
UDAs in New Zealand: Auckland's Turn

The concept of urban development authorities as tools to expedite large scale urban development has been floated in New Zealand for over a decade. The “housing crisis” has, however, injected new momentum into the conversation in recent times with both the previous and current government discussing proposed legislation to introduce urban development authorities.

Last week Minister for Housing and Urban Development Phil Twyford announced plans to establish an urban development authority in Auckland proposed for introduction by the end of this year or early next year. The authority's scope of powers and functions is not yet clear, however it seems likely they will include some ability to fast-track planning approval for projects. The delivery of housing is clearly the focus for this new entity, but earlier comments from the Government indicate that urban development authorities could also deliver broader infrastructure and community projects in support of its housing focus.

While the proposed Auckland urban development authority will be the first of its kind under the new proposed legislation, it will by no means be the first or only entity empowered by special purpose legislation to fast-track development. First touted by then Minister Gerry Brownlee as an “urban development authority”, Regenerate Christchurch is a statutory entity charged with and empowered to lead the regeneration of the Christchurch district. While it does not have the full suite of “tools” that might be expected for an urban development authority (including land acquisition, securing funding, infrastructure development), it does have the ability to override local planning documents to expedite regeneration initiatives.

The experience of Regenerate Christchurch and CERA before it (which was given an even broader suite of powers to enable the expedited recovery of Christchurch) offers invaluable lessons to those who are charged with establishing the new urban development authority, and indeed, to those who are charged with leading it. Tools granted by special legislation to fast track development can be very effective, both in terms of ease of delivery and in obtaining high quality outcomes. The use of those tools can also enhance – rather than compromise – public engagement and iwi

consultation on urban development projects. This can, in turn, incentivise innovation and investment, particularly where development can be scaled. However, as always with great power comes great responsibility. The exercise of these powers is not without political risk. As a result the successful use of this legislation will, as Auckland is about to find out, depend at least in part on both the political and public appetite for that risk.
