



April 2024

Local Water Done Well: Information for councils

This document provides an overview of policy decisions that will be reflected in the proposed Local Government Water Services (Transitional Provisions) Bill, which will soon be considered for introduction to Parliament. It also contains information on other transitional matters that may be of interest to councils.

It is based on Cabinet decisions announced by the Minister of Local Government in April 2024.

Introduction

Measures to be introduced through new legislation in mid-2024 will establish the Local Water Done Well framework and the transitional arrangements for the new water services system.

The measures include requirements for councils to develop Water Services Delivery Plans, steps towards future economic regulation, and streamlined processes for setting up water services council-controlled organisations (water services CCOs).

Water Services Delivery Plans

What are they?

The overarching purpose of the Plans is for councils – individually or jointly – to publicly demonstrate their intention and commitment to deliver water services in ways that are financially sustainable, meet regulatory quality standards for water network infrastructure and water quality, and unlock housing growth.

What do they mean for councils?

Through the development of these Plans, councils will provide an assessment of their water infrastructure, how much they need to invest, and how they plan to finance and deliver it through their preferred service delivery model.

Ringfencing of water services and revenue from other council activities is a key feature of the Plans.

The Plans will be a way for councils to provide transparency to their communities about the costs and financing of water services, and empower them to make decisions about managing and delivering high-quality water services that reflect their local needs and circumstances.

The Plans can also be prepared jointly, and so provide an opportunity for councils to have conversations with other councils about joint arrangements for water services delivery.

What information do they need to cover?

The Plans cover information across three key areas:

1. Financial and asset information	Information about each council’s financial and asset information and performance measures, pricing and other related policies, methodologies, and assumptions
2. Investment required	Planned levels of investment, approach to operations, and whether these are sufficient to deliver proposed level of service, meet infrastructure standards and meet regulatory standards
3. Service delivery arrangements	Councils’ proposed service delivery arrangements – including proposals for joint arrangements, across more than one council

To demonstrate financial sustainability, councils will have to show what needs to be invested to deliver water services to regulated standards and to provide for growth. They will also have to show how they will fund and finance long-term investment in water infrastructure, including renewals and operating costs.

What is the process and timeline for producing a Plan?

Activity	Indicative timing / milestone
DIA releases Plan guidance Councils formally begin development of Plans	Mid-2024 Local Government Water Services (Transitional Provisions) Bill enacted
DIA/council check-in Councils identify contact point(s), whether they will be submitting an individual or joint Plan, whether they need technical support	+ 3 months (following Bill enactment)
DIA/council check-in(s) to monitor progress	+ 6-9 months (following Bill enactment)
Councils submit final Plan to DIA	Within 12 months (of Bill enactment)
DIA accepts the Plan meets statutory requirements or refers back to council for further work	Following submission of Plan
Council publishes Plan on council website	Once Plan is accepted by DIA

What happens if council(s) don’t submit a Plan?

There will be a series of check-ins by the Department of Internal Affairs throughout the Plan development process to ensure councils are on track in preparing and submitting an acceptable plan. There will be guidance and some ‘light touch’ technical support provided by DIA.

During the Plan preparation process, councils may request, and the Minister of Local Government will be able to appoint, a Crown Facilitator who could provide additional assistance (at councils’ expense). For example, the Crown Facilitator could assist and advise a council on how to prepare a Plan, or work across a group of councils to facilitate or negotiate a joint Plan (including providing an arbitration role if requested and agreed by councils).

If a council fails to submit a plan by the statutory deadline, the Minister of Local Government will be able to appoint someone to prepare a Plan on that council's behalf, and (if necessary) to direct the council to adopt and submit this Plan (a 'regulatory backstop' power). Again, any expenses associated with this appointee and the preparation of the Plan would be covered by the council.

Key information



Plans are one-off, transitional documents, to set a pathway forward to sustainability.



Plans can be developed by individual councils, or jointly where groups of councils are planning to jointly establish a water organisation.



Plans must include drinking water, wastewater and stormwater – but councils have flexibility about transferring stormwater in proposed new service delivery arrangements.



It will be up to councils to determine how best to engage with their communities as part of the Plan development process.



Plans have no regulatory function – LTPs continue to be councils' primary planning and accountability document.



Plans cover a 10-year timeframe, with detailed information provided on the first three years.

Steps towards future economic regulation

Economic regulation is a key feature of Local Water Done Well. It is intended to ensure consumers pay efficient, cost-reflective prices for water services, that those services are delivered to an acceptable quality, and that water services providers are investing sufficiently in their infrastructure.

Development of an economic regulation system for water services will be led by the Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment. Relevant provisions would be included in the third Local Water Done Well Bill (to be passed in mid-2025), and implemented by the Commerce Commission after that point.

Through the Water Service Delivery Plans, councils will be asked to provide baseline information about their water services operations, assets, revenue, expenditure, pricing, and projected capital expenditure, as well as necessary financing arrangements.

This is not a regulatory information gathering exercise, but is a useful first step to build the capability of councils and prepare the Commerce Commission ahead of the full economic regulation regime being introduced from the middle of next year.

All councils that have water service delivery responsibilities (either directly or through existing council-controlled organisations) will be subject to these requirements. As well as the Plans being published, information collected through them will be shared with the Commerce Commission, to help them with the development of the future regulatory regime.

The Bill will also provide for some councils to be subject to an early form of information disclosure by the Commerce Commission, prior to the full economic regulation regime.

This will build on the information collected through the Plans, and is intended to be for councils that have more advanced asset/financial management practices, or those that moved quickly to establish new organisations and are ready for a faster track toward more detailed oversight.

Streamlined processes for establishing council-controlled organisations

Under Local Water Done Well, a range of structural and financing tools will be available to councils to use for water services including a new class of financially independent council-owned organisations.

These options will be included in the third Local Water Done Well Bill, with policy decisions expected to be announced in mid-2024. This Bill is expected to be introduced in December 2024, and passed in mid-2025.

However, it is recognised that some councils may want to move quickly to start shifting the delivery of water services into more financially sustainable models. The Local Government Water Services (Transitional Provisions) Bill will include provisions that help streamline the process for establishing water services CCOs, as currently provided for under the Local Government Act 2002.

The Bill will contain a bespoke set of consultation and decision-making arrangements that will enable councils to streamline this process, while continuing to provide the opportunity for community input. These streamlined arrangements are voluntary for councils to choose to use, as an alternative to some of the standard requirements in the Local Government Act.

The arrangements include provisions that:

- Clarify that councils can set up joint committees that can consult on a proposal across multiple districts (instead of each council carrying out separate consultation), and to make recommendations to participating councils
- Set minimum consultation and information requirements – so one round of consultation is required, and information only needs to be provided on the analysis of two options (status quo + preferred option)
- Enable councils to consider the collective benefits/impacts of a proposal (across multiple districts), in addition to the interests of their individual districts – and to factor in the view of other participating councils.

Current Better Off and Transition Support funding arrangements will be retained

Cabinet has agreed to retain existing funding arrangements under the previous Government's water reform programme, and has asked the Department of Internal Affairs to work with councils and Iwi Collectives to align these to Local Water Done Well.

This includes:

- Retaining current Better Off funding for all councils, but for the Department of Internal Affairs to work with councils to identify opportunities to redirect unspent Better Off funding to increase investment in water infrastructure or to help establish new water services delivery organisations.
- Retaining current Council Transition Support funding to enable councils to use this funding for work relating to Local Water Done Well, including supporting the establishment of new water services delivery organisations, or other planning work to support the transition to Local Water Done Well.

The Department of Internal Affairs will work with councils on any changes to current contractual arrangements to reflect decisions in relation to aligning funding to LWDW.

The Department of Internal Affairs will follow up with individual councils to provide further details.

Next steps

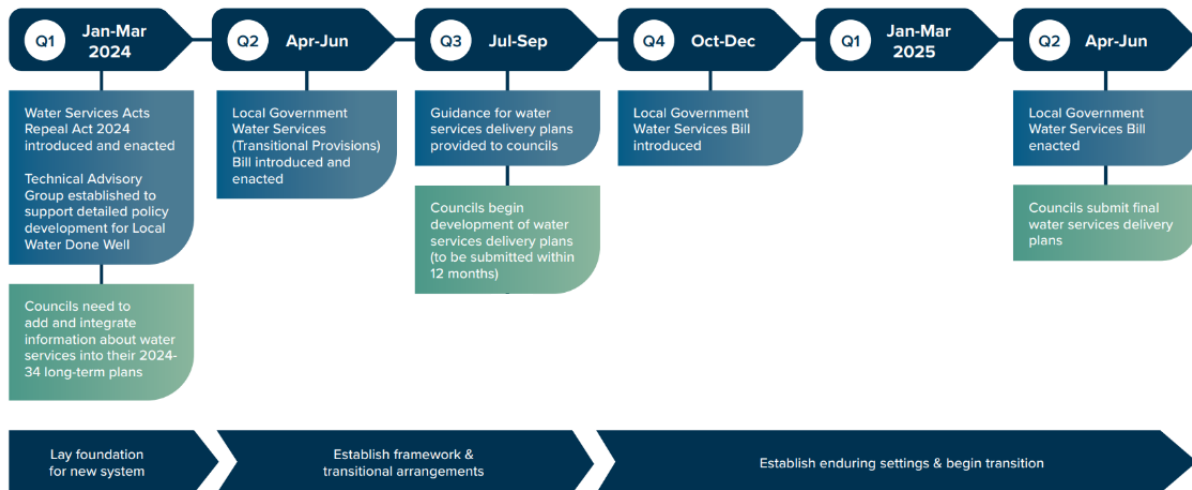
The Government will provide details in mid-2024 on the broader range of structural and financing tools, including through the New Zealand Local Government Funding Agency (LGFA), which will be available to councils to ensure they can access the long-term debt required for investment in water services infrastructure. These tools will be implemented through further legislation that will establish the enduring settings for the new system.

Policy areas to be included in further legislation include:

- Setting long-term requirements for financial sustainability
- Providing for a range of structural and financing tools, including a new class of financially independent council organisations
- Planning, accountability and reporting frameworks for water services
- Considering the empowering legislation for Taumata Arowai to ensure the regulatory regime is efficient, effective, and fit-for-purpose, and standards are proportionate for different types of drinking water suppliers
- Providing for a complete economic regulation regime
- Considering additional Ministerial powers of assistance and intervention in relation to water services, and regulatory powers to ensure effective delivery of financially sustainable water services.

Indicative timeline

The below timeline provides an indicative outline of policy, legislation and related council activity. It is subject to parliamentary processes and timetables.



Further information

Once the proposed Local Government Water Services (Transitional Provisions) Bill has been introduced to Parliament, it will be available at www.legislation.govt.nz.

For further information about Local Water Done Well, visit www.dia.govt.nz/Water-Services-Policy-and-Legislation

Questions? Contact waterservices@dia.govt.nz