



MANAGING CHANGE IN PARADISE

Sustainable
Development
in Peri-urban Areas

Parliamentary Commissioner for the Environment
Te Kaitiaki Taiao a Te Whare Pāremata



Managing Change in Paradise: Sustainable Development in Peri-urban Areas

Parliamentary Commissioner for the Environment
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Preface

This investigation has its origins in New Zealand's first eco-city, Waitakere City. In March 2000 the Waitakere Ranges Protection Society expressed concern at the way subdivision was proceeding in the Waitakere Ranges, the forested jewel within the city boundaries. The group was concerned at the impacts subdivision was having on the qualities that were drawing ever more people to live in the ranges - vistas, wildlife, tranquil natural surroundings, and mature native vegetation. My investigation of these concerns revealed that the 'development march' and the Waitakere City Council's responses to it had many complex facets. There were no quick fixes. Those with subdivision interests and those concerned for the long-term landscape, ecological and amenity values were equally frustrated. There appeared to be little certainty in the planning and consenting processes for either interest group. It was clear that the environmental outcomes in the Ranges were satisfying very few in the Waitakere Community.

Of greatest concern to me and my team, it appeared that the planning processes, as they were being applied, were not sufficient to sustain the very characteristics of the landscape and its ecological qualities that most people in the community cherished. I concluded that the planning processes were leading inextricably to death by a thousand cuts: 100 years from now the freehold parts of the Waitakere Ranges would look like Remuera today!

This finding, plus concerns emerging from other peri-urban areas under development pressure, prompted this wider investigation. I am convinced that we have a very serious sustainable development challenge around our towns and cities, where there is a continuing push outward into the low-density "peri-urban areas" at their perimeters. The tensions being created by this spread are not simply about the process of subdivision, or the way people are occupying the land in greater numbers. They are also about the way in which the pattern of development is being allowed to happen in these environments. In the Waitakere Ranges, Wakatipu Basin and Banks Peninsula, we have natural heritage characteristics that are being valued by New Zealanders (and our international visitors) as "cathedrals". We are increasingly ascribing to the shape, form, textures and colours of these lands the values that older civilisations ascribe to built heritage. We wish these features to be sustained in perpetuity – not in a simple preservation sense, since we are dealing with a peopled landscape, but in the sense of sustainable development.

This aspiration – if it is correctly characterised – is an increasingly tough challenge. My analysis in this report reveals that while our current planning processes under the RMA and other legislation appear to be providing the outcomes some communities desire, results are variable. There are major differences in the way processes are being implemented and there are gaps in our legislative frameworks and the capabilities within our community. These gaps include a general weakness in community and local government capacity to develop and sustain long-term consensus on just what is valued in these peri-urban lands. The reasons for this are complex, but the short electoral cycle, the lack of experience of a variety of participants and the paucity of resource information are all contributors.

What I hope this study does is encourage us all to think very hard about the strengths and weaknesses of our current planning processes under the RMA and other legislation, such as the LGA. They have the potential to deliver more to communities, but there may be some fundamental weaknesses in terms of their capacity to address cumulative effects.

In seeking to move forward I have made only one recommendation to the Minister for the Environment: – “To undertake a substantive review of experience to date in preparing the first generation of RMA plans”. There is a five-year window of opportunity to do this, and I believe it is one way of standing back and looking at whether the current planning processes are delivering what New Zealanders want in the long term. I encourage all those with an interest in the evolution of our peri-urban lands to sponsor and contribute to such a review.



Dr J Morgan Williams

Parliamentary Commissioner for the Environment



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

What is this investigation about?

In July 2000 the Parliamentary Commissioner for the Environment reported on an enquiry (PCE, 2000) into a series of issues arising from actions taken by the Waitakere City Council to implement the Resource Management Act 1991 with respect to the subdivision of land in the Waitakere Ranges.

The enquiry indicated that the environmental planning and management systems for ensuring the sustainable development of peri-urban areas with significant natural heritage, landscape and cultural heritage values were perceived by parts of the community to be inadequate. This raised the possibility that the current environmental planning and management systems may not be effective in avoiding the loss of these values. As a result, it was decided to carry out a more detailed investigation to see whether the issues highlighted by the Waitakere Ranges investigation applied in peri-urban areas generally.

In accordance with sections 16(1)(a) and (b) of the Environment Act 1986, the purpose of this investigation was to review the adequacy of the system of agencies and processes established by the Government, and the effectiveness of environmental planning and management carried out by public authorities to promote the sustainable development of peri-urban areas.

What are peri-urban areas?

In the context of this investigation, the term “peri-urban” is used to describe areas that are in some form of transition from strictly rural to urban. These areas often form the immediate urban:rural interface, and may eventually evolve into being fully urban. Peri-urban areas are places where people are key components – they are lived-in environments. The majority are on the fringe of established urban areas, but they may also be clusters of rural residential development within rural landscapes.

This investigation has chosen to focus on peri-urban areas that have significant ecological, biodiversity, landform, natural character, landscape and/or cultural heritage values because the significance of the values intensifies the pressures on these areas, thereby illuminating the issues more clearly. Six case studies are included: the Wakatipu Basin, Queenstown; Waiheke Island, Auckland; the Waitakere Ranges, Waitakere City; Long Bay-Okura, North Shore City; Banks Peninsula, Canterbury; and the Pauatahanui Inlet and catchment, Porirua.

Sustainable development

This investigation has reviewed the effectiveness of environmental planning and management carried out by public authorities in terms of its capacity to promote the *sustainable development* of peri-urban areas. This is a deliberate choice consistent with the Parliamentary Commissioner for the Environment’s ongoing overall focus on adding value to environmental management and advancing ecological sustainability in New Zealand. In this report, sustainable development is acknowledged as a process of evolutionary improvement rather than a defined state.

How effective is the environmental management and planning of peri-urban areas?

The environmental management and planning framework surrounding peri-urban areas is complex. There are a number of agencies with a varied range of functions involved in their management, and they employ a range of statutory and non-statutory instruments to promote the sustainable development of peri-urban areas. This investigation highlights this variety of approaches to environmental planning and management.

The effectiveness of the planning processes evaluated in the case studies varied considerably. Effectiveness tended to relate to the quality and quantity of the inputs: inadequate inputs led to inadequate outputs while adequate inputs *sometimes* led to acceptable outputs. In all cases the long-term environmental outcomes are at best unclear or problematic, and at worst very probably poor.

The investigation highlights a range of issues that seem to be compromising the effectiveness of the environmental planning and management processes.

- There is a limited capacity of the planning processes to identify and manage tensions and conflicts. The communities living in peri-urban areas are diverse and hold a divergent range of opinions. Debate over the nature and extent of property rights is a significant tension.
- Local and regional communities feel there has been poor leadership from national agencies on how to manage these areas.
- Local vision and leadership has at times been inconsistent, subject to re-litigation and lacking in long-term consensus.
- Institutional capacity to promote the sustainable development of the peri-urban areas, both intellectual and financial, is variable.
- There is a tendency to rely on the RMA (district plans) as the primary tool for managing the sustainability of peri-urban areas. However, some councils are effectively using other tools to influence environmental outcomes in peri-urban areas, such as acquisition of reserves and walkways, information, and guidelines for best practice.
- Accountability in the system is weak: the checks and balances when an agency is not carrying out its statutory responsibilities adequately are limited and not often activated. It is often left to community groups who are poorly resourced to carry out this function.
- Baseline resource information is not particularly good, even in the best resourced councils.
- Tangata whenua do not feature strongly in the debates around the future development of peri-urban areas.
- Capability to define and manage cumulative effects is critical but variable and the tools to do so are weak.
- Monitoring of implementation and environmental outcomes is not particularly good.

Where to from here?

The investigation has thrown up far more troubling questions than answers. It is clear that planning for the sustainable development of peri-urban areas is complex and approaches vary considerably around New Zealand. It is less clear which of these various approaches, if any, will lead to more sustainable development and retain the characteristics and 'sense of place' valued by the community while allowing some development to occur.

Evidence from this investigation suggests there is reason to be concerned that the current system of environmental management and planning may not be capable of promoting the sustainable development of peri-urban areas. However, given the number of questions thrown up by the investigation, we considered it inappropriate to be offering solutions at this stage. Instead, we considered it would be more useful to identify key questions, and thereby stimulate debate around a range of possible solutions and set an agenda for on going dialogue.

Finally, this report makes a recommendation to the Minister for the Environment *to undertake a substantive review of experience to date in preparing the first generation of plans prepared under the RMA*. The purpose of this review would be to ensure that lessons learned are available for the preparation of the next generation of plans. As a result, the implementation of the RMA could be expected to improve, leading to improved environment outcomes. A review should also identify the full range of factors affecting implementation of the RMA and identify solutions. It should address the questions raised by this investigation because they are relevant to the whole spectrum of environmental management, not just peri-urban areas.



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