be provided as implementation arrangements are confirmed. In the meantime, regions should continue establishing their governance arrangements in discussion with MCERT Local Government Partnership Directors.

The terms of reference may need to be updated once the Minister confirms any central government appointee and their voting rights.

Māori participation

The Planning Act goals include providing for Māori interests through Māori participation in the development of regional spatial plans (and other key instruments). Committees are expected to consult with iwi authorities throughout plan development and must consider relevant Māori planning documents. There are specific

requirements related to statutory acknowledgements, identified Māori land, sites of significance to Māori and other specified areas.

How Māori participate in committee governance will vary between regions. In some regions, statutory governance arrangements, joint management agreements, transfers of power made under the RMA or other existing partnership arrangements may be a factor in committee membership or participation arrangements. Regions must consider existing obligations when designing governance structures.

Some regions may rely primarily on direct committee membership arrangements, while others may use advisory groups, partnership forums or other governance mechanisms reflecting local circumstances and existing relationships. The most effective arrangements are those developed collaboratively with iwi and Māori partners.

Decision-making and voting rights

While voting arrangements are important, committees should seek, wherever possible, to operate through consensus and shared regional ownership of outcomes. Formal decision-making and voting arrangements should support this collaborative approach and reflect any requirements set out in the process agreement.

The Planning Act and the Local Government Act 2002 allow spatial plan committees to be exempt from the rules around only elected members of committees having voting rights. All members of a spatial plan committee can have voting rights.

The terms of reference may specify:

- who has voting rights for decisions made by the whole committee (note the process agreement may specify where certain decisions will be made by an individual local authority or small group of local authorities)
- the voting rights of the central government appointee as determined by the Minister
- whether alternate members may vote
- circumstances where members must abstain
- requirements for declaring conflicts of interest
- quorum requirements
- procedures for tied votes
- escalation and dispute resolution processes.

The Planning Act and the Local Government Act 2002 allow spatial plan committees to be exempt from the rules around only elected members of committees having voting rights. All members of a spatial plan committee can have voting rights.

Procedural matters for spatial plan committees

Standing orders are a commonly used procedural framework for meetings and provide certainty for members, officers and observers. Spatial plan committees may develop their own standing orders and may choose to align them with familiar local government meeting practices to reduce complexity.

Reporting and accountability

Clear reporting arrangements will help ensure committee members remain accountable to their appointing authorities while maintaining a shared regional focus. Reporting should support transparency, ongoing political oversight and effective communication with participating councils and communities.

The terms of reference may outline reporting and accountability expectations. This could include expectations around when the committee should report to the local authorities, annual reporting expectations and performance monitoring.

Review of terms of reference

The terms of reference may need to be reviewed following legislative change, committee restructuring, appointment of central government members, significant governance issues or major spatial plan reviews.

The terms of reference should describe triggers for reviews, whether and how frequently there should be regular reviews outside of specific triggers and the process for agreeing amendments.

Establishment of a secretariat

The secretariat is the delivery arm of the regional spatial planning process. While the spatial plan committee provides governance and direction, the secretariat coordinates the work required to develop, implement, monitor and review the regional spatial plan.

What the legislation requires

A spatial plan committee must appoint a secretariat to provide it with technical and administrative support (section 83 of the Planning Act). The secretariat is subject to the direction of the spatial plan committee. A secretariat must include one or more technical experts or advisors appointed and funded by central government.

The process agreement must set out how the secretariat is established and managed.

Secretariat overview

The secretariat coordinates and supports the work required to prepare, implement and review the regional spatial plan. This includes governance support, programme management, evidence coordination, engagement, policy and plan development, and implementation support.

The secretariat should provide the spatial plan committee with objective and transparent advice, as well as evidence, options, process support and draft material needed to inform their decisions. Exactly what this looks like will differ by region depending on the particular work, capability and relationships required. It is important to carry out an assessment of the need, prior to establishing the secretariat.

Core functions the secretariat needs to deliver

The secretariat should ensure these functions are available to support the spatial planning process, either through in-house capability, partner organisations or commissioned expertise.

- **Governance and programme management:** manage processes to support committee operations and programme delivery, including meeting agendas, resource coordination and commissioning, drafting and quality assurance, integration with other work areas and external consultation processes.
- **Analytical foundation:** prepare or commission any necessary advice to support the spatial plan development process, such as on regional growth and change. Coordinate evidence and data, Geographic Information System (GIS) and modelling inputs.
- **Integration across the planning system:** connect the spatial plan with national direction, land use planning, natural environment planning, infrastructure planning, funding and investment and implementation tools.

- **Te ao Māori and Māori interests and Treaty settlements:** provide knowledge, skills and experience relating to te ao Māori and Māori development. Support appropriate Māori participation, including tangata whenua input, Treaty settlements or arrangements, mapping or otherwise recording sites of significance to Māori and considering certain matters related to identified Māori land where relevant (Schedule 2, clause 10 and Schedule 5, clause 2).
- **Adoption, implementation and review:** provide continued support through to adoption of the regional spatial plan and beyond to implementation planning, monitoring and review.

Operating models for the secretariat

This guidance does not prescribe a single operating model or form for the secretariat. Each region can choose an approach that fits its size, capability, institutional arrangements and access to expertise.

The following examples are a starting point for regional discussion only.

- **Integrated in-house model:** a dedicated secretariat team holds most of the core skills in one organisation or jointly established unit. This may suit larger regions with sufficient scale and existing spatial planning capability. The team could be hosted by either a regional council or lead territory authority.
- **Networked or hybrid model:** a central secretariat lead coordinates staff and expertise from partner local authorities and agencies. This may suit regions where skills exist but are spread across several organisations.
- **Small core support model:** a small core team manages the process, and commissions technical or drafting support when needed. This may suit smaller regions or regions with limited specialist capacity.

Any of these models can work if the main tasks are clearly owned, properly resourced and available at the right time. The only requirement in the Planning Act is that the secretariat must include one or more technical experts or advisors appointed by MCERT. Membership should be based on the required functions and the skills that are needed, not which local authority hosts the secretariat.

Where substantial work is commissioned externally, the core team could manage the process, coordinate committee direction and integrate specialist inputs into a single coherent regional spatial plan.

There are multiple factors to consider when determining an operating model. This includes aspects such as ease of employment and hiring, fair representation and involvement across the region, ensuring necessary skills and capabilities are available when needed, how the model can scale as needed and involvement of those outside local government.

Making resources and accountability clear

The process agreement should clearly set out staffing and resourcing contributions from local authorities towards the secretariat and how any fluctuations in availability will be managed.

Staff time, funding, data access, technical support and decision-making pathways must be confirmed, not just assumed. This is particularly important for networked models, where staff may still work for their home organisation but are expected to deliver work for the regional spatial planning process.

Feedback and continuous improvement

Secretariat arrangements should be reviewed as the spatial planning process moves from preparation and adoption through to implementation and review. The review should test whether the model still meets user needs.

Checklist for regional conversations

Below is a summarised list to support regional conversations on each of the matters covered in this guidance.

Process agreements

- Start discussions between all participating councils about how they will work together and with others.
- Review the respective roles of councils, the spatial plan committee and the secretariat.
- Identify which decisions should be made regionally, jointly by affected councils or by individual councils.
- Develop practical consensus, escalation and interim dispute-resolution arrangements.
- Agree how the work will be funded and resourced.
- Identify required consultation partners and prepare an early consultation plan, including arrangements with iwi authorities, PSGEs and customary marine title groups, infrastructure providers and other sector groups and the wider community.
- Identify cross-regional matters and establish working arrangements with neighbouring regions.
- Agree information-sharing, data-management and sensitive-information protocols.
- Build in clear approval, publication, review and amendment processes.
- Engage relevant central government agencies while developing the agreement.

Spatial plan committees

- Decide whether to establish a new committee or adapt an existing regional committee.
- Begin developing terms of reference.
- Identify the capabilities and perspectives needed on the committee, including the required knowledge, skills and experience in te ao Māori and Māori development.
- Work with tangata whenua on appropriate Māori participation and governance arrangements.
- Prepare for later confirmation of any ministerial appointee and their voting rights.

Secretariats

- Assess the functions, skills, capacity and resources required before choosing an operating model.
- Decide who will host, lead, fund and manage the secretariat.
- Identify a suitable model and assign clear responsibility for core functions.
- Confirm access to staff, data, systems, procurement, technical expertise and external providers.
- Include regular reporting and review so the model can be adjusted as the work changes.
- Prepare for later confirmation of central government technical advisers.