Auckland's First Unitary Plan
Creativity, Innovation and Opportunity

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Introduction

The Proposed Auckland Unitary Plan (referenced as the Plan hereon) is the first unitary plan for Auckland and contains all the resource management plans required of unitary authorities (e.g. regional policy statement, regional plans and district plan). It contains provisions relating to the management of coastal, air, land and water resources. A draft plan was released in March 2013 for community engagement and feedback and was formally notified in September 2013. The Plan is accessible on the Unitary Plan EPlan portal via the internet. It is also available as downloadable PDFs, HTMLs for screen readers and as a hard copy. The planning maps are delivered via a GIS viewer and a set of A0 hard copy maps. This paper discusses some of the planning tools developed in the Plan, the EPlan initiative and the lessons learnt along its 2-3 years journey.

A new planning framework for Auckland

The establishment of Auckland Council in November 2010 presented a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to develop a new planning framework for Auckland. The first step in this process was the preparation of a 'spatial plan' for the region, known as the Auckland Plan. On the back of a robust engagement process, the Auckland Plan was adopted within the first 18 or so months of the council coming into being. The Auckland Plan is a visionary, all-encompassing document that has become the reference point for almost all council activities since it was adopted. It is a spatial plan in the broadest sense of the term, with a fairly equal focus on social, cultural, economic and environmental outcomes and actions. A key component of the Auckland Plan is its High Level Development Strategy. The strategy sets out a conceptual land use plan for development in Auckland over the next 30 years. Embodied within this conceptual plan is the notion of the 'quality compact city': 60-70 percent of population growth contained within the city's existing urban areas and 30-40 percent in new greenfield areas and existing rural and coastal settlements.

Having completed the Auckland Plan, the council's attention quickly turned to the changes required to Auckland's various resource management plans. The council inherited a regional policy statement, seven district plans (one of which is split into three major sections) and four regional plans. Most of these documents have their origins in the early to mid-1990s, and while they had been updated through plan changes over time, a number were either under review or about to be reviewed. It would be fair to say that these plans have a limited degree of alignment with one another, and of course none had been prepared with the express purpose of implementing an over-arching spatial plan for Auckland. The opportunity to align the various policies and plans required of a unitary authority had now presented itself.

Early scoping

Through the amalgamation process, two dedicated teams of planners had been established with the specific task of preparing a 'unitary plan' for Auckland. While the Auckland Plan was being developed, these two teams had embarked on the task of considering the scope for this 'unitary plan', the principles that would underpin it and the structure upon which it would hang. By the time the Auckland

Plan was adopted, considerable groundwork had been undertaken, and a solid platform had been established for the development and refinement of the provisions that would ultimately form the Proposed Auckland Unitary Plan.

The first key decision that was made was to include all resource management plans and all geographic areas within the Plan, other than the district plan component of the Hauraki Gulf Islands[1]. Various other options were considered, such as notifying a regional policy statement prior to regional and district plans, or notifying the plan in geographic modules, however it was ultimately concluded that the Plan should be as complete and comprehensive as possible.

The next key decision was to adopt a series of principles for the development of the Plan. The principles that were adopted included being outcomes focussed (as opposed to a narrower focus on adverse effects) and as user-friendly as possible. Key to the latter would be the use of plain English wherever possible, minimising the amount of content and maximising the power of the electronic delivery of the Plan.

Issues papers and outcomes matrix

Having determined the scope and principles for the Plan, the next key step was to identify the issues to be addressed in the Plan. In order to achieve this, the team prepared a series of issues papers. The content of these issues papers was aligned with the draft Auckland Plan, as it was at that time, and went before the politicians for endorsement. A range of methods were considered to resolve these issues. Instead of the traditional method of preparing issues and options papers, the team developed an outcomes matrix. This matrix identified the outcomes sought in each of the draft zones and value-based overlays. The matrix was an organised way to identify tensions that needed to be resolved. At the end of that process, an agreed set of outcomes was confirmed for each of the draft zones and overlays. The team then prepared the objectives, policies and rules. The outcomes matrix was a holistic way to consider an exceptionally wide range of issues and options.

Integration of regional and district planning matters

The development of a unitary plan provides opportunities to integrate the management of natural and physical resources (i.e. regional and district planning matters) in a single planning document. In the plans of the former councils, these matters are managed separately and are written differently. One of the key outcomes the Plan has achieved is applying regional rules against district plan zones. Development controls for regional activities can then be applied across the zones. The result of this allows users to navigate the regional provisions in similar ways to district plan provisions. These planning provisions can now be read in a similar manner. Making regional planning provisions more user friendly has assisted the ease of navigation for the EPlan (to be discussed further below).

Auckland wide provisions – dual and integrated provisions that apply across the region

Auckland wide provisions apply to activities that can occur across the region and can be managed with the same development controls and assessment. In the Plan, where these have both regional and district functions, the provisions are deemed as dual provisions and they have both regional and district plan functions (e.g. dual regional and district plan provisions, dual regional policy statement and district plan provisions). Dual provisions are able to achieve a better outcome as they remove unnecessary duplication and enable an integrated assessment of resource consent applications for these activities. For example, both the regional and district plans regulate earthworks and their associated effects (e.g. noise and dust effects (district planning matters) and discharges effects to air

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[1] The Hauraki Gulf Islands had recently undergone a full district plan review.

and water (regional planning matters)). Earthworks provisions in the Plan are Auckland wide provisions covering both regional and district planning functions. Applicants can now refer to the same set of controls and assessment matters when applying for earthworks resource consents. To distinguish provisions that have dual functions, the Plan[2] uses a line down the left hand margin of the page to identify the relevant functions of the provisions.

Planning tools – zones, precincts, overlays and Auckland-wide provisions

The Plan has streamlined existing planning tools that have been used across Auckland. For example, it has reduced the 99 (approx.) residential zones within current district plans into five residential zones. Rules for residential development in the region have been simplified. Precincts are the planning tool used to vary the base zone provisions to cater for local character and uniqueness (i.e. place-based provisions). Overlays are used to protect the values of natural and physical resources in the region.

It is important that the planning tools available for the Plan are clearly defined in the early stages of the drafting process. These include identifying the hierarchy of planning tools. For example, how do they fit together? How will they relate to each other in terms of activity status and the assessment of resource consent applications? As soon as these planning tools and the rules are determined, it is important that plan writers understand how they relate to each other and are to be used in the Plan. This will also enhance the horizontal integration of provisions in the Plan (e.g. reduce repetition through the plan for managing the same activities). A clear hierarchy between the planning tools assists plan users to work out the activity status for activities (for preparation and assessment of resource consent applications) and the development of the planning enquiry (discussed further below).

Plan drafting and development

An editorial team was formed to ensure the Plan is written in the same tone and language throughout. The editorial team pulled together the draft provisions submitted by planners across the council. Their role was to ensure provisions were written in a cohesive and consistent manner. A professional editor was engaged to carry out a plain English edit to ensure the Plan used simple language and in the active voice as much as possible.

To ensure consistency in content, the team also set up templates for drafting Plan provisions. It is important these templates are set up early in the process and that they are adhered to throughout the plan development process.   A style guide was also produced to guide the drafting style to be used for the Plan. The guide should include how objectives and policies are drafted, how provisions should be laid out and how to cross reference provisions. It should also standardise terminologies that are generally used in the plan. Establishing defined terms early helped avoid the same terms being used for different contexts in the Plan.

The PAUP EPlan delivery

The Plan is an electronic plan which is delivered via the online Unitary Plan EPlan Portal (hereon referenced as EPlan Portal) for text and the Unitary Plan GIS viewer for the spatial content.   The portal delivers the EPlan using a navigable tree structure (hereon referenced as the 'EPlan Tree') to allow users to find their way around the Plan. Downloadable PDF and HTML versions of the Plan are

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[2] See A.Introduction 4.4 Identifying the regional policy statement, regional plan, regional coastal plan and district plan provisions within the Unitary Plan of the PAUP

also available via the EPlan Portal.   The Eplan Portal provides a link to the GIS viewer, the planning enquiry and the printable versions of the Plan.
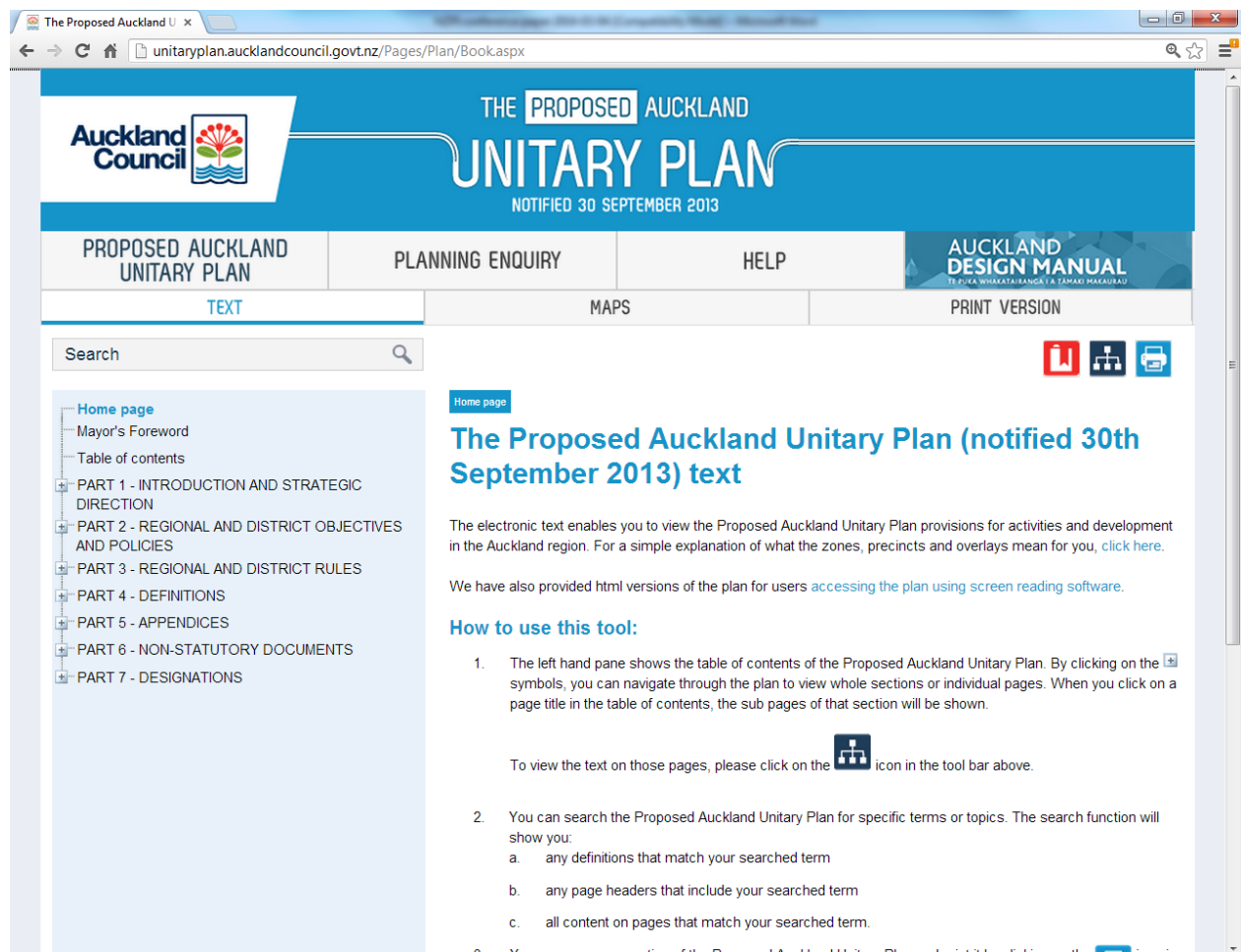

Figure 1: The Proposed Auckland Unitary Plan Landing Page - EPlan Portal

The Content Management System (CMS)

Written content of the Plan including objectives, policies and rules as well as text insert maps and diagrams are entered into an online CMS. Generally pages of the Plan will need to be built in the tree structure in order for the page to be returned in the Plan. The pages are branches of the EPlan tree that dictate where the page sits in the Plan and how the pages relate to each other in the sections / chapters/ parts of the Plan. See figure 2 below.
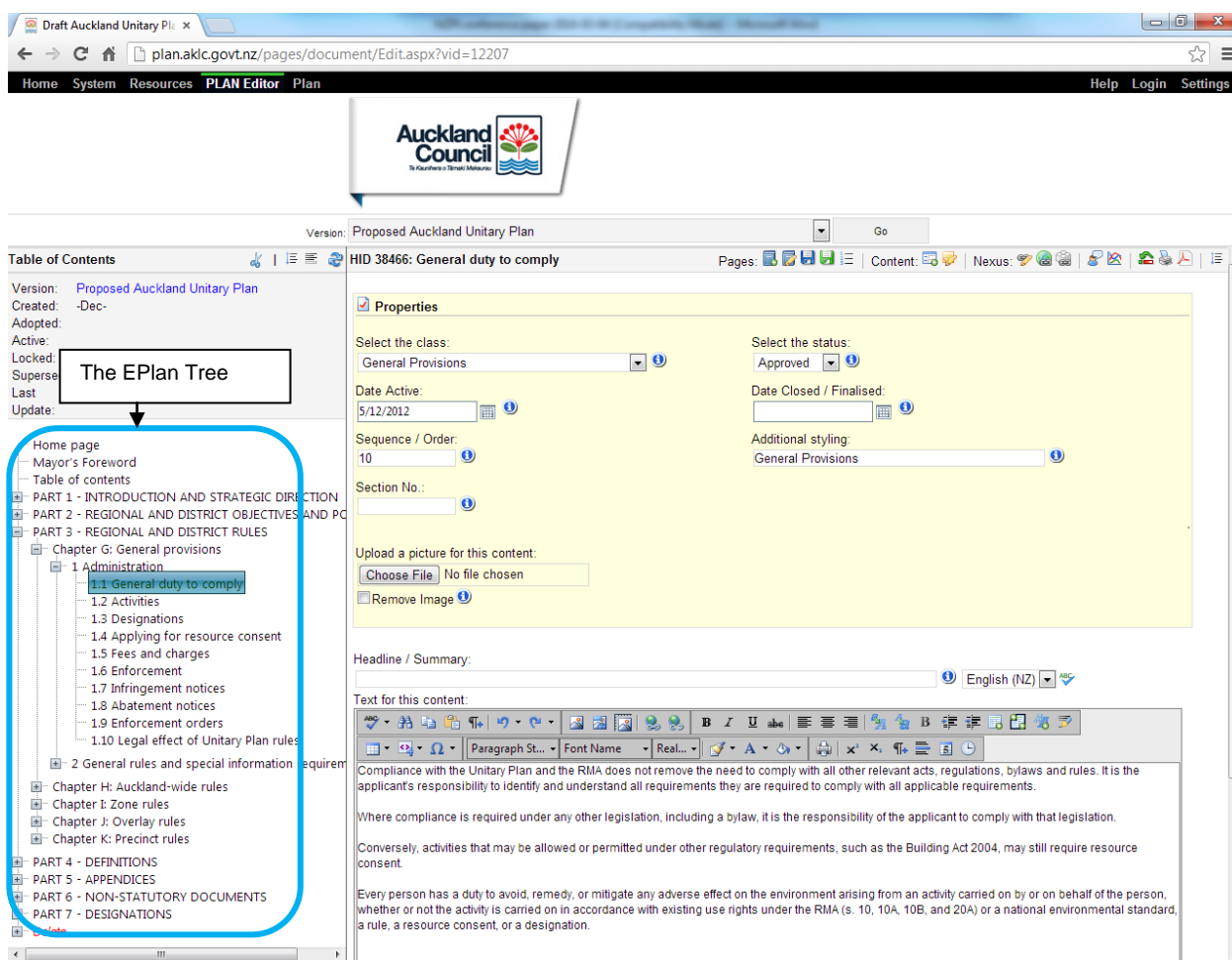
Figure 2: What does the CMS looks like?

Content is entered into the CMS as a class type (e.g. as objective class, or activity table class or as image class). Content can also be given status (e.g. draft, for approval, or final). Classifying content allows the CMS to perform systematic functions such as 'content slice' and for identifying content status. Content slice is a function where the system filters through the Plan and returns all the content that is classed as objectives. This function is useful for reviewing and managing content. Giving content status assists administrators to manage content and know which pieces of content have been entered as draft or have been made final. Other functions available in the CMS include:

1. The audit trail function, which allows users to look up content that has been changed including who, when and what has been changed. However it does not print tracked changes. This function can also allow hyperlinking to other websites or technical reference documents.

2. Hyperlinking between content pages is also completed in the CMS to allow linking of related content pages. This improves the user's experience of the EPlan.

3. The Planning Enquiry is also built in the CMS using the nexus manager (to be discussed below) and an activity list (the planning enquiry activity database).

The EPlan tree provides a clear picture of how content is placed in the document at a glance. The CMS is a good tool to manage content for a large planning document as it allows multiple users to access (i.e. edit, review, finalise) the document at the same time.

GIS Viewer – Spatial content development

The spatial content of the Plan is available in hard copy and in the Unitary Plan GIS viewer. The GIS viewer returns the base zone (by default) of properties and also the precincts and overlays. It allows properties to be searched, zoomed in for viewing of aerial photography (with a slider for opaqueness between layers and aerial) as well as precincts, overlays and non-statutory information to be displayed on request. Information in relation to which layers apply to the property is returned in the property result box. Accessing the spatial content via the GIS viewer is an easy way to get around the three volumes of planning maps and to find the relevant information.

To manage the data that is returned in the GIS viewer, the team used an affectation list. This list is an inventory of the spatial layers that are in the GIS viewer. Any new precincts, sub-precincts, zones, and/or overlay layers are required to be registered on this list before they are drawn into the GIS database. The affectation list is an important tool that assists planners and GIS specialists to manage spatial content. It is necessary to ensure this list is kept accurate and updated as and when required.

Currently there are approximately 50 zones, 140 precincts and 60 overlays displaying spatial content layers in the UP GIS database. All of these layers apply across the Auckland region. The list sets out the main data type and the sub types of the database. The list also assists planners to construct the planning enquiry database.
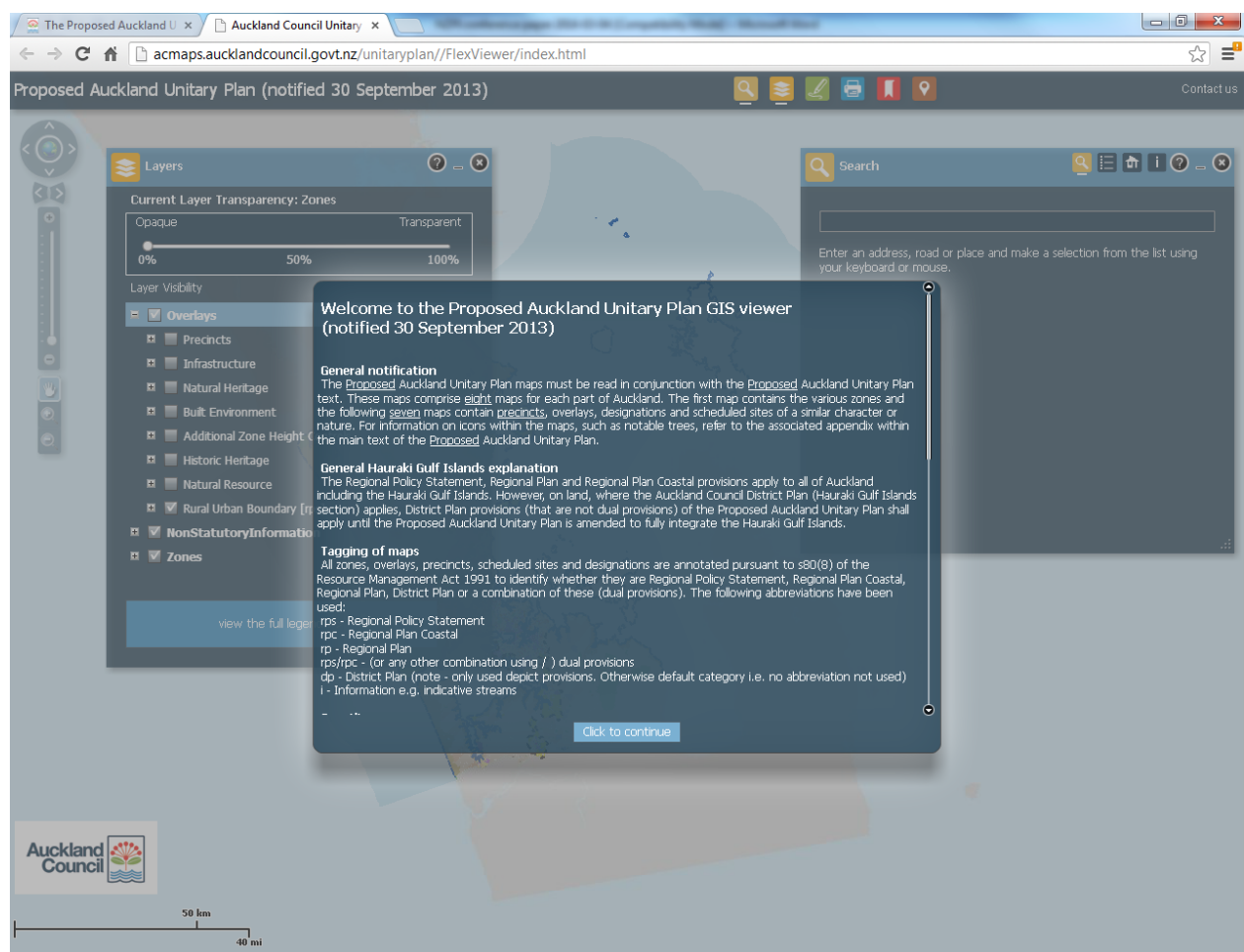

Figure 3: The PAUP GIS viewer landing page

Planning Enquiry

The Planning Enquiry is a new tool that is available with the production of the EPlan. It allows users to enter the address of their property, and the system will return (being applicable zoning, overlays and precincts) the property result as well as the provisions that apply. The current version of the planning enquiry returns the relevant rules for the searched property. During the consultation phase of the Plan, the planning enquiry version returned whether resource consent would be required for an enquiry based on the property and the activities selected. Both versions of the planning enquiry enhance the user's experience, as it makes it easier to find information within a complex plan.

The planning enquiry is built in the CMS's nexus manager. The nexus manager is an activity database of the Plan. To build the planning enquiry, you need to build an activity list (reflecting the activities regulated in the Plan) and then link them to the affectation (the spatial content in the GIS viewer (e.g. the Single House Zone) with the applicable activity status (e.g. Permitted Activity or Non Complying Activity). The last thing you will do is to link the affectation against the pages (i.e. where the rules are for the Single House zone in the Plan) that apply to it in the Plan. Once these links are created in the nexus manager, the system will return the relevant information when 1) a property is searched and / or 2) the activity is selected.   The result is returned as an EPlan tree and can be downloaded as a PDF document. The other step to build a successful planning enquiry is the user interface, and that is why it is important to design website pages with the user interface in mind.

The above has provided an overview of the new online tools that were used to deliver the Plan. Like any tools there are limitations in what they can do, or functions that could be improved and enhanced. Being one of the first complex plans in New Zealand to be delivered in an EPlan format, there were some good lessons learnt.

Lessons Learnt 1: EPlan vs Hard copy

The CMS software is designed primarily to enable effective online navigation in the EPlan Portal. It is not as effective as other software for publishing, formatting and hard copy printing. It is important to decide whether an Eplan is the key deliverable or the hard copy plan. Auckland Council has delivered four legal versions of the Plan and there are challenges with keeping four legal versions updated simultaneously. Apart from the cost of updating four legal versions, producing a hard copy plan using the online CMS system created major challenges with the numbering and formatting for the hard copy plan.   It is important to ensure the format selected for the online EPlan view can be produced in a similar way in the hard copy plan, including using a numbering system that will work for all versions of the Plan. A commitment to minimising the production of hard copy or not producing a hard copy is a key factor to a successful EPlan.

Lesson Learnt 2: Use templates for plan provisions

Unlike the traditional way of formatting a planning document using Microsoft Word, there are limitations on how the CMS can tweak content to be represented in the EPlan portal. It is important that a template is set up early in the process to ensure that content can be entered into the CMS without too much effort. It is important that the template is adhered to and incorporates the details of the available planning tools (such as legal effect, dual provisions, table structures, diagram style etc).

Lesson Learnt 3: Numbering system

The Unitary Plan is a complex planning document as it covers all regional and district planning matters. The Plan extends to over 10 volumes and 10,000 printed pages (approx.). Notably, over a third of the content relates to designations. As discussed, the online CMS has its limitation in terms of returning content in the EPlan portal and also as a printed document. An online CMS simply cannot

meet both requirements comprehensively. For a complex plan, it is important that a robust numbering system is selected to avoid confusion when cross referencing.

The key things to consider when selecting a numbering system are 1) the document size and topics, 2) how is the document going to be split up and 3) how the number will appear in the plan and how many levels the plan will need to go into (e.g. 1.1.1.1.1.1.a.i). It is vital to set up a robust numbering system and trial it in the CMS before the plan goes live. The system should be logical, intuitive and user friendly in all versions of the plan. Any references made to provisions in the plan should be easy and simple to quote and able to be cross-referenced back to the same provision no matter which version of the plan the reader is using. It is important to set up a good quality control system for monitoring the implementation of the numbering system, including producing sections of the plan and reviewing them in printed copy and in the EPlan view.

Key Lessons Learnt 4: Aligning policy framework and terminologies

It is important that the overarching policy framework is determined early in the drafting process to allow drafting of lower hierarchy provisions to align. This will avoid repetition of provisions. For example, zones that incorporate overlay provisions or precincts that modify overlay controls.

The definitions and how they are to be used in the plan need to be set up and understood across the team. This ensures consistency of approach and further integration between provisions in the plan.

The hierarchy of the planning tools needs to be established and understood clearly and early in the process. A model plan structure, templates for drafting and a style guide can help to achieve the structural consistency needed to support the planning enquiry tool.

Lesson Learnt 5: Spatial content in the Plan

To develop a successful planning enquiry, it is important to have as much spatial content in the GIS as possible. These need to be added to the GIS as individual affectations (i.e. mapped as individual layers). This will assist the system to filter out the information that applies to the property and the enquiry.

In doing so, a property will be mapped to the affectations and the relevant rules for the property will be returned in the Planning Enquiry. In some cases, the Plan's spatial content is included in a precinct plan (e.g. a local road to be build). These can still be returned as an affectation, but it requires more work to maintain the data. More work is required because parcel updates from monthly LINZ data will cause multiple affectations to shift to retain cadastral accuracy where the affectation is tied to legal land parcels. It will however improve accuracy for planning enquiry when it involves the selection of activities and returning resource consent status.

Lesson Learnt 6: Activities and qualifications in rules

Once the plan is near completion, terminologies used within activity tables across the plan need to be precisely aligned to ensure these are used consistently. This will also assist the planning enquiry database as the activities list needs to be developed. It is also important to understand that it is not easy to put together a plan database using the currently available functions in the CMS. To build a robust activity list where activities involve many qualifications is a difficult task in the current CMS nexus manager. For example, a dwelling is permitted if the dwelling is of xm2 and the net site area created is xm2 where it is located xm from the front yard. To enhance the user's experience in the planning enquiry process, it is important to note that where there are many qualifications to an activity, the system cannot return them in a simple manner.   Where possible, qualifications to activities should be managed through intensity thresholds within development controls, rather than built into activity

tables. Ensuring the website is designed with consideration of users' experiences in mind is a key factor to the success of a planning enquiry.

Lesson Learnt 7: Planning and IT staff

To ensure a successful delivery of an EPlan, ensure you have a team that understand both planning and IT requirements. For local government, ensure the IT team is fully supportive in the development of the EPlan and that they work with planners in this journey. Remember that once you are committed to an EPlan, then you will need IT support throughout the journey for any updates to the Plan (e.g. clause 16, release of decision version and plan changes etc). Make sure you have a good relationship with IT and they understand the planning requirements in terms of process and time frames. Remember, unlike the traditional way of plan development, the use of a CMS involves using a system that planners may not be familiar with. It may also be a good idea to ensure staff are familiar with the CMS before entering a large volume of content into the database to avoid mistakes and errors. It may be worthwhile to consider using a dedicated team to enter content. A quality control process should be set up to check that content is entered properly.

Lessons Learnt 8: Backup plan and UAT

Relying on the EPlan to notify the plan is nerve-racking. A key lesson learnt is to have plenty of time for user acceptance testing (UAT) and a backup plan. What if the Eplan Portal doesn't work at the last minute? Always leave a sufficient amount of time for UAT, as this will iron out many issues before the plan goes live. It will also allow identification of issues that may not be obvious. Always have a Plan B (e.g. if the Eplan portal cannot go live, the Plan B could be releasing the PDF version first).

Lessons Learnt 9: Selecting the right software

When selecting the software for your next plan review, make sure you ask the vendor the right questions. Ask them to take a chapter or two from an existing planning document and to enter it into the CMS to ensure that the software selected is in fact suited to the size and complexity of the document that you are looking to use it for. If you want to print out the document, make sure the criteria for that also includes numbering and formatting functions. Do you want to use the software for other functions (e.g. track changes, screen reading software)? If so, ensure these are included clearly in the specifications. The other key considerations will be support from vendors and ensuring that IT staff are willing to learn how to support the software to avoid long term running costs. Consider the life cycle of a planning document and what your expectations are for the software. Will you be using the CMS to issue a decision version (i.e. with the track changes version to the document shown on the plan or just for the operative version of the plan)?

Conclusion

This paper provides an overview of the development of the first Auckland Unitary Plan. In particular it covers the key innovations and associated lessons learnt. The Plan is now going through its statutory process with submissions having recently closed. There will undoubtedly be further improvements made to the content, structure, the EPlan and the planning enquiry for the Auckland Unitary Plan during the statutory process and when it becomes operative in 2016/17.