



SocialLink – Tūhono Pāpori¹ is the umbrella peak body for the social and community sector and represents over 1500 organisations and individuals working in the Western Bay of Plenty.

SocialLink walks alongside social service providers, community and Māori organisations to strengthen their capability as they deliver services to their communities, as well as advocates for the sectors interests, social justice and equity of opportunity for all people living in the WBOP.

www.sociallink.org.nz

Submission on the Planning and Natural Environment Bills to the Environment Committee February 2026

Thank you for the opportunity to submit on the Planning and Natural Environment Bills. SocialLink is committed to mana ōrite partnership and honouring te Tiriti o Waitangi. As such this submission focuses on the Bills' impact on Māori and the ability of communities to influence planning, use and development of local land and the built environment and to also protect their natural environment.

We are submitting on both bills.

Overall position

1. SocialLink acknowledges that the current planning system is not operating as efficiently or effectively as it should. We agree that improvements including increased standardisation are needed to reduce unnecessary complexity, delays and costs, and that a more enabling planning system can support the timely provision of housing, infrastructure and community facilities.
2. We also recognise that achieving the right balance is inherently challenging. Streamlining planning processes while still enabling meaningful community participation and upholding Te Tiriti o Waitangi obligations requires care, nuance and good faith.

¹ Legal name is Social Sector Innovation Western Bay of Plenty Charitable Trust: Charities registration number CC50192.

3. SocialLink’s work to support communities to flourish is directly impacted by the quality of the built and natural environment in which people live and the impact of determinants on people’s health, social, spiritual, financial and cultural wellbeing.²
4. With reference to what the Bills cover, the evidence is that determinants include people and communities having well-built, safe, healthy and affordable homes, and having agency to make decisions concerning use, protection and guardianship of land, the natural environment and cultural and spiritual places of meaning and significance.
5. In terms of the increasing impact of weather events with intense rain, communities have the right to have safe durable homes, marae, well designed infrastructure including roading, water, sewage, power systems, parks and reserves.
6. This particularly applies to socially vulnerable activities in land use planning, defined as buildings accommodating activities such as schools and early childhood centres, hospices, assisted living facilities, marae, medical and health service facilities, mental health facilities, pharmacies, retirement villages/aged care facilities, respite care or rehabilitation facilities and social housing/residential units constructed by social housing providers.^{3 4}
7. We are concerned that the intended reforms pay insufficient attention to the impact of climatic warming and the profound and costly consequences for communities, housing, farming and other land use, marae and wāhi tapu areas, roading and other infrastructure around the country.
8. Poorer income families and communities have less material means to independently move out of areas prone to landslides or flooding and are more likely to live in houses of poorer quality that are detrimentally affected by damp, cold or heat. Insurance is going to be harder to obtain, already insurance companies are making decisions to temporarily stop new house policies in flood prone towns.⁵
9. We believe both Bills must provide legislation to mitigate these problems.

² Public Health Advisory Committee. Determining our Future - Social, Cultural, Economic and Commercial Determinants of Wellbeing in Aotearoa New Zealand: Actions to improve our health and wellbeing. Wellington: Ministry of Health

³ Mason, K., Lindberg, K., Haenfling, C., Schori, A., Marsters, H., Read, D., & Borman, B. (2021). Social vulnerability indicators for flooding in Aotearoa New Zealand. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 18(8), 3952

⁴ Environmental Health Intelligence New Zealand. About social vulnerability to natural hazards and climate-related hazards. Massey University. <https://ehinz.ac.nz/social-vulnerability/about-social-vulnerability-to-natural-hazards-and-climate-change/>

⁵ Radio New Zealand Insurer temporarily halts new policies in Westport due to flood risk. 29 January 2026.

Planning Bill

1. General Position

While we acknowledge the need for reform, SocialLink does not support the Planning Bill in its current form and considers it requires significant change.

In our view, the Bill adopts a hierarchical, top-down approach that goes beyond reasonable streamlining and instead:

- Significantly limits meaningful community influence over the built environment.
- Centralises decision-making away from local communities and local government
- Applies a more prescriptive and constrained approach to Te Tiriti o Waitangi considerations
- Risks weakening Māori rights and diluting Crown obligations under Te Tiriti o Waitangi.

We consider these shifts to be inconsistent with wellbeing-led development, participatory democracy, and the partnership principles that underpin Aotearoa New Zealand's constitutional arrangements. We discuss these further below.

2. Purpose of Bill (Clause 4) should include environmental protection.

While we acknowledge that this Bill is being introduced alongside the Natural Environment Bill, we are also concerned that the Planning Bill does not sufficiently consider the environmental and climate related issues noted above that will negatively affect people, communities, wildlife and built environments.

***Recommendation:* Add the word 'protection', to the purpose of the Bill as in 'the use, development, protection and enjoyment of land.'**

Rationale

This would bring the purpose of the Bill in line with the intention of the Natural Environment Bill which is to 'establish a framework for the use, protection and enhancement of the natural environment.' We acknowledge there may be some benefits in two separate Bills, nevertheless we are concerned because of the economic imperative in the purpose of the Planning Bill, that in practice this will end up taking precedence to natural environment protection. By including the word 'protection' in the Planning Bill's Purpose there will be a legislative requirement to consider this.

3. Centralisation and a hierarchical planning framework

The Bill establishes a strongly hierarchical planning system, with national direction instruments dominating regional and local planning processes through what is called a funnel system. While we accept that some degree of national direction can play a useful role in improving consistency and reducing inefficiency across the planning system, in our view, this approach tips the balance too far towards central control and:

- Reduces the ability of local communities to shape the places in which they live, work and connect.

- Treats local context, lived experience and mātauranga ā-rohe as secondary to centrally determined outcomes.
- Risks creating one-size-fits-all solutions that do not reflect the social, cultural and environmental diversity of communities.

For the social and community sector, place matters. The design and location of housing, community facilities, transport, open spaces and services directly affect access, inclusion, safety and wellbeing. While efficiency is important, it should not come at the expense of outcomes that are responsive to local needs.

We are particularly concerned that community engagement appears to be positioned as something to be managed or limited in the interests of speed, rather than as a core democratic function of planning.

***Recommendation:* Rebalance the planning framework to strengthen local and community decision-making.**

4. Diminished community voice and participation

SocialLink recognises that lengthy and highly technical participation processes can create delays and frustration, and that reform should aim to make engagement clearer and more effective.

However, we are concerned that the Bill narrows opportunities for communities to meaningfully influence planning decisions rather than improving the quality of participation. Interestingly, the word ‘community’ in the sense of a geographical community is only mentioned nine times in the entire Bill which suggests a limited focus on community input.

In practice, this approach to communities may:

- Limit the ability of communities to shape long-term spatial outcomes.
- Reduce transparency and public trust in planning decisions.
- Disadvantage groups who already face barriers to participation, including low-income communities, disabled people, migrants and refugees, and rangatahi.

In particular, the broader and more active role of the Minister to direct territorial authorities suggests that if the Minister does not agree with the direction of territorial authority or regionally led plans, they will intervene regardless of community wishes.

Strong communities are built with communities, not for them. Planning processes should be streamlined in ways that enhance participation, not replace it with processes that is centralised and privileges those with resources, expertise and time.

***Recommendation:* Embed meaningful, accessible and early community participation as a core requirement.**

5. Te Tiriti o Waitangi and Māori rights

The RMA 1991 states in clause 8 Treaty of Waitangi: *“In achieving the purpose of this Act, all persons exercising functions and powers under it, in relation to managing the use, development, and protection of natural and physical resources, shall take into account the principles of the Treaty of Waitangi.”*

The majority of the Expert Advisory Group on Resource Management Reform in March 2025⁶ agreed future legislation should retain this section because:

- a) The relationship and kinship connections of Māori with the environment is fundamental to the Māori world view and is inherent to the guarantees and protections afforded by the Treaty.
- b) Planning and environmental management represents a major intersection with the Māori relationship with the environment that has been devolved to local government. In such a case, it is important that the Crown's obligations to Māori are upheld.

However, the Cabinet explicitly ruled out a general Treaty principles clause. This appears to be partly because of the current Government's wider review of Treaty clauses in legislation according to the Cabinet paper.⁷

In considering this current Government perspective, a whakatauki comes to mind: *Toitū he kāinga, whatu ngarongaro he tangata* (While the land remains, the inhabitants are gone). In other words, short term thinking is prevailing.

Te Tiriti o Waitangi is the founding document outlining expectations of an enduring relationship and partnership between Māori and the Crown and lives beyond governments on the day. The Planning and Environment Bills aim to provide an enduring framework related to land and the natural environment. The RMA's clause 8 should endure as part of the new Bills.

SocialLink acknowledges that clearer expectations and processes can support more consistent engagement with Te Tiriti o Waitangi across the planning system. We also recognise that uncertainty and variability can create inefficiency and conflict.

However, we have significant concerns about the way the Bill approaches Te Tiriti o Waitangi. While the Bill refers to Treaty principles, the overall framework appears more prescriptive and constrained than existing arrangements. In our view, this risks:

- Narrowing how Te Tiriti is interpreted and applied in planning decisions.
- Limiting the ability of iwi and hapū to exercise rangatiratanga over their whenua and taonga, particularly for iwi who are yet to settle, Māori rights do not exist only when a settlement happens.
- Reducing the scope of active protection and partnership obligations on the Crown.

Balancing enabling development with upholding Te Tiriti obligations is complex, but prescriptive, centrally defined approaches risk prioritising efficiency over equity and partnership. Te Tiriti relationships are place-based, relational and evolving. They require flexibility, good faith, and the ability for iwi and hapū to determine what partnership looks like in their own rohe.

⁶ Report from the Expert Advisory Group on Resource Management Reform. Blueprint for resource management reform: A better planning and resource management system 2025

⁷ Ministry for the Environment. Resource Management reform Comparison Expert Advisory Group Blueprint recommendations and Cabinet Paper recommendations.

<https://www.beehive.govt.nz/sites/default/files/2025-03/Factsheet%20--%20Resource%20management%20reform.pdf#:~:text=Cabinet%20paper%20progresses%20broad,Cabinet%20paper%20does%20not%20progress>

We are particularly concerned that the Bill may entrench minimum compliance rather than encouraging genuine partnership, co-design and shared decision-making.

Recommendations:

- **Retain Clause 8 of the RMA 1991 in relation to Te Tiriti o Waitangi**
- **Strengthen, rather than narrow, the application of Te Tiriti o Waitangi**
- **Enable iwi and hapū to define partnership and rangatiratanga in ways that reflect local context.**

6. Implications for wellbeing and equity

SocialLink agrees that an effective planning system must enable development and respond to growth pressures. However, the built environment is also a key determinant of social wellbeing. Planning decisions influence housing affordability, access to services, social connection, and environmental health.

A system that prioritises speed and certainty without sufficient regard for community voice and Treaty partnership risks exacerbating existing inequities. From a social sector perspective, the Bill does not sufficiently demonstrate how efficiency gains will be balanced with support for:

- Community wellbeing and social cohesion
- Equity for Māori and other priority populations
- Mana-enhancing, strengths-based approaches to development

***Recommendation:* Explicitly recognise the role of planning in supporting social wellbeing and equity.**

7 Conclusion

SocialLink urges the Committee to reconsider the direction of the Planning Bill. A planning system that centralises power, limits community voice, and constrains Treaty obligations risks undermining trust, equity and wellbeing.

We believe Aotearoa New Zealand needs a planning framework that honours Te Tiriti o Waitangi, strengthens local democracy, and enables communities to shape places that reflect their values, aspirations and mana.

Natural Environment Bill

1. General Position

SocialLink recognises that the current resource management and environmental system is challenging, often inefficient and inconsistent, which can lead to delays, duplication and confusion for councils, communities and resource users alike. We support the intent to make environmental management clearer, more consistent, and more responsive. We also acknowledge the difficulty in striking the right balance between enabling responsible use of

natural resources and protecting the environment and community values, including Te Tiriti o Waitangi obligations.

However, we are deeply concerned that, in its current form, the Natural Environment Bill:

- Establishes a highly hierarchical, top-down system of national direction and standards;
- Limits local and community influence over the natural environment and resource use;
- Adopts a narrowly prescriptive approach to Treaty considerations that risks weakening Māori rights and Crown obligations under Te Tiriti; and
- Reduces opportunities for democratic participation in environmental decision-making.

We urge the Select Committee to strengthen the Bill so it genuinely supports environmental wellbeing, equitable participation, and partnership with tangata whenua.

2. Centralisation and Hierarchy in Environmental Decision-Making

The Bill creates a system where national instruments, goals and standards are prioritised over local context and tangata whenua leadership. National direction will shape regional plans and decisions, with regional councils required to align with standardised requirements unless they justify bespoke content.

We recognise that some national consistency can improve clarity, reduce duplication and support aligned action across regions. However, this must not override communities' lived experience and place-based knowledge, especially when it comes to ecological systems and locally significant environments.

Too much centralisation risks:

- Minimising community input into environmental goals for their rohe;
- Treating local mātauranga Māori and community values as secondary to centrally set criteria; and
- Promoting a “one size fits all” system that does not reflect the social, cultural and ecological diversity across Aotearoa.

A robust system should enable local and regional leadership to shape how environmental objectives are realised, not simply impose centrally authored outcomes.

***Recommendation:* Ensure that regional/local councils and communities, including tangata whenua, have stronger roles in shaping how national goals are implemented in their rohe.**

3. Community Participation and Democratic Voice

SocialLink supports improvements to planning and environmental processes that reduce unnecessary technical barriers and improve clarity for participants. However, the Bill's current design does not appear to strengthen participatory democracy. Instead, it limits substantive opportunities for communities to influence outcomes at meaningful stages. For example, the word 'community' in the sense of a geographical community is only mentioned six times in the entire Bill suggesting a very limited focus on community input.

For example:

- Permit-based implementation replaces the current resource consents regime with fewer notification opportunities, including raising the threshold of who is recognised as “affected”.

This may reduce delay, yet it also reduces everyday citizens’ ability to be heard on decisions affecting local rivers, biodiversity, soils, and coastal environments.

Meaningful participation should be about effective influence over outcomes, not merely speeding up procedural steps.

***Recommendation:* Retain or improve accessible opportunities for communities to influence regional plan content, with clear mechanisms for early engagement and feedback.**

4. Te Tiriti o Waitangi, Māori Rights and Treaty Obligations

The Natural Environment Bill includes goals and provisions that refer to Māori participation, identification and protection of wāhi tapu, sites of significance and enabling development and protection of Māori land.

While these inclusions are positive in intent, we are concerned that the Bill’s approach to Treaty considerations is overly prescriptive and confined to narrow procedural steps. This creates a system that may appear to uphold Māori interests in name, but limits the space for substantive rangatiratanga, shared decision-making and flexible application in context.

Treaty obligations are not checkboxes — they are relational, evolving and rooted in partnership, active protection, and participation. A top-down prescriptive approach can risk:

- Constraining iwi and hapū ability to define partnership in their own rohe
- Limiting Crown’s substantive active protection duties, and
- Creating expectations of minimal compliance rather than meaningful collaboration.

A truly equitable natural environment framework must go beyond procedural consultation and enable tangata whenua to shape environmental outcomes as mana whenua partners.

Recommendations:

- **Embed Treaty principles that allow for flexible, context-specific partnership relationships between the Crown and tangata whenua, rather than narrow procedural requirements.**
- **Value place-based insights as integral, not secondary, to achieving environmental and social wellbeing outcomes.**

5. Impacts on Equity, Wellbeing and Environmental Outcomes

Environmental wellbeing and community wellbeing are deeply interconnected. Decisions about freshwater, biodiversity, soil and air quality directly influence:

- Cultural practices and identity;
- Community health and access to resources;

- Intergenerational wellbeing.

We support the Bill's ambition to protect and enhance the natural environment in ways that are efficient and proportionate. However, efficiency should not become a proxy for exclusion or reduced participation. A system that limits meaningful influence by the community and tangata whenua risks exacerbating inequities and undermining trust in environmental governance.

Recommendation: Explicitly recognise the role of environmental protection in supporting wellbeing and fostering equity.

6. Conclusion

SocialLink acknowledges that reform of New Zealand's environmental management system is complex and necessary. However, a balance must be struck between efficiency and equitable participation, local voice, and authentic Treaty partnership.

We urge the Select Committee to revise the Natural Environment Bill so that it supports an environmental governance framework that is inclusive, participatory, Te Tiriti-consistent, and responsive to community and ecological diversity across Aotearoa.

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Western Bay of Plenty