Outreach Item

Voluntary Planning Assistance: Giving Back Through the Planning Profession

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Central to planning is serving communities. Yet, for many New Zealanders, engaging with the planning system can be daunting, expensive and confusing. While planners routinely assist clients in understanding legislation, navigating planning provisions and working through consenting processes, there are relatively few avenues of support for people who cannot afford professional planning advice.

This challenge prompted my 2023 research into Voluntary Planning Assistance (VPA) – the provision of planning advice by planners on a voluntary basis to help individuals and community groups better understand and engage with planning processes (Betteridge, 2023). Although the concept has been established internationally for several decades, it remains relatively undeveloped in Aotearoa New Zealand.

The idea behind VPA is simple. Just as lawyers undertake pro bono work and engineers contribute their expertise to community projects, planners can also give back to society by sharing their professional knowledge and skills with those who may otherwise struggle to access planning advice.

This article briefly reflects on my research and the subsequent actions taken by a small group of like-minded planners to explore how VPA could be developed and supported in New Zealand.

Why does voluntary planning assistance matter?

Planning systems are inherently complex. They must balance competing interests, draw on technical and professional expertise, and operate within legislative and regulatory frameworks. While a degree of complexity is unavoidable, a good planning system should not exclude people simply because they find it difficult to understand or navigate.

This principle is reflected in international frameworks for inclusive and participatory governance. Principle 10 of the Rio Declaration identifies three foundations of effective environmental governance: access to information, public participation in decision-making, and access to justice. Similarly, the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 11 seeks to make cities and settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable.

Achieving these aspirations requires more than providing people with a formal or theoretical right to participate. People need to have a reasonable understanding of the planning system and access to the information and expertise necessary to engage with it meaningfully.

Evidence from New Zealand highlights the extent of the challenge. A 2016 survey of councils identified a lack of public understanding of the planning processes as the single greatest barrier to the successful implementation of urban planning (Colmar Brunton, 2016).

This raises an important question: What might the planning system look like if more people had the knowledge and confidence to understand and participate in it? Greater access to planning knowledge could help reduce the uncertainty, frustration and mistrust that can surround planning processes. More importantly, it could enable individuals and communities to participate more effectively, contribute their knowledge and perspectives to help improve planning outcomes.

This is where VPA has an important potential role to play: helping to make planning knowledge and professional expertise more accessible to those who might otherwise struggle to engage with the system.

Looking overseas

New Zealand is not starting from scratch. VPA has a long history in other countries, providing useful examples of how planners can contribute their expertise to communities that may otherwise struggle to access professional advice. Perhaps the best-known international example is Planning Aid England, established in the 1970s in response to concerns that communities were being excluded from planning decisions (Parker & Street, 2017). Since then, similar voluntary planning initiatives have emerged in several jurisdictions, including Scotland, Wales, the United States, and Australia (Figure 1).

Figure 1. *Examples of voluntary planning initiatives in Scotland, England, Wales, the United States and Australia.*

Planning Aid Scotland provides a particularly useful example. With support from the Scottish Government, it has developed into an important national service that provides planning advice, education and community capacity-building, while also attracting planners who are keen to volunteer their expertise (Planning Aid Scotland, 2025).

These programmes demonstrate that VPA is not simply about providing free advice. It is equally about building community capacity, helping people develop the knowledge to participate more confidently and constructively in planning processes.

A practical example comes from Bristol, where Planning Aid England volunteers worked with a local community group involved in regeneration planning (Royal Town Planning Institute, n.d.). One participant reflected that it was valuable to have "a planning professional, who wasn't associated with the council, answering questions." The independence of the volunteer helped build trust while also improving participants' understanding of the planning process.

These international experiences provide useful lessons for New Zealand. They suggest that when planning expertise is made more accessible, VPA can help bridge the gap between communities and complex planning systems, not by speaking for communities, but by giving people greater capacity to understand the system and participate in it themselves.

Rediscovering New Zealand's own history

One of the more surprising findings from my research was that New Zealand has, in fact, experimented with planning aid before. Articles published in planning journals during the late 1970s promoted the concept of free planning advice for those unable to afford professional services. By the early 2000s, some community law centres were also incorporating planning assistance into their services. These initiatives demonstrated that there was both a need for, and an interest in, making planning expertise more accessible. However, they were relatively short-lived, and no enduring nationally coordinated model of VPA emerged.

Today, there remains no obvious "go-to" service for free planning advice outside local councils. Councils may provide information and assistance to members of the public, but their ability to offer individualised planning advice is inevitably constrained by limited resources, time pressures and their statutory responsibilities.

The result is a gap between the complexity of the planning system and the ability of some individuals and community groups to access the professional knowledge needed to navigate it. It is this gap that creates an opportunity to reconsider what a contemporary model of VPA could look like in New Zealand.

What New Zealand planners think

As part of my 2023 research, I surveyed members of Te Kōkiringa Taumata | New Zealand Planning Institute to better understand attitudes towards VPA and their willingness to contribute to such initiatives. The survey received 116 complete responses from planners across the country.

The findings indicated strong support for the concept. More than one-third of respondents were already providing VPA in some form, whether independently or through their employer. There was also considerable interest from planners who were not currently volunteering but expressed a willingness to become involved.

Respondents particularly recognised the potential value of supporting community organisations and groups that might otherwise struggle to understand or engage effectively with planning processes. For many, VPA represented an opportunity for planners to use their professional knowledge in ways that could strengthen community participation and contribute to better planning outcomes.

At the same time, the survey also identified several legitimate questions and concerns. Some respondents questioned whether providing planning assistance to communities should instead be the responsibility of councils or central government. Others were concerned that providing professional advice for free could potentially devalue planning expertise and the profession itself.

These are important issues that deserve thoughtful discussion as VPA develops in Aotearoa New Zealand. Nevertheless, the overall response from the profession was encouraging. The findings suggest there is a genuine willingness among New Zealand planners to share their expertise and contribute to initiatives that can help communities participate more confidently and effectively in planning processes.

From research to action

Research is only the beginning. Its value lies in whether it can contribute to changes in practice. Since 2021, I have led a small group of like-minded planners from across Aotearoa New Zealand who share an interest in voluntary planning initiatives.

One encouraging milestone of the group has been the New Zealand Planning Institute's recognition of VPA as Category 2 Continuing Professional Development (CPD) activity. This provides formal acknowledgement that contributing professional expertise to communities represents valuable professional development and practice.

More recently, members of the group have begun developing the foundations of a national VPA website (Figure 2). Drawing inspiration from models such as Planning Aid England, the website aims to provide a simple point of contact for community groups seeking planning assistance, while also connecting volunteer planners with opportunities to contribute their expertise.

The initiative remains in its early stages and is yet to go 'live'. Nevertheless, developing a national platform represents an important step towards making VPA more visible, accessible and easier to coordinate across New Zealand.

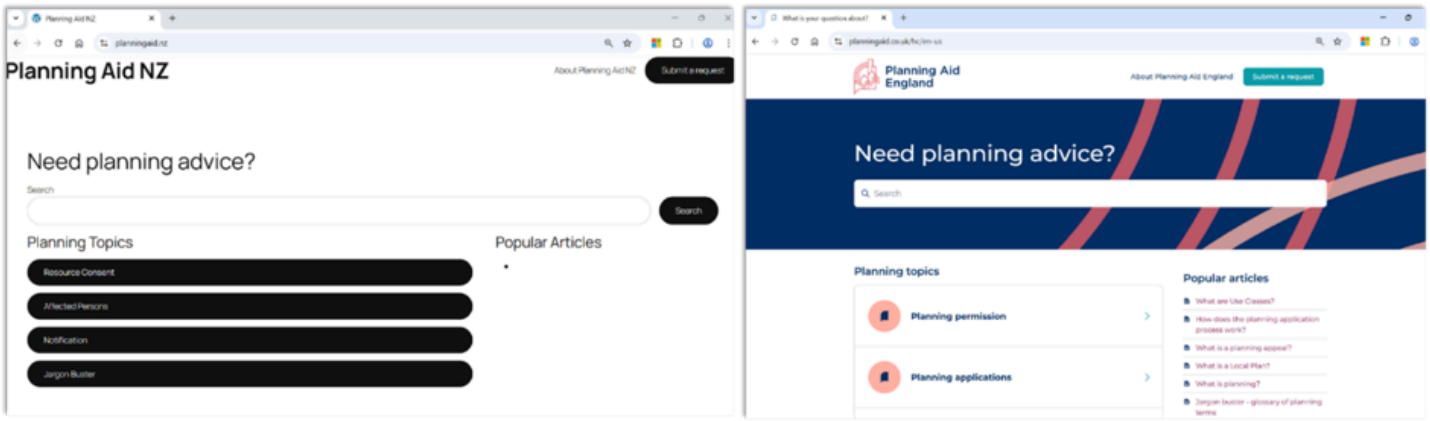

***Figure 2**. Proposed national platform for Voluntary Planning Assistance in New Zealand, compared to Planning Aid England.*

Looking ahead

Planning is fundamentally a public profession. While planners work across many different sectors and serve a wide range of clients, the profession ultimately exists to help shape better places and communities. VPA will not, by itself, resolve the challenges facing New Zealand's planning system. Nor should it replace the important roles played by councils, consultants or community organisations. Rather, it can complement those roles by helping people better understand planning processes, participate more confidently, and engage more constructively in decisions that affect their communities. Improving the planning system does not always require changing legislation, policy and national direction. Sometimes, it can begin with something much simpler: planners being willing to share their knowledge and expertise with those who need it.

As the planning profession continues to evolve, VPA offers one practical way for planners to give something back to the communities they serve. In doing so, it has the potential to strengthen not only community capacity and participation, but also public understanding and confidence in planning itself.

Bio

Clint Betteridge is a Development Manager at Meridian Energy with experience across New Zealand's renewable energy and telco sectors, government planning policy, local government consenting, and renewable energy development in the United Kingdom. He completed a Master of Resource and Environmental Planning at Massey University in 2023, where his research sparked an ongoing interest in voluntary planning assistance and improving access to planning advice. Clint is a Full Member of Te Kōkiringa Taumata | New Zealand Planning Institute.

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