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Spatial Planning – be ready by starting now

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New Zealand's resource management system has recently undergone the most significant, wide-ranging and inclusive review since the Resource Management Act (RMA) was enacted in 1991. One of the key outcomes from the review was the recommendation to establish a Strategic Planning Act (SPA) - to promote the social, economic, environmental and cultural wellbeing of present and future generations.

According to the recommendation, these outcomes would be enabled through the long-term integration of strategic goals and functions directed for under a wide ambit of legislation and most specifically those of the Natural and Built Environments Act (NBA), Local Government Act (LGA), Land Transport Management Act (LTMA) and Climate Change Response Act (CCRA).

An important function of the SPA will be to provide a framework for the mandatory requirement for regional strategic plans (the outcome of spatial planning) for both land and coastal marine areas and at a regional scale.

In this article, we look at how spatial planning is defined in the context of the SPA, what it will mean for local authorities, the challenges it may present to councils, and what you can do now to ensure you are best prepared for when the planned legislation is enacted; expected to be at the end of the current electoral term.

What is spatial planning?

In the context of the SPA, spatial planning will be about setting a direction and a long-term goal to promote the four well-beings; social, economic, environmental and cultural, through integration of considerations for land use change, infrastructure development and delivery, environmental management and recognition of cultural values. This is a critical part of working towards and achieving positive outcomes for our regions and all New Zealanders.

It is proposed that this process will enable local authorities to engage with their communities and central government and to plan more effectively for their future prosperity, to set long-term objectives for urban growth and land use change, while responding to climate change and respecting the environment and values of te ao Māori. It will also provide a framework to include actions arising from the Three Waters Reform.

The SPA specifies that Regional Spatial Strategies should set a strategic direction for at least the next 30 years, informed by longer-term data and evidence as appropriate, such as 100-year plus projections for climate change. Spatial plans will be monitored and reviewed every nine years.

What will the SPA mean for local authorities?

Potential benefits of the SPA for local authorities and the requirement for spatial planning are numerous. More integrated spatial planning will enable regions to plan for the long term based on current and future challenges, such as the potential impacts of climate change, increased population growth, diversity of regions, and being able to respect and give effect to the principles of the Treaty of Waitangi / Te Tiriti o Waitangi.

Whilst it is new legislation, it is important to remember that the intent of spatial planning is not revolutionary; rather it is formalising and recognising processes that many are already doing. To this end, it builds on a range of existing spatial planning approaches, such as those undertaken by Regional Growth forums and the multi-agency collaboration processes of Regional Land Transport Programmes; already delivered under the Land Transport Management Act.

In addition to consideration of urban growth, transport and infrastructure, which has formed the focus of many recent spatial plans such as Western Bay of Plenty (BoP) Smartgrowth and Future Proof in the Waikato, the SPA extends to enabling the creation of well-connected and thriving communities, improved wellbeing, and importantly considering change needed for response to the impacts of climate change.

The resulting spatial strategies will provide one of the best opportunities local government has had to identify outcomes that will influence planning and investment decisions by government agencies such as Waka Kotahi, Kāinga Ora, the Ministry of Education (MoE) and potentially the new water entities created under the Three Waters Reform.

The proposed new Regional Plans envisaged under the NBA will also look for guidance and direction from the spatial planning strategies (with the intent that they need to be consistent with the directions set in these regional spatial strategies). The spatial strategies are therefore potentially critical documents for local communities to focus on in terms of setting the shared outcomes that will be delivered locally, regionally and nationally.

The SPA will also provide a consistent framework for spatial planning. While regional spatial strategies across the country will consider and be tailored to meet the individual requirements of regions, their consistency in format and approach will inform nationally led decision-making.

Noting, the Infrastructure Implementation Plans are a recommendation of the resource management system reform and we have yet to see the specifics of how these will be delivered through the legislative reform.



The need for better engagement and collaboration with neighbouring councils, central government and mana whenua will encourage regions to work together to make informed decisions with regards to future development that meets the unique requirements of that region. Again, this is not all new. For example, Ministers now sit on the governance group for the Western BoP Smartgrowth strategy and Future Proof, alongside mana whenua and councillors.

The SPA also seeks to create greater certainty on central government and wider funding opportunities. This is in part because having a good planning framework paves the way for developing business cases to unlock investment in infrastructure critical to meet regional needs but also, depending on how the legislation is drafted, there will potentially be a requirement that funding plans are consistent with the regional spatial strategy.

The challenges of spatial planning

Considerable success has been achieved already through spatial planning initiatives created by Auckland Council, the Western BOP Smartgrowth strategy and the Hamilton2Auckland corridor strategy. For example, the Smartgrowth Urban Form and Transport Initiative (UFTI) business case completed in July 2021 will guide future central and local government investment decisions for the Western BoP. A similar exercise is underway for the Hamilton Metro area.

Beca has worked alongside the councils involved in these early initiatives, either in a governance or planning analysis role or at a technical level – such as providing GIS data, transport planning advice or advice around the impacts of climate change. We will continue to work alongside councils to support spatial planning initiatives at sub-regional and local/community-based levels as the legislation unfolds.

Our involvement in these early examples has given us insight into and highlighted several challenges the SPA might present for local government as we start to develop spatial strategies.

First, the regions across New Zealand are diverse and experience different pressures. Some are largely urban whereas others are predominantly rural. Some areas are currently undergoing or are projected to experience high population growth, while others will see little or none.

In many North Island regions especially, engagement with mana whenua will require more time as there is multiple iwi representation through committees compared to the South Island.

Issues facing coastal marine areas can also be very different across and within regions, for example – the effects of climate change are likely to be more pronounced in Hawke's Bay.

Secondly, the SPA will require a step change to central government thinking – to engage proactively with local government and to think locally. Typically, central government has different drivers towards planning and is less familiar with providing the same level of local community input / public participation that is typically involved at a regional level. Spatial planning will require central and local government to work together in ways that will, in some cases, be a new concept for both.

Mana whenua will need support to build capacity and in some cases capability to enable effective partnership participation – this represents a huge opportunity for our communities as we have seen in the Hamilton Metro Spatial Plan work and emerging thinking from the Bay of Plenty, but it will take time, investment and relationship building before this partnership can work well.

Spatial strategies will need to align with investment and infrastructure investment and sequencing – and when it comes to funding, some hard calls will need to be made about priorities. This is something that we do not always do 'well' and there may be opportunity for some processes (such as those in the Regional Land Transport Programmes) to share lessons and processes to a wider audience in the resource management system.

Finally, the level and type of existing data available to local authorities is currently inconsistent. Common agreement will be necessary to merge these data sets, fill data gaps and establish a common evidence base that will serve the region as plans are developed.

What can you do now to become SPA ready?

While we are very much in the early stages of the process towards legislation, local authorities can start preparing now, through building on progress or initiatives already underway, or developing action plans to 'be ready'.

We especially recommend proactively building and strengthening partnerships, as soon as possible – with mana whenua and neighbouring local authorities and regions. Get together with partners to identify what can be done now in advance of the final legislation. By doing so, early adopters may also be able to participate in the review of the draft legislation.

In summary our recommendations are:

Firstly, think beyond land use, transport, water infrastructure and housing supply. Spatial planning provides opportunities to delve more seriously into other big challenges – climate change adaptation, the placemaking function of our communities, social and economic inequities in our communities and other support for wellbeing can be addressed through spatial planning.

Secondly, invest in building strong partnerships with mana whenua, developing co-governance structures and establishing processes to enable iwi to collaborate and engage effectively as full partners. It is important not to underestimate the time this will take, and work can and should be done on this as early as possible – noting as well that this is a part of the Three Waters Reform, which will also require active participation by mana whenua.

Thirdly, develop collaborative and operational relationships with neighbouring councils. Define the continuum of elements and key external influences relevant to your regions. Agree protocols around 'big data' collection, monitoring and analysis to inform future modelling or scenarios. Start building a shared evidence base now that will support planning and monitoring later – gaining trust and confidence with your communities through more accurate predictions of the future social, economic, environmental, and cultural impacts of proposed projects or initiatives.

Be aware of the role of central government in the development of spatial plans. As mentioned earlier, central government will need to adapt its method of working to support local development. The establishment of new regional leadership appointments in Waka Kotahi and Kāinga Ora are examples of this occurring. Identify ways you can be better prepared and provide support for this so that central government is aware of the uniqueness of your district and that "one size does not fit all".

Fourth, as we have noted we are well aware there are a number of councils that have been on the spatial planning journey for some time, such as the previously mentioned Hamilton, Auckland and Bay of Plenty, as well as Christchurch, Queenstown and Wellington. There are great opportunities to come together to learn from these early adopters and Beca may be able to help facilitate this. We can also refer to experiences in jurisdictions internationally, who are developing their own approaches – Scotland, Australia and Canada all have great examples that share similarities with New Zealand.

And finally, start thinking about the resources needed to build the capability and capacity of your staff so that your organisation is well resourced to provide the governance, planning and policy expertise required to participate effectively at both the governance and technical levels for regional spatial planning.

The LTP process currently underway should have some consideration of the future needs to support these changes.

Conclusion

The SPA can only be considered good for the long-term planning of our communities and diverse requirements of New Zealand's regions.

The reforms are coming, and by acting now, local authorities can play a part in influencing these reforms. Those who act now will be better prepared to contribute to the development of the legislation and once it is passed, could provide opportunities to shape these strategic plans as an early adopter.

Now is the time and opportunity for local authorities to bring partners together around the table, and to get involved to help shape the future and make a real difference for communities across Aotearoa.



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Annika Lane – Annika joined Beca in 2020, where she provides policy, strategic and spatial planning advisory services to central and local government clients across and New Zealand and the Pacific. Annika is a qualified lawyer with over 20 years' experience in a variety of roles including as a legislative and policy analyst, director of a not for profit organisation, research economist, practising lawyer, group manager for strategic policy and planning and independent strategy consultant in the private and public sectors. Annika can be contacted on annika.lane@beca.com



Amelia Linzey - Amelia Linzey commenced her career at Beca in 1997 and has since had a number of roles within the business and in delivery of infrastructure and land use change for Council, infrastructure providers and developers in New Zealand. Amelia was involved in the Independent Panel appointed by the Minister to make recommendations on the Resource Management Reform. Amelia can be contacted on amelia.linzey@beca.com

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