Plans without authority? RMA reform, spatial coordination and implementation

Introduction

The Planning Act 2026 and Natural Environment Act 2026 promise a more enabling, nationally consistent system with mandatory regional spatial planning. Their value will depend on whether plans guide later development and investment decisions. Drawing on Grey Lynn, I argue that common rules and clearer implementation responsibilities can improve plan-making, but exceptional approvals and unfunded infrastructure can weaken a plan's practical authority. Departures may be justified; the test is whether decision-makers compare them with the strategy's evidence and explain their wider consequences. Existing Resource Management Act 1991 (RMA) arrangements continue during transition (Planning Act 2026, sch. 1, cl. 2).

National consistency and the content of plans

The case for reform is substantial. The Planning Act establishes national direction, regional spatial plans and land-use plans, with prescribed provisions generally protected from local rewriting (ss. 14, 101–102). Common rules could reduce duplication and improve clarity. Auckland's 2016 upzoning also shows the value of enabling development: Greenaway-McGrevy and Phillips (2023) found increased construction, while Greenaway-McGrevy and So (2026) estimate rents 23% below a no-upzoning counterfactual by 2024. These studies concern the earlier reform, but challenge the assumption that retaining local restrictions necessarily produces better planning.

Our Grey Lynn plan used measurable entitlements: S1 set a baseline of four storeys and a floor area ratio (FAR) of 2.5, while S2 and the intended S3 framework provided predictable residential capacity (Rashidmardani et al., 2026, pp. 8–14). I had been more familiar with Euclidean zoning. Working with the plan's Japanese-inspired permissions, targeted form controls and incentive provisions challenged that starting point (pp. 2–3). I saw how much power lies in translating an objective into a usable entitlement. Berke and Godschalk (2009) distinguish plan quality from aspiration; a zone label alone cannot make development feasible.

Grey Lynn's S1 provisions sought adaptable ground floors and pedestrian entrances, while S5 added park-facing and solar-interface controls (Rashidmardani et al., 2026, pp. 8–10, 15–17). These choices made me less comfortable with either a uniform envelope or unlimited local

discretion. Campbell's (1996) economic, environmental and equity tensions suggest an enabling default with local controls justified by their effects, within the scope permitted by section 102. Writing a frontage rule also showed me its limit: a usable entrance still depends on the public route outside it.

The two Acts also require growth and natural resource decisions to work together. Our preferred housing locations intersected overland-flow paths and a proposed blue-green network (Rashidmardani et al., 2026, pp. 3–6). A combined planning document could expose that overlap, but it could not resolve competing powers or environmental constraints on its own. We consulted neither the public nor mana whenua. That gap mattered because our map and proposed engagement process had not been tested by the people whose priorities might change them.

Regional spatial plans, Fast-track and strategic authority

The Planning Act imposes firmer requirements on spatial planning. Schedule 2, clause 15 requires an options assessment before notification, examining alternative growth strategies and the certainty of their drivers. Sections 80 and 84–86 link plans with other instruments and require actions, responsible organisations, timeframes, funding status and reporting. These partly answer Infrastructure New Zealand's (2026) concern about delivery responsibilities, although capacity and funding constraints remain important (Taituarā, 2026). In Grey Lynn, focusing growth on the Great North Road–Surrey Crescent spine similarly depended on transport and park investment beyond our zoning rules (Rashidmardani et al., 2026, pp. 3–6).

Options assessment should also expose uncertainty. The committee must describe growth drivers within and outside public control (Planning Act 2026, sch. 2, cl. 15). Healey (1997) explains why spatial strategy depends on coordination between institutions. I would ask each option to identify its servicing assumptions, affected interests and fiscal exposure, together with conditions that would justify reopening the choice. This would give later departure decisions a clear point of comparison.

Spatial-plan authority is tested when exceptions arise. The separate Fast-track Approvals Act 2024 lets the referring Minister consider both whether a proposal appears in a spatial strategy and whether it is consistent with local or regional planning documents (s. 22(2)(a)(i), (x)). That is a statutory link, but neither factor is an absolute sequencing requirement. Paetz's (2026a, 2026b) lectures raised the possibility that large projects could proceed outside established growth programmes. Auckland Council (2026) estimated 50,000–60,000

dwellings in its unanticipated-development pipeline and approximately $3 billion in potential council costs, excluding water, wastewater, infrastructure operating and non-growth costs. These prospective costs show how approvals could alter regional-plan assumptions before expenditure is incurred.

The weakness arises when an approval changes growth sequencing without revisiting the alternatives assessed under Schedule 2. Flyvbjerg (1998) asks whose interests shape a technically framed choice. I recommend that the responsible council publish a comparison of the departure with the adopted strategy before the decision, bringing developer evidence and public responses into the same record. It should explain servicing, deferred investment and who bears the costs. Deliberation could improve the judgment without requiring unanimous agreement.

This is a proposed accountability process, not a description of the Fast-track referral test. That test considers significant benefits and allows consideration of spatial consistency, but does not itself reopen the regional options assessment or commit infrastructure budgets. Strategic alternatives may therefore receive public regional scrutiny, while a material departure is argued on the basis of an individual project's benefits. Requiring a comparative explanation would address that difference without imposing a blanket veto.

A rigid conformity test could also preserve an outdated strategy. Mastop and Faludi (1997) distinguish whether a plan guides decisions from literal adherence to its map. Fast-tracked investment might meet urgent demand or reveal a better network option. I would compare its regional benefits, feasible servicing, environmental and fiscal effects, and the opportunity costs of alternatives. The reasons should state whether the original strategy remains credible or needs revision. This allows adaptation while making cumulative departures visible.

The course's Queenstown discussions exposed the difficulty of separating a project's housing benefits from regional network and landscape choices (Paetz, 2026b). That example tests the Planning Act's promise: an options report has value only if later decisions explain which assessed alternatives remain viable. Grey Lynn involved inner-urban intensification rather than unanticipated greenfield networks, but the same logic shaped our decision to locate greater capacity beside intended access improvements.

We concentrated growth in S1 and selected S5 locations due to intended access improvements, rather than applying equal intensity across all locations (Rashidmardani et al.,

2026, pp. 3–6). I now see those zones as choices that later transport and stormwater decisions must revisit using comparable evidence. Their justification cannot rest on the map alone.

Implementation, funding and lessons from Grey Lynn

Funding raises a further implementation problem. Laurian et al. (2004) distinguish adoption from implementation, while Berke et al. (2006) show that organisational practices matter. Section 84's requirement to identify actions and funding status improves transparency but does not allocate money. Government guidance likewise says a spatial plan does not guarantee investment (Ministry for Cities, Environment, Regions and Transport [MCERT], 2026b). A credible sequence requires a response when expected funding fails to arrive.

Infrastructure provision involves recovering growth costs, obtaining cash before works are needed and deciding which networks to advance. Brueckner (2000) explains how unpriced service costs can distort the location of development. Local Government Act 2002 section 102A permits qualifying Fast-track-related contribution-policy changes. The separate development-levy proposal would recover shares of forecast capacity costs by levy area (MCERT, 2026a). These tools could improve recovery, while differentiated areas make expensive locations more visible. They still leave decisions about cash timing and programme priority.

A charge can reveal part of a location's cost but miss the opportunity cost of diverting a network programme. Excessive charges could also undermine planned intensification. Plan-makers need transparent feasibility assumptions and funding gaps, with triggers for reviewing the sequence after material approvals (MCERT, 2026a).

For example, a project might bring an upgrade forward by ten years. Even full eventual cost recovery could leave a near-term cash shortfall and postpone another area’s investment. An options assessment should identify who bears that timing risk and compare the benefits of advancing the project with those of deferring the works. That is a planning judgement that the levy amount cannot settle.

Our Grey Lynn Section 7.5 confronted this difficulty. It proposed a project pipeline, titled responsibilities and capacity-responsive staging, while stating that S5 bonus contributions did not, by themselves, mean that a park or street project was funded (Rashidmardani et al., 2026, pp. 20–21). We kept baseline permissions distinct from variable uplift receipts and prohibited double recovery. These mechanisms were designed for student exercise and would need legal

testing. The choice showed that granting capacity, collecting money and delivering a public connection require separate decisions.

Grey Lynn's baseline and optional uplift helped me connect enabling rules with their delivery conditions. We need to ask which accessible routes would proceed if bonus uptake fell short, and what funds would be used. I would put that fallback sequence alongside the preferred programme and identify who must explain a deferral. This would make our implementation proposal more credible while recognising that the plan could not compel another agency to invest.

An accessible crossing's public value does not disappear when developer uptake is low. The fallback should therefore prioritise the most consequential public benefits and identify an accountable agency, rather than allowing contribution receipts alone to determine the sequence.

I would monitor how the strategy influenced investment as well as consent decisions (Mastop & Faludi, 1997). For Grey Lynn, useful measures include bonus uptake, completed accessible links, stormwater funding, and reasons for changes in priorities. Flyvbjerg's (1998) distributional question remains: who benefits from additional housing permissions when the public improvements supporting them are delayed?

Judgement

The reforms strengthen planning through common provisions, assessing alternatives and clearer implementation records. Grey Lynn taught me that predictable permissions can support development, but their value depends on local effects and a credible delivery pathway. I would support departures in which councils, developers, and affected people can examine comparable evidence, and the decision explains the consequences for funding and other locations. A plan gains practical authority when it guides those choices and makes changes accountable.

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