



Hon Chris Bishop
Minister of RMA Reform
Wellington 6140

By email: C.Bishop@ministers.govt.nz

25 August 2026

Dear Minister Bishop,

Urban development and climate in the new planning system

As you turn to the implementation of your new planning laws, I would urge you to talk to your officials about how new standardised uses and zones are going to ensure that we don't build harder, hotter cities (I hope you will recognise in that description – the title of one of my reports).¹

Climate change has significant implications for the physical fabric of our urban spaces. It's not an intellectual abstraction. Neither is it a 'nice-to-have' notion about amenity that you have explicitly removed from the legislation. It's about what it will be like to live in places that will become extremely hot at times and deluged by rain at other times.

There has been huge suburban growth around Hamilton where I live. I am watching the creation of whole new suburbs filled with densely stacked houses and town houses. There is virtually no private green space, so whatever public space there is will have to provide all the cooling and water absorption 'services'. Concrete, asphalt, tanalised wooden fences and black roofscapes do not appear to be setting these suburbs up well for summers with sustained periods over 30°C.

Hills have been terraformed out of existence, the soil removed and turned into hard clay terraces ready for concrete pad foundations. Even if some open space has been preserved, it won't absorb much rainfall. We will be heavily reliant on engineered solutions. And that hardened substrate certainly won't support much more than some low shrubs or grasses. Trees have no chance.

Hamilton City Council is aware of these issues and has attempted to address them through Plan Change 12, which includes requirements relating to deep soil retention and urban tree canopy. I understand that you have initiated a review of these provisions on the basis that they may have a negative impact on economic growth, development capacity or employment.² While that may or may not be the case, it seems to me that removing these requirements will have costs – the need to 'upscale' traditional built solutions to managing stormwater and urban heat for example.

¹ PCE, 2023. Are we building harder, hotter cities? The vital importance of urban green spaces. <https://pce.parliament.nz/publications/are-we-building-harder-hotter-cities-the-vital-importance-of-urban-green-spaces>

² <https://www.beehive.govt.nz/release/new-investigations-heritage-and-housing-rules>

Are we building harder hotter cities? and *Urban ground truths: Valuing soil and subsoil in urban development* attempted to survey the issues at stake.³ They're gaining urgency around the world. My attention was caught by the attached article from the Sydney Morning Herald. It tells a familiar story.

You're probably more familiar with flood risk than the heat risk discussed in this article. I imagine your response on flood risk would probably be to say the Government is investing in a flood map that will show "go or no-go" areas for development. My question is: how will the flood map change as urban development continues? Building many impervious surfaces can have unexpected cumulative impacts, changing the amount of water that is absorbed and where the excess water goes.

Your new planning templates will provide an opportunity to see that these issues are minimised. These templates will be important in the new system given legislative changes to how urban green space is protected and provided for. I note, for example, that councils will no longer be able to use financial contributions to mitigate the adverse effects of development, the ability to protect indigenous urban vegetation in urban growth areas (and elsewhere) will be subject to regulatory relief, and notable trees will only be able to be protected if they have significant historic value. If your templates overlook these issues right at the outset, you will be hard-wiring problems for the future.

I wouldn't start with a pre-conceived regulatory mind-set. Why not invite some practical and well-regarded developers, builders, landscape experts and engineers to a round-table discussion and ask them to tell you what currently gets in the way and how we could do a better job of creating liveable suburbs. I'm aware that people can install air-conditioning and councils can lay bigger pipes. But these can be costly – and energy hungry to operate. It might be worth seeing how we can avoid hard-wiring harder, hotter cities rather than having to retrofit them later.

There is a bigger picture reason behind my raising this point. I have been pondering how flexible the new system will be in responding to cumulative impacts. Standards and templates can – if well designed – minimise these risks. But the environment is dynamic. Even with good information, the best-laid plans will need to be monitored once implemented and might need to be adjusted accordingly. One of the trickier problems the RMA has faced is how to claw back degradation when environments unexpectedly go past limits. I expect your reforms will face exactly the same challenge. It is much cheaper in the long run to prevent that from happening in the first place.

We're always happy to help.

Kind regards



Rt Hon Simon Upton
Parliamentary Commissioner for the Environment
Te Kaitiaki Taiao a Te Whare Pāremata

³ PCE, 2024. *Urban ground truths: Valuing soil and subsoil in urban development*.
<https://pce.parliament.nz/publications/urban-ground-truths>