

Mike's Blog February 26

## **Beds for the season: why RMA planning reform matters for RSE and worker accommodation**

If you grow fruit, vegetables or grapes in New Zealand, you already know the awkward truth: the hard part isn't always finding workers: it's finding decent accommodation for them. Not only do you have to meet Immigration New Zealand's accommodation standards, but you also then have to run the obstacle course of getting the right consents through your local council.

The Government is proposing to replace the Resource Management Act 1991 (RMA) with two new laws: the Planning Bill and the Natural Environment Bill. The practical question is simple: **will this make it easier to build up-to-standard worker accommodation with less uncertainty, less delay and less cost without lowering the bar on real environmental outcomes?**

### The current RMA system: uncertainty and delay are the killers

In the current RMA system, uncertainty, complexity, cost and delay are the killers. For seasonal industries, timing is everything: you can't "catch up later" if your accommodation isn't ready when harvest starts.

And that's the real-world problem with how the RMA plays out: it slows down worker accommodation and plenty of other productivity-enabling projects too. Yes, the direct cost of consenting hurts, but the bigger cost is often the delay. Every extra month waiting is a month of carrying risk, burning cash and pushing decisions out. Under current settings, it can genuinely take years to get your consent and that drags on productivity and economic momentum.

### What the RMA reform is trying to do

The bills are intended to reduce unnecessary consents, increase consistency across councils, create clearer rule frameworks, and use data/technology to improve speed and consistency while safeguarding the natural environment and human health. From a worker-accommodation viewpoint, there are some potentially good signals:

- Fewer consents where effects are genuinely minor and more focus on the effects that actually matter wastewater, stormwater, traffic, noise and hazards.
- More consistency between councils, so you're not relearning individual Council's different rules every time you cross a boundary.
- Clearer rule frameworks, so earlier decisions narrow what can be argued later: less "re-litigate it at every step".
- A simpler, more predictable system, which is exactly what investment needs.

If the reforms genuinely deliver more certainty and less process drag, that's a big deal not only for horticulture and wine, but for New Zealand.

### But here's the rub: councils are the choke point

Even a better law won't help if councils keep running consenting like an obstacle course where the default posture is "prove why you deserve it" instead of "help manage effects and get to yes". The biggest day-to-day failures I see aren't about high-level principles. They're operational:

- Poor pre-application guidance or guidance that changes midstream.
- Inconsistent interpretation inside the same council.

- Request for information being drip-fed: death by a thousand follow-up questions.
- Timelines that look tidy on paper but aren't actively managed in reality.
- Process that quietly shifts risk and conflict management onto the applicant.

For worker accommodation and plenty of other consents, councils also need to stop treating “affected party management” as someone else’s problem. This isn’t about *who* is involved: it’s about how the process is designed and managed. Whether it’s neighbours, mana whenua, infrastructure providers or other affected parties, the same issue keeps showing up: applicants are too often told to go and “herd cats” with no clear pathway, no clear timeframes, and no consistent expectations.

This increases risk for everyone applicants, councils and affected parties, because late-stage surprises are exactly what cause blow-outs. If these reforms are serious about certainty, they should drive a council model where:

- engagement steps are clear, front-loaded and led by the council;
- information requirements are proportionate and consistent;
- timeframes are real; and
- councils actively manage the process.

This is not a debate about identity or politics. It’s basic system design: predictable process, early engagement and fewer ambushes at the end. Anything that genuinely reduces complexity, delay and cost while still managing real environmental effects is worth supporting. But if we don’t address the practical reality of council culture, capability and process management, we’ll keep getting the same outcomes under a different label: uncertainty, delay and investment that never happens.

#### Submission deadline

Submissions on the Planning Bill and Natural Environment Bill close 4.30pm Friday, 13 February 2026 (NZ time). Email: [En.Legislation@parliament.govt.nz](mailto:En.Legislation@parliament.govt.nz)