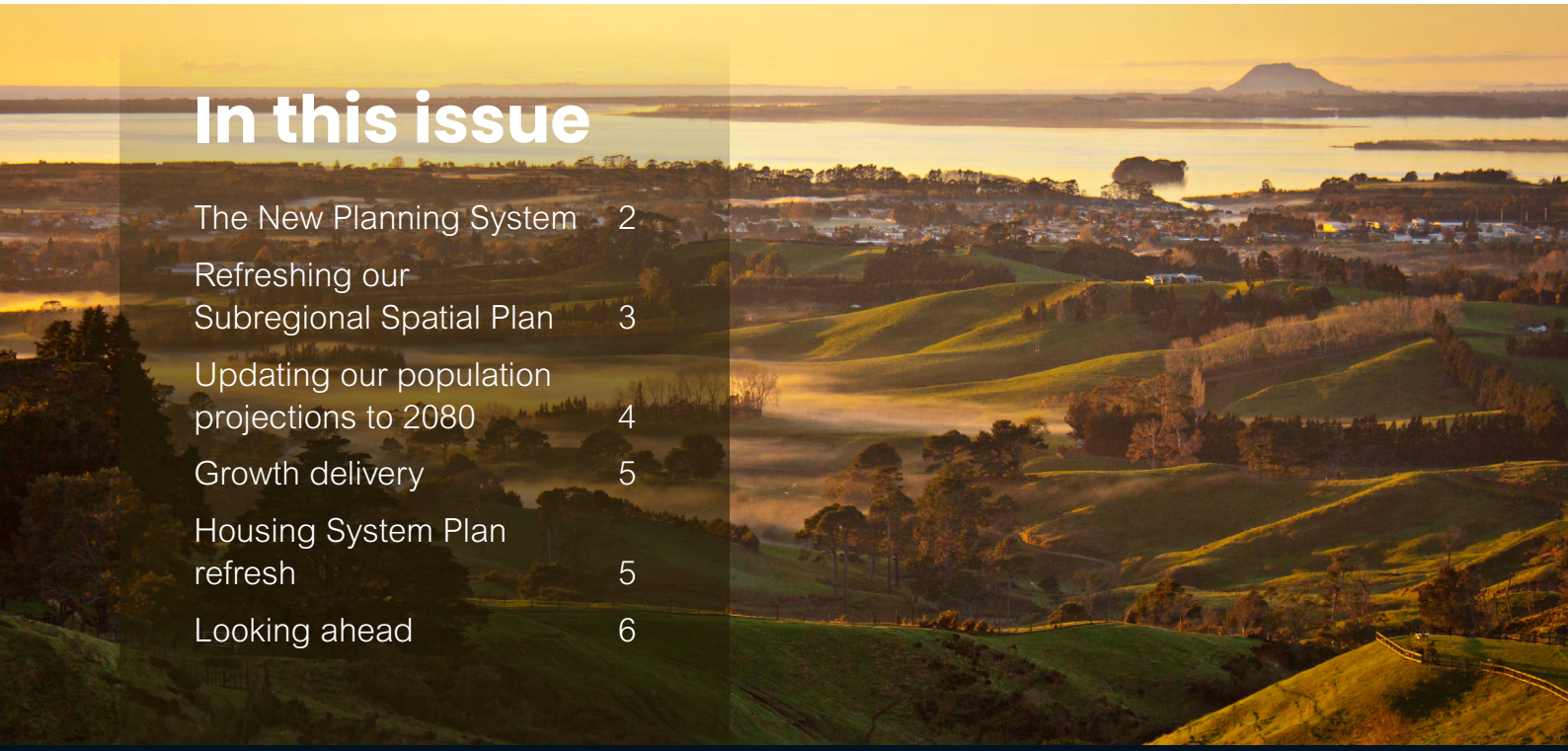
SmartGrowth
Building our futures together

Update October 2026

SmartGrowth is entering an important new phase as the planning system changes and work begins to prepare for the first Bay of Plenty Regional Spatial Plan.

For the western Bay of Plenty, this is not about starting again. The SmartGrowth Strategy 2024–2074 and Future Development Strategy already provide a strong long-term framework for how and where the subregion grows. The task now is to refresh the framework where it is needed, strengthen the evidence base behind it, and ensure the western Bay of Plenty is well positioned within the future regional planning system.

At our September meeting and workshop, the SmartGrowth Leadership Group considered a range of work that will contribute to this next phase. This included preparing for the new planning system, emerging national planning direction, updated population projections, future development opportunities, progress across our Priority Development Areas, and the allocation of housing between greenfield development and intensification.



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The New Planning System

New Zealand's Planning Act and Natural Environment Act became law in September 2026, establishing the framework for a significant change in how growth, infrastructure and the environment are planned and managed.

A key feature is the introduction of Regional Spatial Plans, which will provide a long-term framework for growth, development and infrastructure investment over at least 30 years. SmartGrowth is working with regional partners to prepare for the first Bay of Plenty Regional Spatial Plan.

In August, the Government released illustrative National Policy Direction to indicate how the new planning system could operate. Consultation on the illustrative direction has now closed, and the final National Policy Direction is expected in 2027.

Several proposed changes are particularly relevant to the western Bay of Plenty:

- **Abundant development opportunities:** A stronger emphasis on ensuring sufficient land and development capacity is available to support competitive urban land markets, housing choice and affordability.
- **More enabling planning provisions:** Greater flexibility for development, including privately initiated growth opportunities, and fewer unnecessary restrictions on where development can occur.
- **Infrastructure-led growth:** A stronger connection between development opportunities and the infrastructure required to support them, including infrastructure provided or funded by private interests.
- **Rural production:** Greater recognition of the importance of productive rural land and the need to provide for rural economic activities.

These proposals have significant implications for the western Bay of Plenty, where growth needs to be managed alongside infrastructure capacity, natural hazards, highly productive land, environmental and cultural values, and the costs of servicing new development.

A central challenge will be ensuring that the supply of development opportunities is sufficiently responsive while maintaining an efficient, affordable and well-integrated infrastructure network.

The final National Policy Direction and supporting standards will be important inputs to the refreshed SmartGrowth Subregional Spatial Plan and the Bay of Plenty Regional Spatial Plan.

Further information on the new planning system and emerging national direction is available at **planning.govt.nz**



Refreshing our Subregional Spatial Plan

SmartGrowth has begun work on refreshing the western Bay of Plenty Subregional Spatial Plan as an input to the future Bay of Plenty Regional Spatial Plan.

The proposed new planning system will require Regional Spatial Plans to provide a long-term plan for where growth, infrastructure and major development constraints are located, including priority areas for climate adaptation.

Much of this work already has a strong foundation in the SmartGrowth Strategy and Future Development Strategy. The refresh is therefore focused on filling the areas where more work is needed and updating areas where circumstances, evidence or national direction have changed.

Initial priorities include further work on:

- population and employment growth in the subregion
- development constraints, including natural hazard risks
- housing capacity, including growth in existing urban areas and greenfield growth, and the densities achieved in both
- development of whenua Māori, and protection of sites and areas of significance
- commercial centres and industrial land supply
- future infrastructure requirements, including energy, health and education
- climate adaptation priorities.

One strong focus will be on revisiting how SmartGrowth can support more intensive development across both existing urban areas and new growth areas. This is not a change in direction. A more compact urban form, with higher densities, greater housing choice and more efficient use of land and infrastructure, has long been central to the SmartGrowth approach.

The September workshop confirmed that intensification should remain a key focus. Members supported further work on the opportunities, incentives and policy tools needed to increase the proportion of growth delivered through intensification, while also ensuring that new greenfield areas achieve appropriate urban densities and are supported by the transport, schools, healthcare and other infrastructure needed to make them successful.

In parallel, regional partners are putting in place the programme, responsibilities and resources needed to deliver the Regional Spatial Plan, which will incorporate our refreshed subregional plan. The intention is to have these arrangements agreed, so that the main work can get underway from early 2027.

Our current programme anticipates the refreshed subregional spatial work being developed through 2027, ahead of the draft Regional Spatial Plan progressing through notification, hearings and decisions during 2028.

This is an important opportunity to build from the significant planning work already completed across the subregion while ensuring that future decisions about land use, infrastructure and investment remain well integrated.

Updating our population projections to 2080

A strong evidence base remains fundamental to good long-term planning.

SmartGrowth and other regional partners are now working with the University of Waikato's Te Ngira – Institute for Population Research to prepare updated population projections for the Bay of Plenty region through to 2080.

This follows an initial review of the Stats NZ 2023-base projections, prompted by a significant increase in projected long-term growth for the region and particularly the SmartGrowth area. The review highlighted the very significant implications that different population assumptions can have for housing demand, infrastructure investment, growth sequencing, and long-term planning.

The work will provide updated regional and subregional population projections, supported by detailed analysis of the factors driving growth. While future national direction may prescribe targets to achieve an abundant housing land supply, councils, infrastructure providers and developers will also require a robust best estimate of future population growth for spatial planning, transport, infrastructure and related investment decisions.

The results scheduled to be considered by the SmartGrowth Leadership Group in December.

Read the initial Population Projections Review here



Growth delivery

Alongside long-term planning, SmartGrowth continues to monitor delivery across its Priority Development Areas and other significant growth projects.

There has been tangible progress across a number of areas.

- At Tauriko West, the first subdivision consent within the growth area has been granted for 364 lots, while the SH29 enabling works and wider Tauriko Network Connections programme continue to progress.
- At Ōmokoroa, the upgrade of Ōmokoroa Road between Prole Road and the railway is expected to be completed in November, including road widening and new walking and cycling facilities.
- At Rangiuru, development of the Business Park is continuing, with infrastructure delivery and the future Te Puke wastewater treatment plant remaining important enablers of longer-term growth.

The Wairakei South Fast-track application also represents a significant potential addition to the eastern growth corridor, proposing approximately 2,729 homes together with industrial and commercial land over a 15–20 year development period. Wairakei South has progressed through the Fast-track process, with the substantive application lodged in May 2026 and deemed complete in June; it is now in the pre-panel stage, but with no confirmed expert panel decision timetable yet.

Across the wider programme, however, the same issues continue to recur: infrastructure capacity, funding and financing, transport connections, servicing and whether development is financially viable.

This reinforces why SmartGrowth needs to maintain a strong link between the long-term spatial plan and what can realistically be funded and delivered.

Housing System Plan refresh

SmartGrowth has refreshed its Housing System Plan for 2026–2029.

The Housing System Plan is an implementation programme designed to support the SmartGrowth Strategy's "Homes for Everyone" outcomes. It brings together actions across local and central government, tāngata whenua and housing-sector partners, with a focus on housing advocacy, evidence and monitoring, housing choice and affordability.

Initial priorities include engaging more effectively in the national Housing Investment Plan, developing an annual Subregional Housing Story, identifying and escalating barriers to housing delivery, promoting successful intensification and mixed-tenure development, supporting impact investment and strengthening Community Housing Provider capacity.

The Plan will be updated over time, and progress will be reported as part of the overall SmartGrowth work programme.



Read the Housing System Plan at a glance here

Looking ahead

The next few months will be important for SmartGrowth.

Further work will continue on the set up for the Subregional Spatial Plan refresh and SmartGrowth partners will continue to work through the implications of the new national planning system.

Further engagement with tāngata whenua, the development sector, infrastructure providers, central government agencies and the wider community will be an important part of the next phase. The detailed engagement programme is still being worked through, and by the next SmartGrowth update we expect to be able to provide a clearer picture of how and when our key stakeholders and the community will be involved.

Our objective remains the same: to provide a clear, evidence-based approach to where and how the western Bay of Plenty grows, with land use, infrastructure and investment decisions considered together.

Our next meeting is scheduled for 16 December 2026.

Ngā mihi maioha

Mayor James Denyer
Chair, SmartGrowth Leadership Group

Click here to read the latest ePānui from our tāngata whenua partners



SmartGrowth
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Find out more at **smartgrowthbop.org.nz**
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SmartGrowth is the urban growth partnership for the western Bay of Plenty – involving tāngata whenua, Bay of Plenty Regional Council, Tauranga City Council, Western Bay of Plenty District Council and central government agencies. The purpose of SmartGrowth is to take a collaborative and coordinated approach to managing and shaping growth within the western Bay of Plenty sub-region.