



More strategy needed, the Auditor-General says. Photo: Lynn Grieveson



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INFRASTRUCTURE

Inside NZ's water management mess

A major report by the Auditor-General on how councils manage drinking, storm and waste waters found an incoherent, disorganised and stagnant system unprepared for climate change

Auditor-General John Ryan found so much lacking in our water management systems he chose to start his final report on it by listing the things he didn't find:

"Given the significance of water issues, we expected to find: clear national strategies...coherent work programmes...robust systems...resourcing, planning, and strategic risk management...and strong engagement models with communities of interest and, in particular, Māori." Ryan wrote.

"We found that, although much good work is being done, all of these elements were not in place."

Ryan said New Zealand didn't have enough data about its water assets and had different organisations in charge of water with competing interests. Councils were ill-prepared for climate change with few having taken note of it in their long-term plans.

Ryan pointed to a major marine spatial plan for the [Hauraki Gulf](#) that stalled in the implementation phase.

An extensive consultation process meant a consensus was formed around it, but accompanying that consensus were 180 interrelated recommended actions.

Consultation had been done with stakeholders, but the agencies implementing the process had not been involved, the OAG report said.

"There needed to be a balance between giving the stakeholder-led collaborative group enough independence and the right amount of involvement from the agencies, which might be responsible for large parts of the implementation."



Councils have a 'limited' understanding of the state of their own assets, the report says. Photo: Lynn Grieveson

Councils have 'limited understanding' of risks

Ryan also hit out at how unprepared councils were for water issues related to climate change. Many had planned for floods according to past flooding events and hadn't tried to predict how future floods could be different.

"Many councils assumed in their 2018-28 LTPs [long term plans] that, in the next 10 years, the effects of climate change will not significantly affect their communities and that there will be no major natural hazard events."

Data held by councils on the state of their own assets was also "limited", the report noted.

A spokesman for Local Government New Zealand acknowledged that councils were operating with "20th century policy tools which don't adequately recognise the 21st century risks we're facing."

"Councils have found themselves in a policy vacuum on the issue of climate change adaptation, and have been calling for central government guidance," the spokesman said.