Media Statement

21 February 2026

EMBARGO SATURDAY 21 FEBRUARY 8AM

Canterbury Must Learn Lessons from the Past to Protect Future Growth

Canterbury's infrastructure leaders are calling for greater coordinated action to future-proof one of New Zealand's most livable and productive regions. It comes with a stark warning that ageing bridges, fragile freight links and outdated funding models are placing the region's future at risk.

A new White Paper, Connecting Canterbury: Strengthening Infrastructure for Growth, authored by Simpson Grierson and Infrastructure New Zealand, with input from public, private and iwi groups, sets out a clear message: we need to collaborate more to achieve long-term resilience and growth.

Canterbury has momentum – it's New Zealand's fastest growing region in New Zealand and is the South Island's economic engine. Its freight corridors, port and airport links and digital systems support agriculture, advanced manufacturing, aerospace, tourism and exports. Yet much of the infrastructure quietly enabling that growth – particularly bridges and culverts – is nearing the end of its design life. In the face of the region's natural hazards and increasing climate exposure, the time to act is now.

Catherine Shipton, Infrastructure Partner at Simpson Grierson in Canterbury, says the region can lead nationally if it acts decisively.

"Canterbury has an opportunity to set the standard in asset management and climate resilience. But that requires central government, councils, iwi and the private sector to align around a coordinated, long-term programme - not isolated projects.

This White Paper isn't a wish list; it's designed by the people who build, own, operate and finance these assets every day as a practical blueprint for how the region should plan and invest in its future.

The post-earthquake rebuild demonstrated what coordinated action looks like at scale. “The challenge now is applying the same discipline to safeguarding the region’s lifelines, " says Shipton.

Bridges are a stark example. In one Canterbury district, around 280 bridges support 1,500 kilometres of local roads. Their replacement value is approximately $400 million. Around 100 of those bridges will need replacing within 30 years.

To meet that renewal task, the district would need to spend roughly $4.75 million annually on bridge replacements. Current funding for bridges sits at around $200,000 per year.

Closing that gap through rates alone would require an increase of about 60 per cent in roading rates - an unsustainable burden for a small rating base.

Nick Leggett, Chief Executive of Infrastructure New Zealand, says the numbers reveal a systemic issue.

“In parts of Canterbury, we have hundreds of millions of dollars’ worth of bridge assets, with dozens requiring replacement within a generation. The current funding model does not match the scale or lifespan of these assets.”

One district faces a $15 million bridge replacement within five years on a critical inland freight route, carrying overwidth and overlength freight that cannot use State Highway 1 tunnels. Without funding, the bridge could face weight restrictions or revert to a ford for heavy vehicles.

“That is not resilience,” Leggett says. “It is managed decline.”

Here is a clear opportunity for collaboration between public, private and iwi groups to solve this critical need,” says Leggett.

This White Paper sets out a clear message: Canterbury must move from project-by-project decisions to a coordinated, long-term infrastructure programme developed in partnership with central and local government, Iwi and the private sector. That programme should deliver directly on the vision and planning the region is developing through Business Canterbury's private sector-led ambition which spans infrastructure, regulation and housing, a regional spatial plan and a prioritised regional deal with central government.

Canterbury stands at a pivotal moment in its infrastructure development. The central point is clear: to protect and strengthen our long-life, nationally significant assets; we can’t accept the status quo. We need bolder and more collaborative action using models of the past to proactively shape the region’s future growth.

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A Smarter Way Forward

The White Paper calls for:

- Bundling bridge and culvert renewals into region-wide programmes to unlock scale and attract private capital;
- Establishing a Canterbury Infrastructure Coordination Group to align local and national priorities;
- Using alternative funding tools such as public-private partnerships, asset recycling and value capture where appropriate; and
- Embedding whole-of-life asset management and climate resilience standards across the region's infrastructure assets.

Infrastructure New Zealand is the nation's leading infrastructure member association. Our core purpose is to advance best practice development of world-class transport, energy, water, telecommunications, and social infrastructure for all New Zealanders. We do this through research, advocacy, and public and private sector collaboration. Our membership is comprised of over 150 organisations, including central and local government agencies, consultants, contractors, financiers, utilities, and academics – collectively employing approximately 150,000 people in infrastructure-related roles. Together, we are committed to creating a better New Zealand through outstanding infrastructure.

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