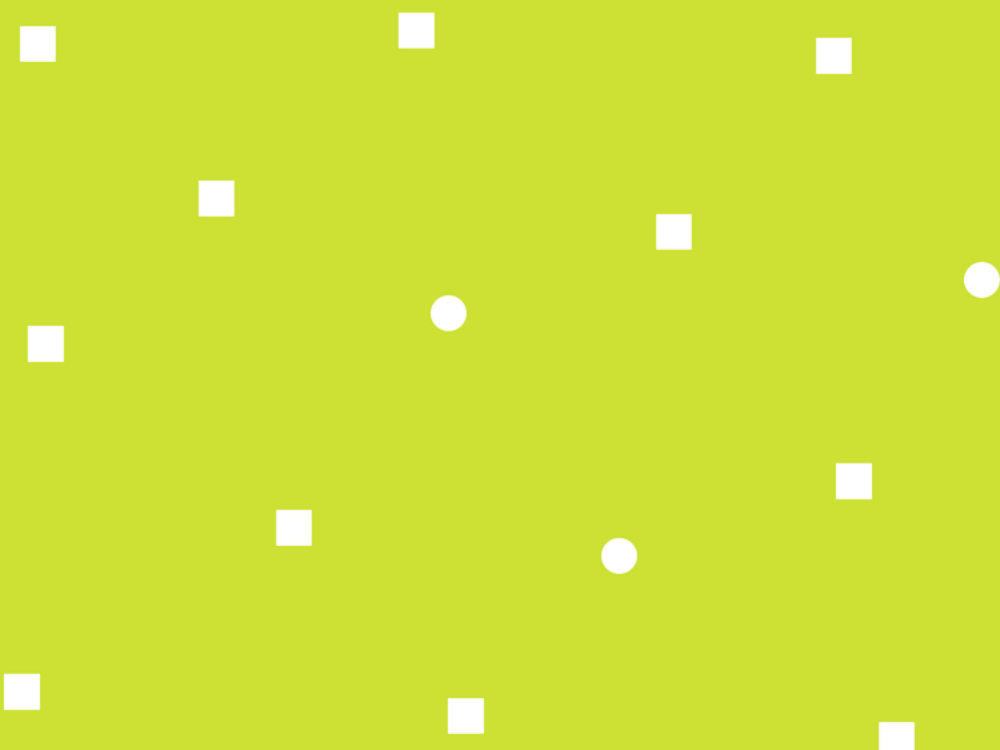




Making Spatial Decisions Count

Practical guidance for councils
and infrastructure providers

September 2026

Key Takeaways

Regional spatial plans will need to do more than describe a preferred future. They will need enough clarity and supporting evidence to guide the planning, investment and delivery decisions that follow.

- **Start with why.** Significant spatial directions should respond to an identified issue, opportunity or obligation, rather than simply an aspiration or preferred project.
- **Use evidence appropriate to the decision.** Not everything needs a business case, but there does need to be enough information to explain the scale, location, timing and consequence of an issue.
- **Draw on information already held by others.** Councils don't need to generate all of the evidence. Infrastructure providers, government agencies, mana whenua, airports, utilities, developers and others may already hold information that should inform the spatial plan.
- **Define the change before the solution.** Be clear about what needs to change and where, without unnecessarily locking in the eventual project, design or regulatory response.
- **Be clear about the outcome sought.** Explain what should improve and, where reasonably possible, how that improvement could be measured.
- **Make uncertainty useful.** Where something isn't yet known, identify what needs to be resolved, why, by whom and what future decision it will inform.

The practical implication is that better spatial plans start with better definition of the issues they are trying to address, not with the map.



Why this approach

Spatial plans need to explain the why

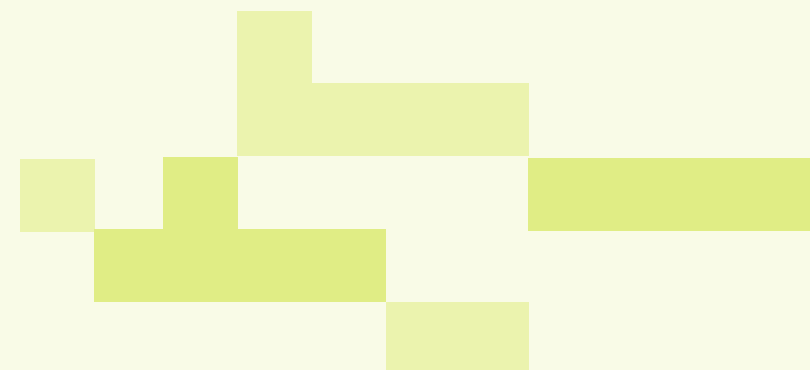
Vision statements and outcomes remain important. They establish what a region or place is seeking to achieve. What they don't necessarily establish is why a particular spatial response is justified, or why one location, sequence or direction should be preferred over another.

That becomes more important as Regional Spatial Plans take a stronger role in shaping growth, infrastructure, constraints, sequencing and the decisions that follow. There needs to be a clearer bridge between what we want to achieve and why a particular spatial response is appropriate.

This applies to more than councils. Infrastructure providers, regulatory authorities, airports, utilities, government agencies, mana whenua and major landowners may all hold information about future pressures, opportunities or requirements that should inform a spatial plan. Their contribution should help establish why the matter needs to be recognised and what supports that conclusion, rather than simply identifying something they want shown on the map.

Key point

A map should be the expression of a spatial decision, not the starting point for one.



Start with the what, where, when & why

Before identifying a spatial response, establish the issue, opportunity or obligation that requires one.

A strong starting point should answer four questions:

— **What is happening?**

What growth pressure, infrastructure issue, environmental condition, economic opportunity, risk or other change needs to be addressed?

— **How significant is it?**

Can its scale be described through demand, capacity, population, cost, productivity, environmental condition, risk or another meaningful measure?

— **Where and when does it occur?**

What area is affected and when is the issue likely to become material?

— **What happens if nothing changes?**

What opportunity is lost, constraint reached, cost incurred or outcome compromised?

This doesn't require exhaustive analysis. It requires enough information to establish why the matter warrants a spatial response and roughly how significant that response may need to be.

Key point

If the issue can't be reasonably bounded or described, it is difficult to know whether the proposed response is proportionate.

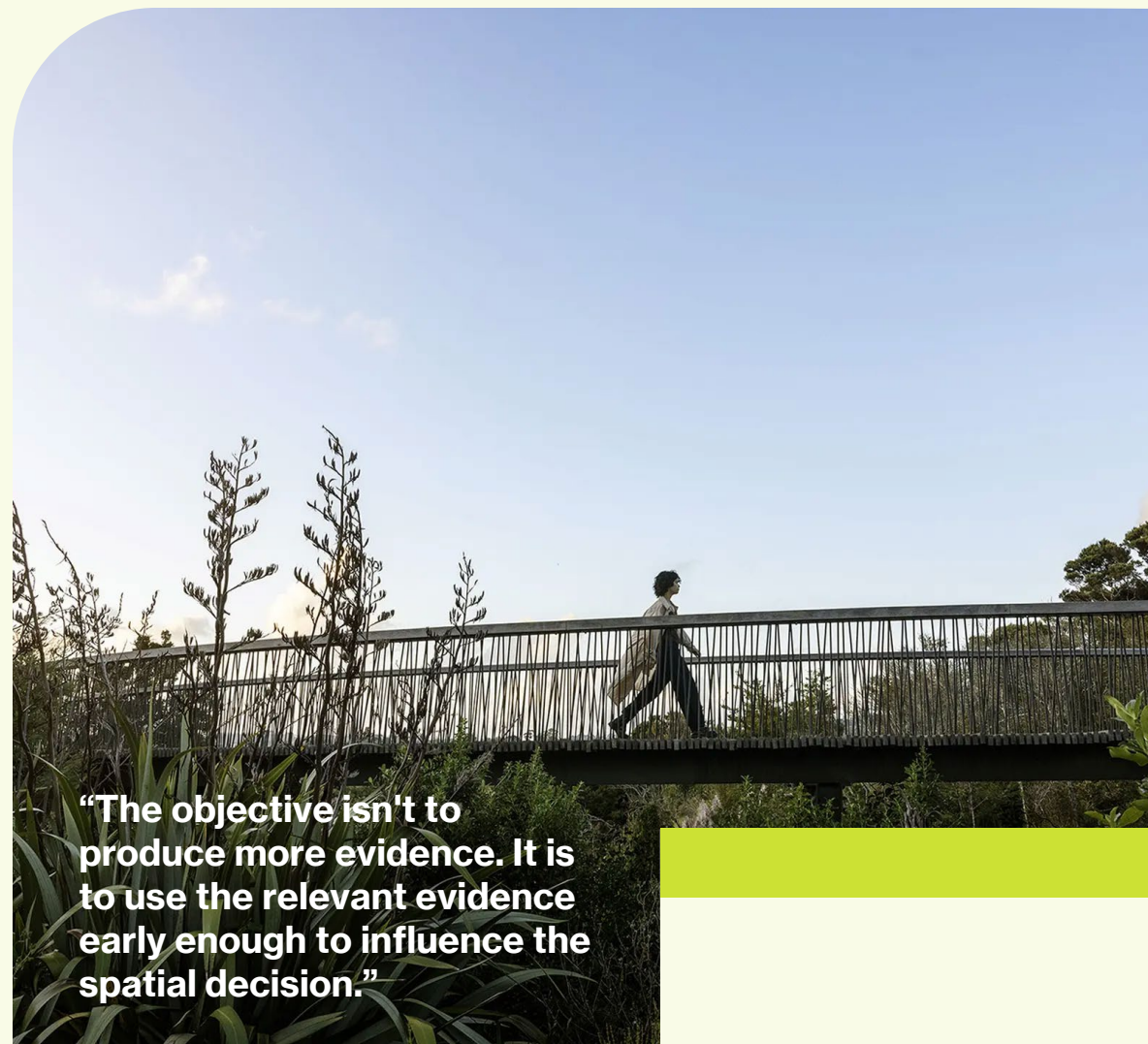
Use the evidence already available

Councils won't hold all of the information needed to make every spatial decision, nor should they need to.

Relevant evidence may already sit within infrastructure investment cases, network and asset plans, transport modelling, airport or port masterplans, housing and economic assessments, natural hazard information, mana whenua strategies, health and education planning, private development investigations or central government programmes.

The spatial planning process should bring the relevant information together and understand what it means spatially. Where different evidence or objectives point in different directions, those tensions should be identified and worked through rather than hidden within a high-level statement.

The amount of information required will vary. A broad long-term direction may reasonably rely on higher-level evidence. A decision that protects land, establishes a major growth area or materially affects future infrastructure investment will generally require more.



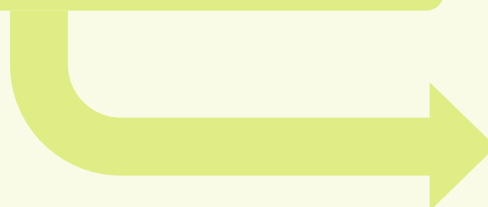
“The objective isn't to produce more evidence. It is to use the relevant evidence early enough to influence the spatial decision.”

Define the change before the solution

Spatial plans operate upstream of many project, investment and regulatory decisions. They need to be clear about what needs to change, where and by when, without unnecessarily determining the eventual solution.

Too specific too early

Build a new four-lane bridge between A and B by 2045.



A more appropriate spatial response

Forecast demand is expected to exceed existing cross-city network capacity between A and B around 2045, constraining access between major growth and employment areas. Additional strategic cross-city capacity will therefore be required before this threshold is reached. The spatial plan should identify the strategic connection and protect the ability to respond, with the preferred intervention determined through subsequent transport and investment analysis.

The second option – the more appropriate approach, establishes the need, location, timing and required outcome while leaving the eventual intervention to the process designed to determine it.

This is important. Once a specific project is embedded in a strategic plan it can become difficult to distinguish between the need that has been established and a solution that may not yet have been properly tested.

“Be specific about the need. Be only as specific about the solution as the evidence reasonably supports.”



What belongs in the spatial plan?

Not everything needs to be in the spatial plan. Regional Spatial Plans need to remain strategic. Adding more information does not necessarily make a better plan. Before elevating a matter into the spatial plan, test whether it is:

Strategically significant

Will it materially influence the future form or performance of the region or sub-region?

Consequential

Would acting, or failing to act, have meaningful economic, environmental, social, cultural or infrastructure consequences?

Connected

Does it affect land use, infrastructure, investment, environmental management or decisions made by others?

Spatial

Does location, geography or its relationship with other activities affect the decision?

Decision-relevant

Can the spatial plan establish a useful priority, trade-off, area of change, constraint, future opportunity or sequence?

At the right level

Can strategic direction be established now while leaving detailed design, funding and project decisions to the appropriate later process?

From spatial direction to action

Be clear about what happens next. A spatial plan doesn't need to resolve every issue or determine every project. It should, however, provide a clear enough pathway for the decisions that follow.

For significant spatial directions, it should be possible to understand:

- **the outcome sought** and what should improve;
- **the timing or trigger** for further action;
- **key dependencies**, including infrastructure, funding or further evidence;
- **the next decision** that still needs to be made; and
- **who is best placed to carry that work forward.**

This also provides a more useful way of dealing with uncertainty.

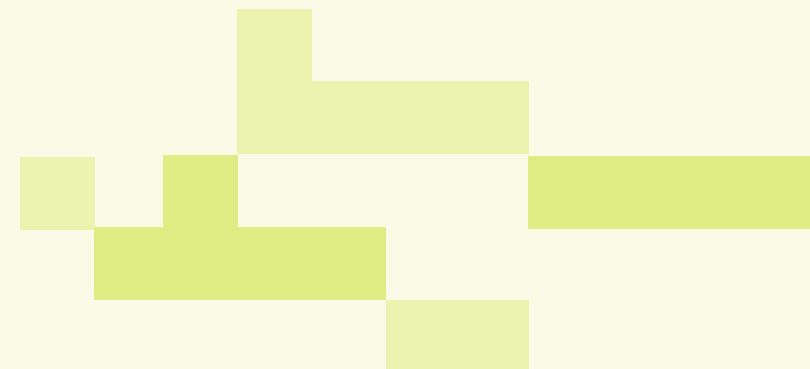
Rather than:

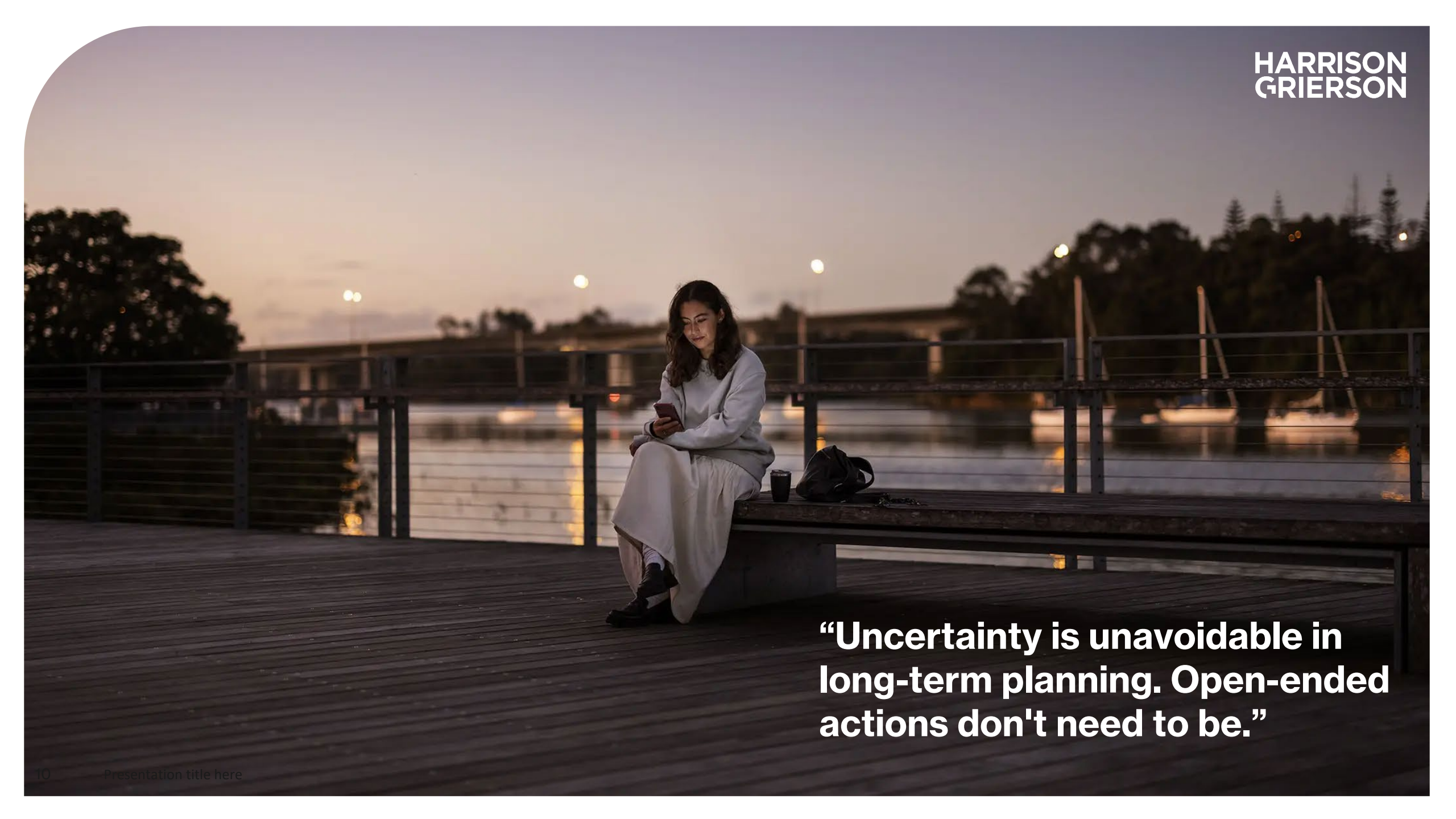
- **Investigate additional transport capacity.**

a more useful direction would be:

- **Current modelling indicates the corridor may reach practical capacity between 2040 and 2045.** Confirm the scale and timing of additional capacity through the next regional transport programme so that any necessary corridor protection can be determined before 2032.

The issue remains unresolved, which is reasonable at this stage, but the question to be resolved and the decision it needs to inform are clear.



A woman with long dark hair, wearing a light-colored long-sleeved top and a long skirt, is sitting on a wooden bench. She is looking down at a smartphone in her hands. The bench is situated on a wooden deck overlooking a body of water. In the background, there are trees, a bridge, and some lights reflecting on the water. The sky is a mix of purple and blue, suggesting dusk or dawn. A black bag and a cup are on the bench next to her.

“Uncertainty is unavoidable in long-term planning. Open-ended actions don't need to be.”

A simple spatial decision test

1

Why

Can you clearly explain the issue, opportunity or obligation requiring a spatial response?

2

Evidence

Do you understand its scale, location, timing and consequence well enough for the decision being made?

3

Change

Have you defined what needs to change without prematurely selecting the eventual solution?

4

Location

Is it clear where the response applies and why that geography matters?

5

Outcome

Can you explain what should improve and how we will know whether the direction is working?

6

Next Step

Are the timing, dependencies, responsible parties and next decision sufficiently clear?

If these questions are difficult to answer, the issue probably needs more development before it becomes a substantive spatial direction.

What does this all mean?

The emerging planning system is placing greater weight on spatial plans as a basis for subsequent land-use, infrastructure, investment and implementation decisions. That doesn't mean Regional Spatial Plans should become large business cases or seek to resolve matters that properly belong later.

The level of information needs to be appropriate to the decision being made.

- **For councils**, this means being clearer about why significant spatial directions are proposed and drawing more deliberately on information held by others.
- **For infrastructure providers**, airports, utilities, government agencies and other organisations, it means moving beyond identifying projects or future aspirations and instead explaining the underlying issue or opportunity, its spatial implications and the evidence supporting it.

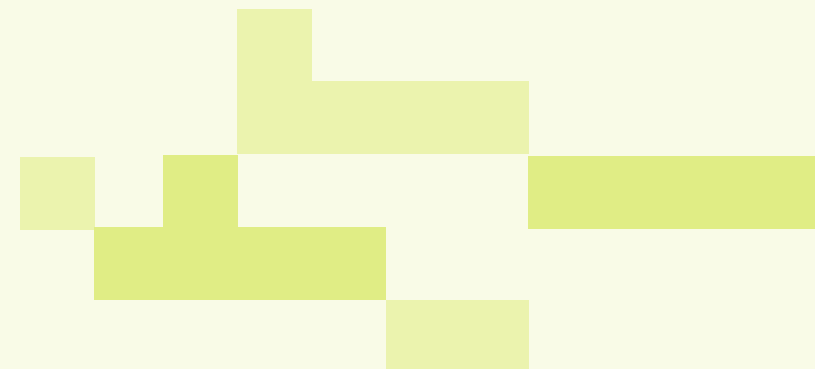
Where the need, location, timing and intended outcome have already been reasonably established, the planning and investment decisions that follow start from a much stronger position.

Bottom Line

A spatial plan shouldn't simply show where we want things to happen.

It should provide enough information to explain why change is needed, where it matters, what response is required and what that response is intended to achieve.

Enough information to establish clear spatial direction, without trying to make decisions that properly belong later.



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